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Social participation and contemporary scenarios: transformations, representations, and psychosocial impacts in territories

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SUMMARY

Editorial
Social Participation and Contemporary Scenarios: Transformations, Representations, and Psychosocial Impacts in Territories

Fortuna Procentese*

In recent decades, contemporary societies have undergone profound transformations in civic and political participation, shaped by cultural, social, and technological changes (e.g., Aresi *et al.*, 2022; Gatti & Procentese, 2024; Natale *et al.*, 2016; Procentese *et al.*, 2011; Tonkiss, 2014). The traditional concept of active citizenship, grounded in institutional participation, conventional volunteering, and membership in established organizations, now coexists with more fluid and fragmented forms of engagement (e.g., Aresi *et al.*, 2022; Nowakowska & Pozzi, 2024; Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a, 2025b). Participation has become increasingly selective, oriented toward immediate outcomes, and often mediated by technology. In this context, the studies presented in the current issue of the journal provide a comprehensive overview of these ongoing changes, offering an integrated perspective on contemporary civic engagement and challenging reductionist interpretations that have long characterized declining institutional participation as a sign of disengagement or social apathy. The evidence, on the contrary, suggests that civic and political engagement is being reconfigured along more flexible, selective, and hybrid trajectories, in which individuals actively shape the timing, modes, and meaning of their participation.

Volunteering, in particular, offers a privileged lens through which to observe social change, revealing a constant tension between continuity and innovation. Traditional, episodic, and digital volunteering should not be understood as rigid categories but rather as dynamic positions along a continuum of participatory practices (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025b). Research conducted within the PRIN (Progetti di Ricerca di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale) project "Profiling traditional, episodic and online volunteering: pathways from civic engagement to local collaborative networks" by various research units (e.g.,

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Gatti *et al.*, 2025; Mutti *et al.*, 2025) identifies three types principal volunteer traditional, episodic, and digital – each with distinct modes of engagement, perceptions, and motivations. Traditional volunteers remain committed to social causes, justice, and activism, cultivating a strong identification with their group and organization, and perceiving themselves as agents of change (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). While this model reinforces community bonds and social generativity, it shows limitations in terms of flexibility and appeal for younger generations, who increasingly seek horizontal, immediate, and customizable forms of participation. Traditional volunteering often requires continuity, time, and organizational commitment (Snyder & Omoto, 2008) that do not always align with contemporary needs.

Episodic volunteering, characterized by short-term commitments and specific opportunities, allows for immediate and rewarding involvement, often connected to local events, campaigns, or awareness initiatives (e.g., Pozzi *et al.*, 2019). Its defining feature is the capacity to enable participants to experiment, develop skills, and perceive the impact of their contribution without ongoing obligations (Macduff, 2005). However, this approach demands that organizations adapt to integrate innovative contributions while maintaining internal cohesion.

Digital volunteering, though still marginal relative to traditional models, introduces a transnational, technology-mediated dimension (e.g., Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018; Ihm & Shumate, 2022; Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a). Here, digital competencies become a tangible asset for collective engagement, from organizing online campaigns and disseminating informational content to managing virtual communities. Digital volunteers often perceive themselves as actors difficult to coordinate, and approach their participation almost professionally, distant from local contexts yet deeply connected to a global civic sphere (Mutti *et al.*, 2025). Gatti *et al.* (2025) note that across all three types, volunteers share certain constants a combination of altruistic and self-development motivations, and an awareness of the limited social recognition of their efforts alongside their generative contribution to the wider community.

Overall, these findings suggest that contemporary volunteering is not in crisis but is evolving toward fluid and hybrid forms (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025b), requiring organizations to adopt inclusive strategies that facilitate transitions between traditional, episodic, and digital engagement while considering the role of technology in shaping civic identity. Traditional volunteering continues to play a fundamental role in fostering stable social bonds, transmitting values of solidarity, and generating social capital. Nonetheless, its decreasing appeal to younger generations highlights the need to rethink organizational models, which often remain hierarchical and insufficiently responsive to contemporary demands for flexibility, autono-

my, and individual recognition (Procentese, 2025). Episodic volunteering introduces an experiential, project-based logic that aligns with the biographical and occupational precarity experienced by younger generations (Pozzi *et al.*, 2019). Yet, it also presents organizational challenges, necessitating new approaches to coordination, belonging, and continuity in collective action to prevent fragmentation or the erosion of shared identity (Mutti *et al.*, 2025). Digital volunteering represents perhaps the most innovative and simultaneously challenging form of civic engagement. It extends the space of citizenship beyond territorial boundaries and positions digital skills as central resources for civic action; however, perceptions of invisibility and distance from local contexts raise questions about the social recognition of these practices and their capacity to generate enduring belonging and collective responsibility (Tommasi *et al.*, 2025a).

Similar vein, digital engagement also shapes modern sociocultural phenomena such as contemporary feminism, exemplified by phenomena such as parasocial feminism (Degen & Johanssen, 2025). Analysis of followers' narratives of feminist influencers reveals that digital spaces can foster personal empowerment and social transformation, allowing online communities to extend the social self and influence individual choices, relational dynamics, and self-perceptions. Practices like #volanismus, combining artistic performances and media content, illustrate how digital feminism can generate everyday empowerment and symbolic resistance, while retaining structural limitations tied to the individualizing logic of platforms. This highlights that contemporary civic engagement is no longer confined to physical or institutional spaces but extends into digital spheres, where relationships, identity, and collective participation take on novel and complex forms, creating temporary, flexible, and multidimensional communities capable of influencing offline practices.

Theoretically, these contributions call for a revision of traditional models of active citizenship, which remain anchored to dichotomies – conventional/non-conventional, online/offline, individual/collective – that no longer capture the complexity of contemporary participation. The evidence points instead toward interpretive frameworks that acknowledge the coexistence of individual motivations and collective orientations, formal and informal practices, and physical and digital spaces.

The social implications of these transformations are particularly evident in youth political participation, which demonstrates complex dynamics. As noted by Foglia *et al.* (2025), young people tend to have a narrower conception of political participation than adults and often perceive institutions as unresponsive to their needs, explaining apparent disengagement from electoral or institutional processes. Comparative studies in contexts such as Naples and Bogotá, however, indicate that a lack of party affiliation does

not equate to disengagement: young people redefine participation through fluid, selective, and informal practices rooted in social movements, community initiatives, and identity-driven actions, where personal motivation intersects with a desire to impact the social environment. In Italy, the public university system and historical student mobilizations provide opportunities for institutionalized participation, yet declining representation and rising abstention encourage more flexible engagement oriented toward civic causes and social rights. In Colombia, youth participation emerges despite repression and institutional distrust, combining local and online activism with identity-based engagement. These findings underscore the influence of political and relational context on participation. Participation is also shaped by psychological factors, such as self-efficacy and anomie, and varies with political orientation and national context: left-leaning youth integrate transformative ideals with collective action, right-leaning youth adopt more normative or critical approaches, and non-affiliated youth articulate autonomous, reflective perspectives (Foglia *et al.*, 2025). International comparisons reveal the plurality of youth participation and the limitations of traditional dichotomies, highlighting the need for a more dynamic understanding focused on the shared construction of meaning.

Cross-national comparisons, such as between Italy and Colombia, further emphasize the role of structural, political, and relational conditions in shaping participation. In contexts characterized by institutional distrust or repression, engagement tends to be informal, identity-driven, and often digital, whereas in contexts with a tradition of mobilization, hybrid forms emerge that combine institutional spaces with grassroots action. This underscores the importance of viewing participation not as isolated individual behavior but as a situated process influenced by macro- and micro-social factors (e.g., Procentese & Gatti, 2022; Procentese *et al.*, 2023). The political implications of these insights are significant for public policy and strategies targeting youth and active citizens. Rigid normative models of participation risk excluding or delegitimizing emerging forms of engagement, widening the gap between institutions and citizens. Conversely, recognizing the plurality of participatory practices could foster more inclusive policies that value intermittent, digital, or non-conventional engagement.

Further research emphasizes the role of territory as a site of citizenship construction, particularly during the transition from childhood to adolescence. The relationship between adolescents, youth, and local environments forms a foundation for civic and community participation. Initiatives connected to Educating Communities, such as the ComunitAttiva project by Gruppo Abele and the University of Turin (De Piccoli *et al.*, 2025), demon-

strate that adolescent involvement is facilitated through networks connecting schools, families, services, and associations, oriented toward well-being and personal growth. Territory is not merely a physical backdrop for interactions but a meaningful space for belonging, identity, and security, which are central to activating participation (e.g., Procentese & Gatti, 2022; Procentese *et al.*, 2020). The transition from childhood to adolescence entails gradual detachment from protective family environments and the pursuit of autonomy and exploration of broader public and social spaces (e.g., Beyers *et al.*, 2003). Daily interactions, integrated activities, and participation in local initiatives help maintain ties to the territory, fostering resilience, responsibility, and psychosocial well-being. Findings from the ComunitAttiva project indicate the need for structural, long-term interventions capable of capturing systemic and indirect effects. For generations raised in digital contexts, such as Gen Alpha, hybrid modes of socialization between online and offline spaces redefine relationships with territory and community, offering new opportunities for civic education.

Experiences of Educating Communities and the ComunitAttiva project suggest that civic participation cannot be assumed as spontaneous but must be cultivated through supportive relational contexts, sustained educational continuity, and long-term investment. Territory emerges as both a symbolic and relational space where belonging, security, and agency intersect. In an era dominated by digital relationships, connections to local spaces serve as critical anchors for identity, particularly for adolescents. Yet, these connections must be actively constructed through shared practices, meaningful experiences, and opportunities for real participation. The coexistence of online and offline spaces, as seen in the experiences of new generations including Gen Alpha, presents both challenges and opportunities for civic education. Educating Communities are tasked with integrating digital dimensions as full-fledged social environments in which civic skills, values, and identities are developed.

Overall, the research presented in this issue demonstrates that civic engagement is increasingly plural, fluid, and interconnected across local, national, and digital contexts. Traditional volunteering continues to play a central role in fostering community ties, but now coexists with episodic and digital forms, requiring new organizational strategies and attention to volunteer experiences. Finally, digital environments emerge as new arenas of participation, where personal empowerment and social practices intersect in innovative forms of civic engagement.

Youth political participation is being redefined in terms of alignment between values, practices, and contexts, reflecting selective and critical engagement rather than withdrawal. Relationships between adolescents and territory underscore the importance of long-term, integrated, and flexible

interventions that cultivate belonging, autonomy, and active citizenship. These developments suggest the need to reconsider traditional models of citizenship, embracing the complexity of contemporary experiences, valuing both individual and collective motivations, and recognizing interactions between offline and online, local and global, and institutional and informal dimensions (e.g., Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2016). Ultimately, as highlighted by the authors in this issue, changes in civic engagement do not signify declining participation but rather a dynamic evolution, prompting reflection on the meaning of citizenship in the 21st century, the importance of shared spaces for collective learning, and the responsibility of institutions, communities, and citizens to support new forms of conscious, generative, and sustainable activism. Only through the integration of local, national, and digital dimensions, and by valuing individual and collective experiences, resilient and inclusive communities can be built, and become capable of addressing emerging social challenges and promoting a shared sense of responsibility that strengthens cohesion and civic identity over time.

These phenomena reveal the limits of approaches that focus exclusively on a single context, such as the digital realm, which often reinforce individualistic and performative logics. The risk is confinement within one of the contexts shaping contemporary social life, resulting in a symbolic rather than actionable perspective unless complemented by collective practices and offline-online engagement. The evidence underscores that no single context replaces others in shaping participation; rather, they reorganize and interact, producing new hybrid configurations of civic engagement (e.g., Gatti & Procentese, 2024).

In light of these findings, future perspectives must account for the complexity and dynamism of contemporary civic engagement. From a research standpoint, longitudinal and mixed-method approaches are needed to trace individual participation trajectories and transitions across different forms of engagement throughout the life course. Attention should also be given to intersections of psychological, social, and technological factors, as well as intercultural differences.

Practically and politically, third-sector organizations and institutions must reconsider engagement strategies, adopting more flexible, inclusive, and participatory models. This entails recognizing digital skills as valuable, supporting episodic experiences, and creating spaces that facilitate transitions across different modes of engagement without implicit hierarchies.

Finally, there is a pressing need for renewed citizenship education that integrates local and global, online and offline, individual and collective dimensions. Promoting active citizenship in the 21st century requires acknowledging the plurality of participation forms, fostering shared meaning-

making processes, and guiding citizens in developing a conscious, generative, and sustainable sense of social responsibility.

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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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Keywords: traditional volunteering, episodic volunteering, digital volunteering, social participation, evolution volunteerism

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 brough 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

	Traditional (n = 29)	*Episodic (n = 22)*	*Digital (n = 16)*
Mean age (*SD*)	49 (19.6)	35 (15.9)	45(18.8)
Gender (%)			
Male	38%	36%	19%
Female	62%	64%	81%
Mean years of volunteer service (*SD*)	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.

Traditional profile	
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
Episodic profile	
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
Digital profile	
Characteristics of volunteers	Invisible volunteers
Representation of volunteerism	Unpaid second job; Beyond borders; Self-management
Collective meaning of volunteerism	Vehicle of solidarity
Common Features	
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 prosocial 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 underrecognized 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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Political Representation and Action: Conceptions of Political Participation Among Youth in Bogotá and Naples in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

The research aims to investigate the co-constructed social representations of political participation that circulate among different groups of young Italian and Colombian university students and to verify whether there are correlations between social representations, political participatory behaviour, perceived anomie and self-efficacy. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, it was possible to reach a total sample of 327 students from Naples and 370 students from Bogotá, divided into three subgroups based on "political orientation": young people on the right, young people on the left, and young people who are not affiliated with any political party. The internal structure of social representations was reconstructed using the hierarchical evocation technique. The content of the representations studied was operationalised using specific psychometric scales. Right-wing young people exhibit a very traditional view of political participation. Italian young people tend to emphasise the positive aspects of participation, whereas Colombian young people associate it with a negative connotation. Left-wing young people, both Neapolitan and Bogotano, are very active in demonstrations and actions aimed at change: the latter also emphasise their ability to influence the socio-political fabric. Young people who claim not to identify with any political party or faction have a strong distrust of their respective state institutions, as well as traditional representative bodies. The students involved in the study, regardless of their nationality and political orientation, showed great interest in participating. The results obtained so far provide important insights into how young people participate in politics and the meanings they attribute to it.

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Keywords: political participation, young people, social representations, mixed methods, intercultural comparison, political orientation

Riassunto. ***Rappresentanza e Azione: Le Concezioni di Partecipazione Politica tra i Giovani di Bogotà e Napoli in Prospettiva Comparata***

La ricerca intende indagare le rappresentazioni sociali della partecipazione politica, co-costruite e circolanti in diversi gruppi di giovani studenti universitari, italiani e colombiani, e verificare se esistono delle correlazioni tra le RS, i comportamenti politici partecipativi, l'anomia e l'autoefficacia percepite. Utilizzando un questionario semistrutturato, è stato possibile raggiungere un campione totale di 327 studenti napoletani e 370 studenti bogotani, suddivisi in tre sottogruppi in base all'"orientamento politico": giovani di destra, giovani di sinistra, giovani antipartitici. La struttura interna delle rappresentazioni sociali è stata ricostruita attraverso la tecnica delle evocazioni gerarchizzate. Il contenuto delle rappresentazioni studiate è stato operazionalizzato servendosi di apposite scale psicometriche. I giovani di destra mostrano una visione molto tradizionale della partecipazione politica: gli italiani sono ancorati agli aspetti positivi della partecipazione, mentre quelli colombiani ne offrono una connotazione negativa. I giovani di sinistra, sia napoletani, sia bogotani, sono molto attivi in manifestazioni e azioni volte al cambiamento: i secondi, inoltre, rimarcano la loro capacità di incidenza sul tessuto sociopolitico. I giovani che affermano di non riconoscersi in nessun partito o schieramento politico nutrono una forte sfiducia nei confronti delle rispettive istituzioni statali, così come degli organi di rappresentanza tradizionali. Gli studenti coinvolti nello studio, a prescindere dalla nazionalità e dall'orientamento politico, hanno mostrato un grande interesse nei confronti della partecipazione. I risultati fin qui ottenuti rappresentano un importante spunto di riflessione sulle modalità e sui significati che i giovani attribuiscono alla partecipazione politica.

Parole chiave: partecipazione politica, giovani, rappresentazioni sociali, mixed-methods, confronto interculturale, orientamento politico

1. Introduction

Political participation is fundamental to the development of an effective democratic system. To date, numerous studies have explored this phenomenon from a multidisciplinary perspective, which, while enriching the field of research, has also made it more difficult to establish a clear definition and conceptualization (Weiss, 2020). One of the reasons for the differences in political behavior is the variety of definitions of political participation. Several studies that have examined how this phenomenon is conceptualized have shown that young people tend to construct a narrower definition of political participation than researchers and adults (Andolina *et al.*, 2002; Bynner & Ashford, 1994). Therefore, the issue concerns both individuals' understanding of what politics entails and their awareness of acting to achieve political goals (Weiss, 2020). In this regard, «low political partici-

pation among young people is a by-product of their narrow conception of politics and their impression that politicians do not sincerely care about their needs» (Quintelier, 2007, p. 169). Consequently, young people's political distrust, rather than stemming from a lack of interest, appears to be a result of the very nature of political organization (Weiss, 2020). Research has increasingly focused on how young people define "political participation" and what they perceive as such (Henn *et al.*, 2002, 2005; O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole *et al.*, 2003a). As Rainsford (2017) rightly observed, «it seems that the problem of young people's political participation is not so much whether they participate, but rather where they participate» (p. 2).

Our study fits into this framework and aims not only to explore 'where young people participate' (Rainsford, 2017), but also how they participate and what meanings they attribute to their actions. In this regard, the primary objective of this research is to reconstruct the meanings that young people themselves attribute to the phenomenon in question, using the framework of Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1961). It is necessary to reflect on young people's understanding of political participation, taking into account new lines of research aimed at understanding their ideas and, possibly, finding ways to engage them politically and promote their active citizenship in the future (Bruno & Barreiro, 2014; O'Toole *et al.*, 2003; Weiss, 2020). We have chosen to work within the framework of Social Representation Theory because it allows us to understand young people's political participation based on the concepts and knowledge that, as a group, they construct and share through daily social interaction and practices, which enable them to interpret the reality related to the object of representation (Wagner & Flores-Palacios, 2010). Forms of participation are supported by the representations that legitimise them and, in turn, contribute to reinforcing these representations (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020). As stated by Howarth *et al.* (2014), political participation is defined as the power to construct and transmit particular representations of others. This concept refers to the power relations and conflicting representations that exist between social groups. Few studies have analyzed young people's political participation using social representation theory. Rochira *et al.* (2019) recently examined the relationship between sense of community and social representation of political participation, while Mannarini *et al.* (2020) analyzed the content and semantic structures underlying the social representation of political participation in the Italian and Greek media. Restrepo *et al.* (2016) conducted a study in Colombia that showed that political participation is understood as the ability to influence social, community and political spaces through public opinion. Furthermore, as noted by Weiss (2020), current research in this field lacks broader transnational investigations that consider how young people define political participation

and conduct comparative analyses of young people's participatory behavior. Yet, it seems essential and interesting to analyze intercultural differences, since, as Barrett (2007) points out, representations of national identities are influenced by a series of social, cognitive and motivational factors and by a cultural context that is constantly interacting and evolving. Symbols, myths, shared memories and historical narratives that are internalized and reproduced in discourse contribute to constructing and defining one's identity linked to one's context of origin. On the other hand, Sarrica, Grimaldi and Nencini (2010) have shown how young people develop citizenship by simultaneously intertwining two dimensions: on the one hand, the institutional dimension, linked to duties, rights and formal political practices; on the other, the cultural and symbolic dimension, which is rooted in social belonging, the media and collective narratives.

This research attempts to enrich the scientific debate on youth political participation by reflecting on the meanings attributed to the phenomenon from an intercultural perspective, as it compares the social representations of both Neapolitan and Bogotano university students. The Italian and Colombian university systems have structural and cultural differences that shape the meaning and modalities of student political participation. In Italy, the prevailing public system and the constitutional autonomy of universities favor institutionalized forms of representation and a well-established tradition of student mobilization linked to national parties (Barile, 2024; Cini & Guzmán-Concha, 2017). Italian universities, especially in large urban centers, are spaces for political socialization through collectives, assemblies and occupations that are perceived as legitimate (Della Porta & Diani, 2020). In Colombia, the mixed public-private system is characterized by strong socioeconomic segmentation and chronic underfunding of public universities, which historically represent epicenters of radical mobilization and social resistance (Donoso, 2023; Pinto Ocampo, 2010). Colombian students face greater institutional repression through the Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios (ESMAD) and criminalization of activism, making participation a highly risky act for individuals and the collective (Aríza Santamaría & Velásquez Bonilla, 2020). The post-conflict context and recent national mobilizations (Paro Nacional 2019-2021) continually redefine student participatory practices (Donoso, 2023). These institutional differences influence both the levels of participation observed and students' willingness to respond to sensitive items in comparative research (Van de Vijver & Leung, 2021).

Naples and Bogotá, although geographically distant, are much closer in terms of symbolism. In the specific case of Italy, as reported in the latest Censis Report (2024), the majority of the population has disengaged from traditional politics: abstention in the last European elections stood at 51.7%

of those eligible to vote, and 68.5% of Italians believe that Western democracies and traditional systems of representation no longer work. Young people, however, identify with new forms of non-hierarchical, non-institutionalized and informal participation. The growing fragmentation of the party system, combined with the weakening of traditional social ties, has contributed to eroding the classic dichotomy that previously divided the Italian electorate into right-wing and left-wing voters (Corbetta, 2009). In this context, the concept of post-ideological politics is gaining importance, in which political orientation is no longer articulated around coherent and shared value systems, but is instead reorganized around individual concerns and contingent issues (Pozzi *et al.*, 2021). As a result, the political space is also interpreted differently by each generation, giving rise to heterogeneous symbolic configurations and narratives despite the use of a common language (Tuorto, 2018). Young people combine a deeply disenchanted view of politics with an approach based on solidarity (Della Porta & Portos 2020; Giugni & Grasso 2021), founded mainly on the principles of combating inequality and militarization, as well as demonstrations in support of peace, environmental sustainability and civil rights. Similarly, when examining the Colombian context, several studies explain that the low rate of youth participation is often due to a sense of exclusion, as well as the lack of attention paid by politics and its representatives to the concerns of that age group and the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which leads them to feel unheard, unrepresented and uninformed. This translates into a lack of motivation to participate and a detachment from political organizations, which are considered impractical or irrelevant to their life plans, and a distrust of the effectiveness of political participation and institutions due to issues such as corruption, inequality and insecurity. This generates a negative attitude towards politics, which is perceived as institutionalized and reserved for the few and their interests (Bruno *et al.*, 2011; Cárdenas *et al.*, 2007; Henn *et al.*, 2002; Huanca, 2021; Kitanova, 2019; Márquez *et al.*, 2020; Taller de estudios de los Jóvenes y la política, 2000). Although young people reject politics and institutional or conventional mechanisms, they tend to be active in causes, community actions, organizations, projects or social movements that allow them to participate and that are also linked to their identity, goals and context (Bruno & Barreiro, 2014; Cubides, 2006; O'Toole *et al.*, 2003; Ramírez & Sánchez, 2010; Rossi, 2009). These findings contradict the idea that young people are apathetic or politically disinterested and offer a new perspective not only on the recognition of other forms, actions and means of participation (Alonso & Brussino, 2019; Bruno *et al.*, 2011; Bruno & Barreiro, 2020; Bruno & Barreiro, 2021; Márquez *et al.*, 2020), but also on the possibility of different definitions that young people attribute to politics and their participation in it.

In light of the above, the study aims to enhance our understanding of youth political participation in Italy and Colombia by conducting a comparative analysis of social representations and related variables, including participatory political behaviors, perceived anomie, and perceived self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' belief in their ability to produce specific results: individuals are unlikely to have a political impact if they do not believe they can achieve the desired results through their actions (Caprara *et al.*, 2009). Anomie, on the other hand, can be understood as a perception of social disintegration and loss of normative coherence (Teymoori *et al.*, 2017).

The objective is to move beyond traditional dichotomies and enrich the theoretical framework by identifying the structure and content of social representations, shared and circulating among youth groups, exploring the role of psychological variables involved in the positioning of the groups regarding the object of political participation, and specifying the existing relationships between social representations and the selected variables.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

This research aims to conduct an exploratory analysis among university students in Naples and Bogotá. Through a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method, it was possible to administer a semi-structured questionnaire to 697 young people, 327 Italian (mean age: 20,37 years; *SD*: 4,35) and 370 Colombian (mean age: 22,95 years; *SD*: 4,75). In Naples, the questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in the Sociology degree course at the Department of Social Sciences of Federico II University. In Colombia, on the other hand, the survey was conducted thanks to the collaboration of Psychology students at the University of Cundinamarca.

The descriptive variables of the participants are summarized in the table below (Table 1).

Italian and Colombian students were then divided into three subgroups based on the variable of "political orientation": right-wing youth, left-wing youth, and non-partisan youth. Comparative literature (Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Luna & Zechmeister, 2005; McCoy, 2024; Zechmeister & Corral, 2010) suggests that the left–right axis operates as a shared cognitive metadimension, but with content that varies according to historical, institutional, and cultural divisions. In Western Europe, and in Italy in particular, the axis remains anchored to redistributive conflicts and is enriched by cultural dimensions linked to cosmopolitanism and socio-cultural values. In Latin

America, and in Colombia specifically, the meaning of the axis incorporates security, public order, peace/conflict, anti-corruption and inequality with greater salience. It follows that ideological self-positioning is comparable in structure but not directly commensurable in content: the same label may reflect different sets of issues.

Table 1 – Descriptive variables of Italian and Colombian students

	Italian	*Colombian*
Gender		
Male	52 (16%)	178 (48%)
Female	275 (84%)	192 (52%)
Vote in the last elections		
Yes	211 (64,5%)	256 (69,2%)
No	116 (35,5%)	114 (30,8%)
Political orientation		
Right	37 (11,3%)	35 (9,5%)
Left	44 (13,5%)	49 (13,2%)
Non-partisan	246 (75,2%)	286 (77,3%)

2.2 Study Design

To achieve the set objectives, the research uses a mixed-method approach. This choice is closely aligned with the principles of the theory and the study's specific objectives. Social Representation Theory (SRT) is fundamentally a multi-method approach. SRT operates within a dialogical epistemology (Markova, 2000), which inherently requires the use of various methods for in-depth exploration and analysis. This approach enables us to comprehend the complexity of social representations, which manifest in both discourse and common sense (through qualitative data) and in measurable psychological dimensions (through quantitative data). This triangulation of data aims to provide a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under study.

2.3 Data Construction Strategies and Procedures

To ensure that the research tool measured the same theoretical constructs in both cultural contexts, and to minimise bias due to linguistic and cultural differences, two native Spanish-speaking researchers (Colombian, MFC and FRC), with excellent knowledge of Italian and the research topic, independently translated the tool from Italian into Spanish. The two translators, together with a member of the research team, then compared their ver-

sions. Subsequently, discrepancies were discussed, and the best formulations were chosen to create a single preliminary version in Spanish. Two new native Italian translators (AP and CC), who had never seen the original version of the instrument, independently translated "Version 1" from Spanish back into Italian. The entire research team compared the original Italian version with the two reverse translations, and the original and re-translated versions were found to have a very high semantic equivalence. Finally, the questionnaire was administered to a small group of Colombian students (*n* = 12) balanced by gender, asking them to "think aloud" as they answered, explaining how they interpreted each question and motivating their choice of each answer. This method did not reveal any ambiguities or unexpected interpretations, so the questionnaire was administered to the general population.

From January 2024 to June of the same year, the questionnaire – designed, translated, and adapted to both the Italian and Colombian contexts – was distributed via an online form. Students from both countries were provided with a link to the Google Form. They completed the questionnaire outside of class and without teacher supervision, so that they had the time necessary to answer the questions freely, without external constraints. It was composed as follows:

- The first section was devoted to the Technique of Hierarchical Evocations (Abric, 2003; Vergès, 1992), which was used to identify the internal structure of the respondents' social representation of political participation. Specifically, each student was asked to express themselves in two distinct moments: 1) to freely associate the first five words that came to their mind when thinking about "political participation"; 2) to classify their verbal productions according to their relevance. To overcome the limitations associated with the interpretation of associative materials, which are by nature extremely polysemous, the free association technique was supplemented with a series of open-ended questions aimed at requesting subjective justification for each freely associated word (Fasanelli *et al.*, 2020).
- The second section of the questionnaire focuses on representational content, which is investigated using the psychometric scales described below. The Scale of Participatory Political Behaviour, developed by Magallares and Talò (2016); Talò and Mannarini (2015), was used to examine social practices related to political participation. It consists of 16 items across four factors -disengagement (α_i =,769; α_c =,783), civic participation (α_i =,650; α_c =,718), formal participation (α_i =,878; α_c =,828), activism (α_i =,755; α_c =,805). This tool, initially validated in Italy, was subsequently translated into Spanish. The original scale was

tested on a sample of students in Naples, while the Spanish version was used as a guide by students in Colombia. The Perceived Political Self-Efficacy Scale, created by Caprara *et al.* (2009) and Vecchione *et al.* (2014), was employed to investigate whether disaffection towards public affairs could be a manifestation of "learned helplessness". This scale measures individuals' confidence in their ability to influence the political system. A short version of this scale, consisting of four items, was developed and validated in Italy and Spain ($\alpha_i = 832$; $\alpha_c = 871$). The Anomie Perception Scale by Teymoori *et al.* (2016) was chosen to assess the impact of social disintegration ($\alpha_i = 585$; $\alpha_c = 798$) and the perception of non-functional leadership ($\alpha_i = 571$; $\alpha_c = 815$). It is composed of 12 items across two factors. Finally, the last tool was validated in 28 countries, including Italy, Spain and Chile.

- The last section of the survey instrument consists of descriptive variables, which are investigated using checklists (gender, age, political orientation).

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The terms obtained through free association were subjected to a preliminary lexical analysis, followed by a frequency categorical analysis. In particular, lemmas were grouped according to the synonymy criterion until clusters of terms coinciding with their manifest meaning were obtained. Each cluster was then assigned a label, the choice of which mainly followed two criteria: high lexical proximity with the other words belonging to the grouping and the highest frequency of occurrence within the single set. The data obtained were processed with the IRaMuTeQ software and treated with similarity analysis (Flament, 1962), a particular type of network analysis. The procedure consists of an elaborate similarity matrix obtained from the chosen index: the Chi-square. The final output shows a network of concepts, characterized by a size directly proportional to the frequency of appearance and to the rank of appearance that the participants themselves attributed to them. The structural theory of social representations (Abric, 2003; Flament, 1962) proposes that every collective representation is organized according to an internal structure divided into a central core and one or more peripheral systems. The central core guarantees coherence, stability and identity function to the representation, while the periphery plays a role of adaptation and mediation with the context. Within this theoretical framework, the analysis of similarities (or verbal co-occurrences) is a valuable tool for the empirical investigation of representational structure, as it allows us to detect the frequency and

strength of co-occurrences between the elements evoked, revealing the interconnections that underpin the overall organization of the system. This approach, therefore, allows us to empirically distinguish between elements with a core function and those with a peripheral function. The graph produced by the similarity analysis in IRaMuTeQ can be interpreted in terms of representational structure: the nodes, i.e. the words, represent the most frequent lemmas or lexical forms in the corpus. The arcs, or lines, indicate the co-occurrence of two terms; their presence indicates that the two words appear in the same context.

The thickness of the arcs is proportional to the strength of the link (number of co-occurrences). Thicker arcs indicate stronger associations. Groups of strongly interconnected words form semantic clusters that can be interpreted as thematic nuclei of the representation.

In this sense, the graph is not a simple frequency map, but a map of associative relationships: it allows us to visualize which terms constitute the central core (most frequent and interconnected) and which occupy the periphery (less frequent but still linked to certain clusters).

The text strings, starting from each subject's explanations to justify their evocations, were subjected to a categorical-frequency analysis of the content (Bardin, 1998) of the "paper and pencil" type. Using SPSS V. 29.0.1.0 software, it was possible to analyze the data collected through the psychometric scales subjected to correlational analysis. To explore the differences between subgroups of young people according to their declared political orientation (right, left, non-partisan), a set of non-parametric analyses was conducted using the Kruskal-Wallis test.

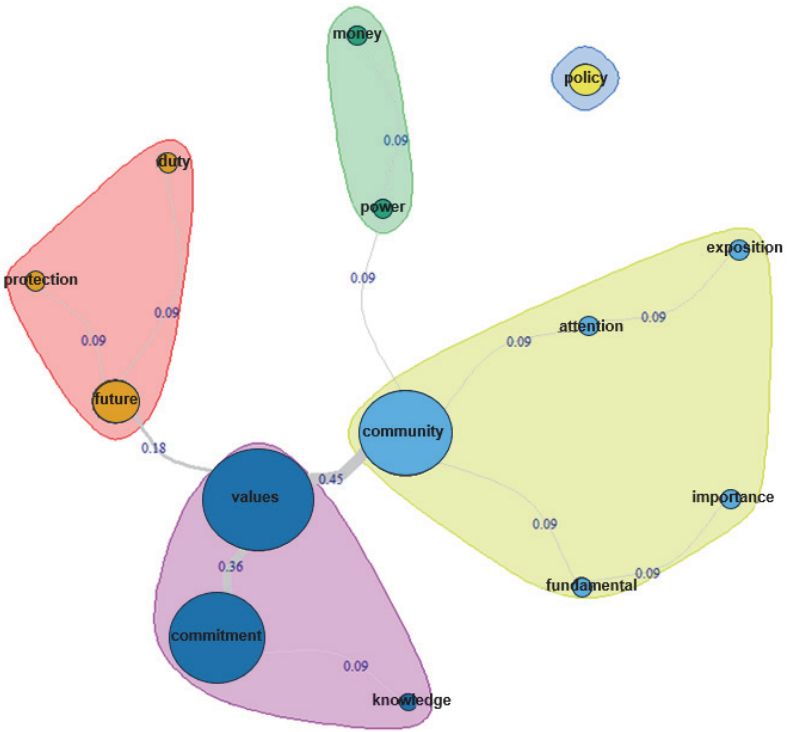
3. Results and Discussion

A comparative analysis between Italian and Colombian university students reveals divergent dynamics and surprising convergences in how political participation is understood and practiced. These findings, derived from the triangulation of qualitative data (analysis of social representations) and quantitative data (correlations and non-parametric tests), show how the socio-political and cultural context significantly shapes the semantics of participation, while maintaining certain transnational constants.

In the case of right-wing youth, an interesting dichotomy emerges between the two countries. In Italy (Figure 1), the concept of political participation is deeply rooted in normative and moral values, including ethics, civic sense, and collective responsibility. These values, often evoked in everyday language, form the foundation for an idealized vision of political

engagement, one oriented toward social cohesion and responsible action. Participation is understood as a civic duty, rather than a strategic response to the system.

Figure 1 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Italian right-wing students



In Colombia (Figure 2), by contrast, right-wing youth adopt a more conservative and institutional framework: participation is described in terms of canonical tools ("vote", "government", "law"), but trust in institutions appears fragile and permeated by suspicions of corruption and opportunism. Values are not associated with shared ethical principles but rather with clientelist dynamics and private benefits, thus generating an ambivalent representation.

At the quantitative level, both groups show a significant relationship between formal participation and activism (Table 2; Table 3).

However, among Colombian respondents, this engagement is accompanied by a greater perception of institutional deregulation ($r = –.648$, $p <$

.05), suggesting that political involvement is also constructed as a critical reaction to a system perceived as instrumental.

Figure 2 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Colombian right-wing students

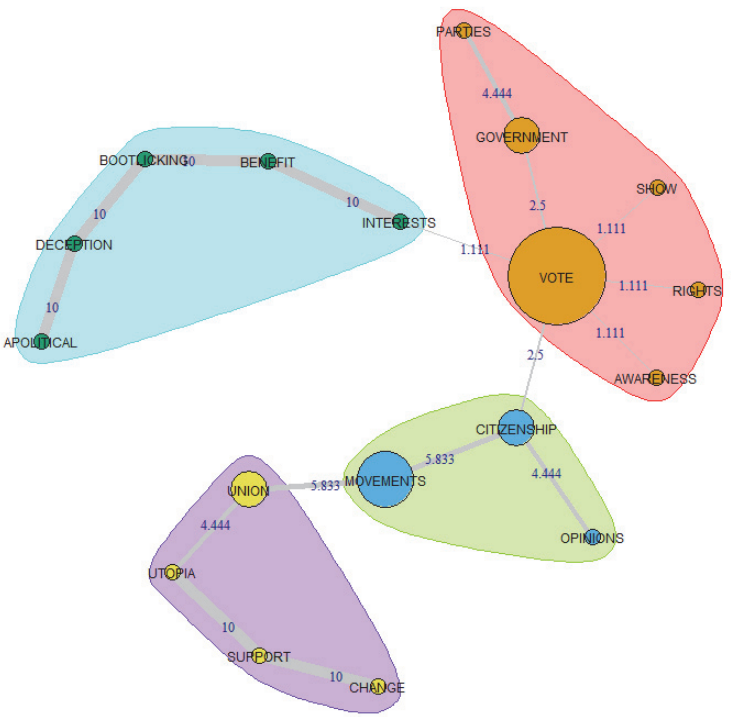


Table 2 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Italian right-wing students

	Sum_diseng	*Sum_civilpart*	*Sum_formalpart*	*Sum_act*	*Sum_selfeff*	*Sum_disint*	*Sum_disreg*
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.722*	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.836**	.673*	--				
Sum_act	.070	.236	.267	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.269	.317	.623*	.281	--		
Sum_disint	.134	.402	-.110	.345	-.193	--	
Sum_disreg	-.054	.086	.157	.047	.397	-.098	--

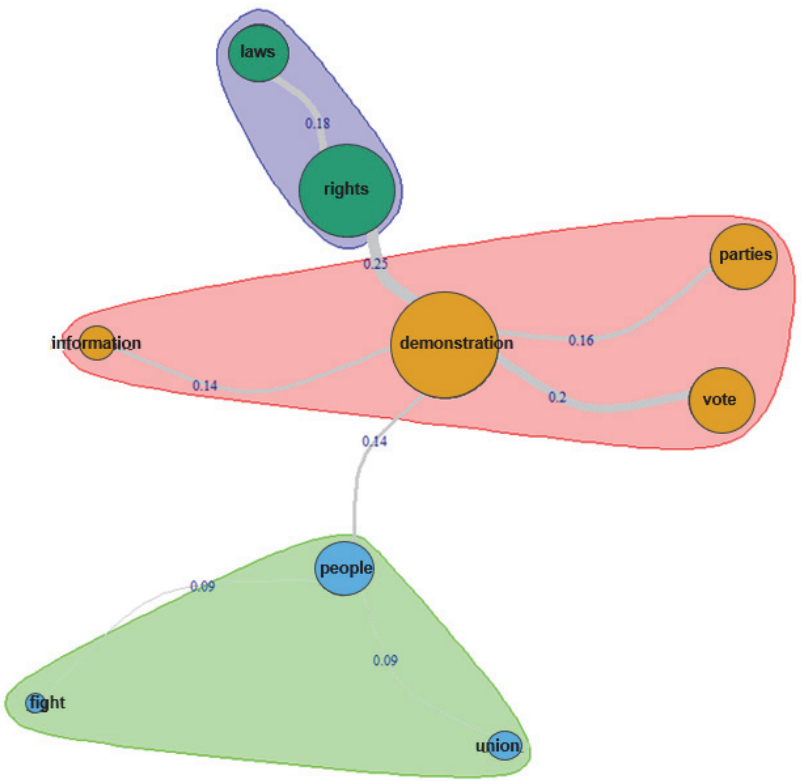
The comparison between left-wing youth in the two contexts highlights a more marked convergence. In both Italy (Figure 3) and Colombia (Figure

4), political participation is represented as a transformative process, oriented toward action and social change. The shared lexicon encompasses terms such as “rights”, “protests”, “justice”, and “equality” indicating an evident politicization of practices and identities. However, conceptually relevant differences also emerge.

Table 3 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Colombian right-wing students

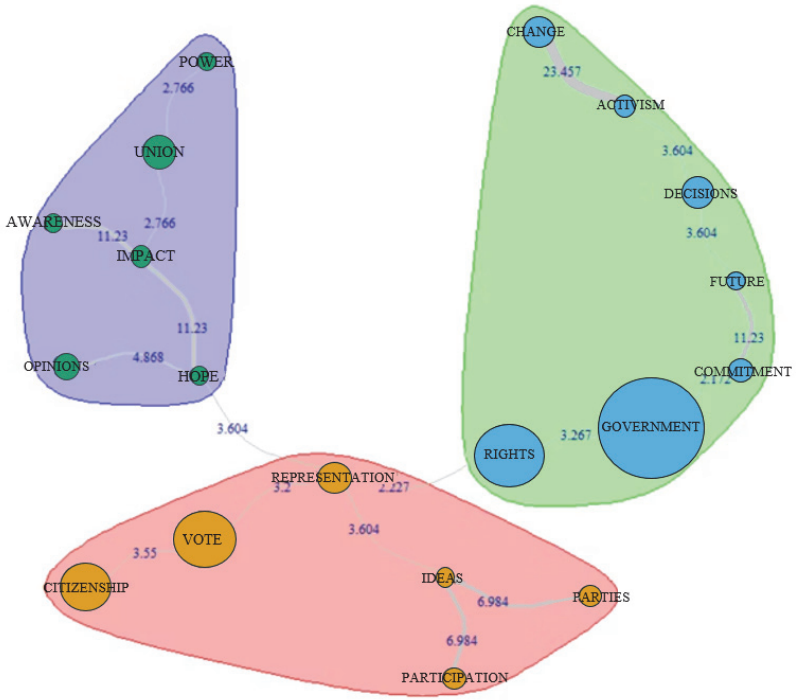
	Sum_diseng	*Sum_civilpart*	*Sum_formalpart*	*Sum_act*	*Sum_selfeff*	*Sum_disint*	*Sum_disreg*
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.077	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.606	.466	--				
Sum_act	-.505	.541	.661*	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.306	-.529	.075	-.115	--		
Sum_disint	.090	-.290	-.415	.047	.047	--	
Sum_disreg	.190	-.648*	-.406	-.557	.150	.245	--

Figure 3 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Italian left-wing students



For Colombian youth, the concept of "influence" (i.e., the effectiveness of action in modifying the social and political environment) is directly embedded in the social representation of participation, indicating a stronger sense of agency. In Italy, by contrast, self-efficacy remains confined to the psychometric dimension and is not explicitly thematized in participants' narratives.

Figure 4 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Colombian left-wing students



In Italy (Table 4), although similar associations are observed, they appear less structured and more fragmented, perhaps indicating a gap between declared intentionality and perceived efficacy.

Quantitative evidence supports the internal coherence observed among Colombian respondents (Table 5): civic participation is significantly correlated with self-efficacy ($r = .535$, $p < .01$), activism ($r = .643$, $p < .01$), and formal participation ($r = .640$, $p < .01$).

The profile of non-affiliated youth reveals distinct nuances in both contexts. In Italy (Figure 5), participation remains firmly institutionalized: "voting" holds a central position in the representation of politics and is associated with a citizenship right/duty. However, this is accompanied by

tangible distrust toward the state and representative structures, primarily emerging in the discursive justifications.

Table 4 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Italian left-wing students

	Sum_diseng	*Sum_civilpart*	*Sum_formalpart*	*Sum_act*	*Sum_selfeff*	*Sum_disint*	*Sum_disreg*
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.229	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.275	.708**	--				
Sum_act	-.014	.575**	.568**	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.138	.506**	.597**	.679**	--		
Sum_disint	.048	-.108	.059	-.032	-.052	--	
Sum_disreg	.050	-.192	-.232	-.132	-.178	.235	--

Table 5 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Colombian left-wing students

	Sum_diseng	*Sum_civilpart*	*Sum_formalpart*	*Sum_act*	*Sum_selfeff*	*Sum_disint*	*Sum_disreg*
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.256	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.216	.640**	--				
Sum_act	-.100	.643**	.741**	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.402*	.535**	.484**	.471**	--		
Sum_disint	.027	.045	.035	.191	-.004	--	
Sum_disreg	-.001	-.125	-.276	-.452**	-.263	-.249	--

In Colombia (Figure 6), by contrast, such distrust is structurally incorporated into the social representation, with the term "corruption" directly linked to "government" and "power".

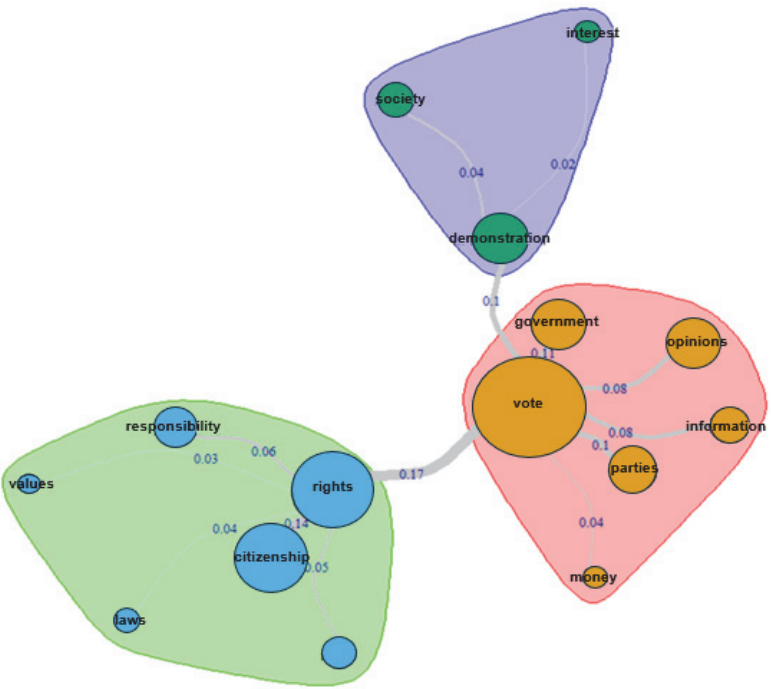
At the quantitative level, both groups exhibit significant levels of civic and political engagement: correlations between activism and formal/civic participation are high in both samples (e.g., Colombia: $r = .669$, $p < .01$). However, in Italy (Table 6), these dimensions are not significantly associated with other behaviors, remaining more marginal.

Among Colombian youth (Table 7), this activism coexists with a widespread perception of social disintegration and institutional instability (e.g., civic participation and disintegration: $r = .318$, $p < .01$), whereas in Italy (Table 6) these dimensions are not significantly associated with other behaviors, remaining more marginal.

Overall, the data suggests that in both countries, the lack of partisan affiliation does not imply an absence of political orientation, but rather a redefinition of participation in a plural, fluid, and reactive key. The distance from institutional channels is compensated by a critical and selective form of activism, expressed through heterogeneous and often informal practices. Moreover, the notion that young people are politically apathetic or disen-

gaged is refuted by the semantic and relational density of their representations, as well as by the richness of the quantitative connections they exhibit. Far from being univocal, youth participation is modulated by opportunities, cultural contexts, and institutional constraints, resulting in a complex yet coherent mosaic.

Figure 5 – IRaMuTeQ output - Similarity analysis for Italian non-partisan students



The integration of qualitative and quantitative data, analyzed in the three subgroups, allows for a more in-depth observation of the degree of convergence or divergence between the two levels of analysis.

With regard to young people on the right, different patterns emerge in the two contexts. In Italy, qualitative representations describe political participation as a civic and moral duty, closely linked to ethical values and a sense of collective responsibility. However, on a quantitative level, the correlations appear less structured, indicating a certain distance between discursive intentionality and actual reported behavior. In contrast, among Colombians, the narratives paint a more ambivalent picture, centered on insti-

tutional practices but permeated by distrust of institutions. Here, quantitative data reinforce the qualitative interpretation: significant associations between formal participation and activism coexist with indicators of institutional deregulation, confirming the critical tension that young people express in their discourse. In this subgroup, therefore, Italy and Colombia show a divergence in the relationship between qualitative and quantitative data: in Italy, the convergence is partial and weaker, while in Colombia it is closer and more consistent.

Figure 6 – IRaMuTeQ output – Similarity analysis for Colombian non-partisan students

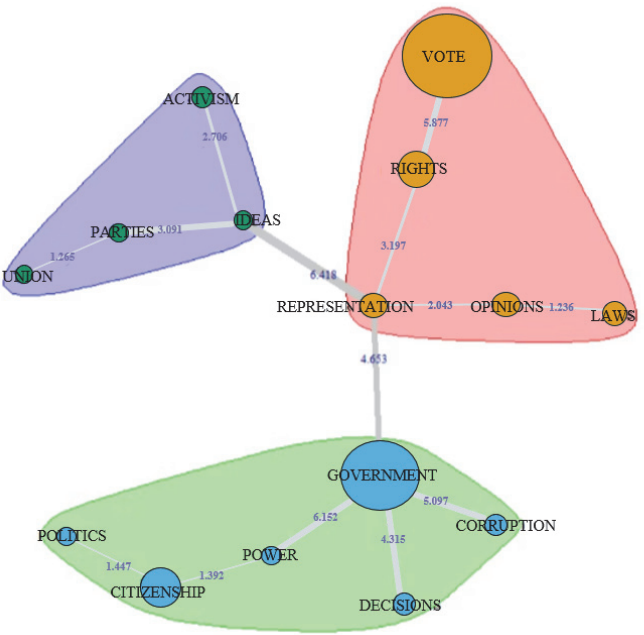


Table 6 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Italian non-partisan students

	Sum_diseng	*Sum_civilpart*	*Sum_formalpart*	*Sum_act*	*Sum_selfeff*	*Sum_disint*	*Sum_disreg*
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.240*	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.172*	.575*	--				
Sum_act	-.155*	.634**	.570**	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.259**	.420**	.375**	.392**	--		
Sum_disint	.046	.114	.015	.047	.034	--	
Sum_disreg	.053	-.114	.023	-.022	-.032	-.018	--

Table 7 – SPSS Output – Correlations among study variables for Colombian non-partisan students

	Sum_diseng	*Sum_civilpart*	*Sum_formalpart*	*Sum_act*	*Sum_selfeff*	*Sum_disint*	*Sum_disreg*
Sum_diseng	--						
Sum_civilpart	-.081	--					
Sum_formalpart	-.062	.471**	--				
Sum_act	-.092	.669**	.560*	--			
Sum_selfeff	-.120*	.448**	.178**	.468**	--		
Sum_disint	.080	.318**	-.028	.232**	.313**	--	
Sum_disreg	.038	.213*	.123*	-.142*	.206**	.163**	--

Moving on to young people on the left, triangulation highlights a clearer convergence. In both countries, qualitative representations emphasize a transformative orientation of participation, characterized by concepts such as rights, justice and equality. Quantitative data confirm this structure, especially in Colombia, where activism and self-efficacy are strongly interconnected. In Italy, on the other hand, although significant associations emerge, these appear more fragmented: the qualitative lexicon refers to a strong political commitment, but the statistical correlations show a less cohesive network, suggesting a possible gap between declared political identity and the perception of its effectiveness. In summary, there is a more solid convergence among young left-wingers in Colombia than in Italy, where quantitative data do not always support the semantic density observed qualitatively.

Finally, the subgroup of non-partisan young people highlights a particularly interesting area for triangulation. In Italy, qualitatively, participation still appears to be institutionalized around voting but accompanied by widespread skepticism towards institutions. Quantitative data only partially confirm this picture: although voting and civic participation emerge as central, they are not significantly correlated with other dimensions of political behavior, remaining marginal. In Colombia, on the contrary, the narratives describe a picture in which corruption and mistrust are an integral part of social representation, and quantitative data confirm this structure by showing that activism coexists with perceptions of social disintegration and institutional instability. In this case, therefore, there is a more marked convergence between qualitative and quantitative levels, with statistical associations reinforcing discursive representations.

Overall, triangulation shows that the convergence between qualitative and quantitative data is most evident in Colombia, especially among young left-wingers and non-partisans, where statistical relationships confirm the internal consistency of social representations. In Italy, on the other hand, the picture appears more fragmented: qualitative narratives evoke a norma-

tive and politicized lexicon, but quantitative connections are less structured, suggesting a potential gap between intentions, perceptions and practices. This comparison highlights how triangulation not only strengthens the empirical validity of the analyses but also allows us to identify interpretative divergences that enrich our understanding of social representations, offering insights into the cultural and institutional specificities of the two contexts.

4. Conclusion

The results presented strongly confirm the initial assumption: Italian and Colombian youth are by no means uninterested in politics, but interpret participation in plural ways, often alternative to conventional models linked to parties and institutional representation. The joint analysis of social representations and quantitative data has shown that distance from traditional channels does not correspond to passivity, but rather to a semantic and practical rearticulation of active citizenship, shaped by local political, cultural, and historical contexts. In particular, left-wing youth in both countries appear to be the most consistent in combining a transformative vision of politics with behaviors oriented toward collective action and social change. Right-wing youth, although less conflict-oriented and more aligned with institutional dimensions, exhibit notable differences: in Italy, the value-based reference is strong and positive, whereas in Colombia, it takes on more instrumental and critical connotations. Finally, non-affiliated youth perhaps represent the most significant challenge to classical interpretations of participation: although distant from ideological affiliations, they maintain a clear understanding of what it means to participate and adopt a critical attitude, albeit diverging across contexts – more argumentative in Italy, more structurally distrustful in Colombia.

Overall, the data confirms the need to rethink the analytical categories through which youth political participation is studied, moving beyond dichotomies such as engagement versus apathy or conventional versus non-conventional, in favor of a more fluid perspective capable of capturing ongoing transformations. Youth participatory practices are nourished by new expressive modalities, constructed outside traditional political arenas, and directly question the legitimacy of institutions and existing forms of representation. Understanding these dynamics means not only describing a generational shift but also reflecting on the necessary conditions for a genuinely inclusive, responsive, and multilevel democracy – one that makes room for the voices of young people as fully agentive subjects in the political and social spheres.

The study aims to contribute to the literature by addressing the gaps highlighted, in particular, by Weiss (2020). Specifically, the research focused on the definitions and meanings that young people construct and share regarding political participation, and it was designed as an intercultural and comparative investigation between two countries, Italy and Colombia. Although this is a preliminary exploratory study, it is important to acknowledge its most evident limitations. The use of psychometric measurement tools may expose results to social desirability bias. To mitigate this risk, the following strategies were adopted: anonymity, separation of thematic sections, neutral instructions, balancing of direct and reverse items, and randomized order of questions. The questionnaire was also supplemented (in the section on socio-demographic data) with an objective/indirect behavioral measure of political participation through a self-report item on behavior adopted in the previous election held in the respective countries.

During the investigation, the most significant challenge involved reaching university students who declared affiliation with a specific political party or movement. This was observed in both Italy and Colombia, particularly among young people who openly expressed right-wing views. Another limitation concerned the excessive imbalance in the subsample of participants who identified as "non-partisan".

However, these findings are part of an ongoing study. We intend to expand the student sample shortly to better balance the different respondent groups. Furthermore, it will be necessary to broaden the participant pool to include not only university students but also adult groups with diverse occupations and backgrounds. Particular attention will be devoted to participatory modalities recognized as "non-conventional," as these are rapidly growing and of great heuristic interest. Specifically, the dimension of online political participation will be included as a constitutive aspect of the future phases of research.

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Educational Community and Adolescents: Territoriality or Nomadism?

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Abstract

Starting from a project aimed at developing a network among various social actors in order to build an "Educating Community", this paper focuses on the evaluation process, with particular attention to one of the many target groups involved: adolescents. Participants completed a questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the project, aimed to assess residential attachment, sense of community, and psychosocial and emotional well-being (n = 326, 50.6% of whom belonged to the experimental group). The data collected at the end of the project did not show any increase in the dimensions investigated. Based on this unexpected result, the paper offers a reflection on the methodological and psychosocial factors that may explain this outcome.

Keywords: Sense of Community, Place Attachment, Educational Community, action research, adolescents, assessment

Riassunto. ***Comunità educante e adolescenti: territorialità o nomadismo?***

A partire da un progetto, volto a sviluppare una rete tra i diversi attori sociali al fine di pervenire a una "Comunità Educante", si farà qui riferimento al percorso di valutazione, focalizzato su un target tra i molti coinvolti, cioè la fascia adolescenziale. I soggetti hanno compilato un questionario, a inizio e fine progetto, volto a rilevare l'attaccamento residen-

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ziale, il senso di comunità e il benessere psicosociale ed emotivo (n = 326, 50.6% appartenenti al gruppo sperimentale). I dati raccolti al termine del progetto non hanno rilevato un incremento in nessuna delle dimensioni indagate. A partire da questo risultato inatteso, si propone una riflessione circa i fattori, sia di ordine metodologico sia di ordine psicosociale, che possono spiegare questo risultato.

Parole chiave: Senso di Comunità, Attaccamento al luogo, Comunità Educante, ricerca-azione, adolescenti, valutazione

1. Introduction

Under the title of Educational Community, projects and interventions aimed at contributing to community development that fosters the growth and well-being of adolescents and young people are becoming increasingly frequent. The goal is, among others, to develop a network among social actors who jointly share projects, initiatives, and strategies aimed at responding to the needs of young people living in a specific territory. The territorial location is an important issue that characterizes these initiatives, promoting forms of participation and developing relationships (Amerio, 2000). Essentially, the local community constitutes the place where interpersonal relationships are lived, thus contributing to satisfying human needs for belonging, security, and identity (Francescato, 1997). In the case of adolescents and young people, how should their relationship with the territory be interpreted?

2. Adolescents, Young People: What is their Relationship with the Local Community and the Territory?

Extensive psychosocial literature shows that place attachment and sense of community are functional for the development of a good quality of life.

A good relationship with the place of residence is important, especially during childhood and pre-adolescence; while growing up individuals need to expand their knowledge and move beyond the familiar territories where they grew up. It is known that a pre-adolescent, gradually gaining greater autonomy also in the relationship with the world outside of the family, can identify critical aspects of his/her context he/she previously did not recognize. Moreover, the need to explore and step outside of the protective territorial boundaries that characterize childhood also increase. This reduces the sense of community, precisely because there is a need to explore different territories, nevertheless maintaining an anchor to the place of residence. It

is therefore not surprising that several studies show how the sense of community and place attachment decrease with the transition from pre-adolescence to adolescence (Brownson *et al.*, 2009; Scheller *et al.*, 2024).

Place attachment and sense of community are two constructs that emphasize the relationship with one's context, but focus on different aspects of it. A brief clarification of the two constructs is therefore necessary.

2.1 Place Attachment

Place attachment refers, in general, to the emotional bond that the subjects experience towards a place significant to them: the place where they live, a place where they had an important experience, and so on (Lewicka, 2010; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010a; 2010b). More specifically, it is called "residential attachment" when this bond concerns one's place of residence (Fried, 1982).

Place attachment is closely related both to well-being (Scannel & Gifford, 2010), and to the possibility of finding socializing opportunities there, as well as to environmental awareness (Uzzell *et al.*, 2002; Carrus *et al.*, 2014; Erdoğdu, 2025). It develops through experiences lived during the course of daily life and is also consolidated through place practices (Paulsen, 2004; Raffaetà & Duff, 2013). Attachment to a place is in fact built not only by establishing an emotional relationship with the residential place and developing social ties, but also through the possibility of carrying out actions that contribute to a sense of agency and to a situated protagonism. This assumes particular importance during adolescence, a crucial phase of development in which relationships and bonds are redefined (Bartolo *et al.*, 2023), and new experiences are shared (Albanesi *et al.*, 2007; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Evans, 2007, Prati *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 Sense of Community

Sense of community is a concept that does not need an introduction. From the first reflections by Sarason (1974), to the subsequent developments proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), up to the most recent proposals by Nowell and Boyd (2010), it is known that community is a resource: it constitutes a symbolic and a relational space that if satisfies people's fundamental needs for connection, belonging, positive experiences, is a solid basis for the development of their well-being.

Studies that have investigated the sense of community in early adolescence are scarce (Prati *et al.*, 2021), although it has been shown that the relationship that adolescents build with their territorial context constitutes a reference also for subsequent stages of development, influencing their well-being (Cicognani *et al.*, 2015; Coulombe & Krzesni, 2019; Prati *et al.*, 2018; Prezza *et al.*, 2001; Vieno *et al.*, 2007).

The relationship with a territorial context, such as the local community, tends to progressively change according to the different stages of development: childhood, pre-adolescence, adolescence, and maturity. This change reflects the path of growth towards greater autonomy, which characterizes the transition from childhood to late adolescence with a change in lifestyle, in perceiving, and inhabiting the community space.

It is undeniable that among the developmental tasks that characterize the transition from childhood to adolescence there is also a gradual search for autonomy, living and building relationships and actions that are not affected by parental norms; this is a transition from the family sphere, possibly perceived as safe and protective, or as intrusive and limiting, to public spaces that ensure that the community constitutes (or should constitute) a social and relational context (Ayllon *et al.*, 2019; Prati *et al.*, 2021).

Act with others, doing things together, contributes to broadening relational possibilities and this, in turn, helps to develop a sense of belonging and affiliation. Since one of the superordinate needs of the human being is the need to belong, expanding the opportunities that allow this important need to be satisfied is a protective factor against critical events that could lead to psychological distress and retreat into solitude. The sense of attachment and belonging to the community is built not only through strong ties, such as friendships and family relationships, but is also nurtured by the occasional interactions generated in daily life. It is precisely in the ordinary course of life – in shared places, in intermediate times, in unexpected contacts – that the foundations of the sense of community are consolidated.

Based on these assumptions, an intervention was proposed. The actions that characterized it will be briefly described hereafter, focusing on some aspects of the evaluation that was carried out.

3. Building Ties and Developing an Educational Community: a Situated Intervention

3.1 The Project: A Synthesis of the Operational Phases

The project *ComunitAttiva – Building bonds to recognize ourselves as*

an educating, inclusive, and resilient community, promoted by Gruppo Abele, in partnership with the University of Turin (Departments of Psychology and Computer Science), UISP[1] Torino, together with other public and private social institutions, and funded by Con i bambini Impresa Sociale (call: "Comunità Educante" – "Educating Community"), had the objective of "activating the resources present in the territory in order to build educational paths capable of promoting well-being, autonomy, and critical capacity in the younger generations" (Dipartimenti di Informatica e Psicologia – UNITO, Gruppo Abele, UISP Torino & Circoscrizione 3, 2023). In synthesis, the project had a dual objective: on the one hand, to consolidate or build a network among several actors who can – or could – contribute to building an Educating Community in a District of the City of Turin, thereby creating synergies both between the main educational agencies, namely schools and families, and between them and the different opportunities developed by local agencies (such as: meeting centers for adolescents and young; sports centers; centers for youth leadership, and so on); on the other hand, to propose practical initiatives and activities aimed at adolescents to foster relationships among them and to facilitate their relationship with the local context outside the school.

The first phases (from late September to December 2023) involved more than 300 students, almost 500 parents, and about 50 teachers from the four Institutes (3 lower secondary and 1 upper secondary) participating in the project[2]. These initial contacts aimed:

- to assess perceptions, representations, and use of the local context (seen as a place and as a local community);
- to analyze the needs related to adolescents and young people, perceived both by adults and by the young people themselves.

Subsequently, meetings were proposed in the classes with the objective of deepening the understanding of the needs and desires of adolescents referred to activities to be carried out. The needs collected in the classes suggested the realization of various activities (including during the summer period), in class and outside, integrating the proposals formulated by teachers and parents through focus groups and interviews. The activities were carried out during the first *Educating Community Week – A training to be a community* in 2023 and included meetings with residential structures for the

[1] UISP: "Unione Italiana Sport Per Tutti" (Italian Union of Sports for All).

[2] Parents were involved through a questionnaire and through word cafés (the latter with an average of 20 parents participating in each school); teachers were involved in focus groups (one meeting per school). Project partners, local agencies, and teacher representatives from each school participated in periodic internal review meetings on the progress of the initiatives.

elderly, with the mosque, with neighborhood bookstores, and also an *Urban Walks* to walk the neighborhood streets and learn about its different places, a Treasure Hunt, sports activities in the neighborhood's pedestrian streets, and artistic-recreational activities. In addition, the classes were involved in civic education activities. 350 students and more than 80 citizens, with 35 local organizations were involved in the about 30 events organized.

Furthermore, during the summer, between the 2023/24 and 2024/25 school years, other initiatives were carried out: a civic activism workshop on urban requalification, the regeneration and decoration of 50 concrete benches placed in a public space, and a film workshop. For the year 2023/24, additional pedestrian areas were created in front of the schools and were used for recreational and sports activities dedicated to the students.

Some classes were involved during two school years as foreseen by the project; others, during the second year, participated only sporadically in some initiatives and new ones were involved. New recreational and sports activities were only implemented in the second year because collaborations between local institutions were added, expanding the network of partners

4. The Evaluation

In order to detect the perception and knowledge of the territory by young people, operationalized in terms of sense of community and place attachment, to explore their psychosocial well-being and to evaluate the effectiveness of the actions in terms of change in attitude towards the local community, a questionnaire was administered at the start and the end of the project. We therefore expect an increase in place attachment, sense of community and well-being in those who participated in the activities.

Here we refer exclusively to the data collected through the questionnaires addressed to the students, thus excluding the information collected through interviews and focus groups.

4.1 Method

The questionnaire, administered at the beginning of the project (September/October 2023) and at the end of the actions (May 2025), included the following scales:

- *Place attachment* (Bonaiuto *et al.*, 2002): a unidimensional scale of Residential Attachment (ACP; Cronbach's alpha = .80), consisting of 8

items (e.g., “This neighborhood is now a part of me”), with a Likert type response where 1 = completely disagree and 7 = completely agree. A high score refers to high place attachment;

- *Sense of community for adolescents* (SOC-A; Chiessi *et al.*, 2010), consisting of 5 sub-dimensions: 4 items refer to the sense of belonging (e.g., “I think this neighborhood is a good place to live”; Cronbach’s alpha = .82); 4 to the opportunity for influence (e.g., “I believe that people here have the potential to change things that seem not to work”; Cronbach’s alpha = .73); 4 to the emotional connection with the community (e.g., “People in this neighborhood support each other”; Cronbach’s alpha = .85); 4 to the emotional connection with peers (e.g., “I like spending time with other young people in this neighborhood”; Cronbach’s alpha = .87); 4 to the satisfaction of needs (e.g., “There are situations and initiatives here that manage to involve us”). The Likert scale provides: 0 = not at all true and 5 = absolutely true (Cronbach’s alpha = .81); a high value refers to a high sense of community;
- *Psychosocial well-being*, detected through the Stirling scale, developed by the *Stirling Council Educational Psychology Service* (UK) and translated into Italian by Testoni *et al.* (2020). It includes two subscales: one referring to psychological well-being (e.g., “I think many people care about me”; Cronbach’s alpha = .73) and the other referring to emotional well-being (e.g., “I feel in a good mood”; Cronbach’s alpha = .81), to which is added a sub-dimension referring to social desirability (3 items; e.g., “I have always told the truth”). The Likert scale provides responses from 1 = never to 5 = always. A high score refers to high well-being.

Some *socio-demographic characteristics* such as: gender, year of birth, country of birth, place of residence were collected.

4.2 The Sample

Adolescents participated in the submission of the questionnaire at two different times: a first phase (T0) between October and November 2023, and a second (T1) between May and June 2025. At T0, the sample consisted of 326 respondents (50.6% belonging to the experimental group) and at T1 of 353 (57.7% belonging to the experimental group). This different number is due to the fact that some classes joined after the project started, and therefore were not contacted at T0, but were in any case considered as experimental group.

In the planning phase, it was decided to re-administer the questionnaire at T1 to the same subjects involved, but this was not possible for several

reasons: some classes did not take part in the project in its second year and other classes, which had not participated in the project during the previous year, joined instead.

Similarly, the activities of the *Educating Week* were attended not only by the classes that adhered to the project, but also by other classes that participated sporadically in the activities; some activities were proposed outside school hours (such as the Treasure Hunt) and boys and girls participated individually. Essentially, what we could define as the experimental sample is a *quasi-experimental* sample, as it was impossible to guarantee the presence of the same subjects before and after the project. In summary: the control sample consists of subjects who were not involved in any project phase; while subjects belonging to classes that participated only occasionally in the activities of the second year were also included in the experimental group (quasi-experimental group).

In both surveys, the gender distribution shows a female prevalence, increasing from 60.1% to 66.2%, compared to a male component that slightly decreases from 39.9% to 33.8%. The average age increases consistently with the temporal shift between the two surveys: from 13.1 years (SD = 1.9) at T0 to 15.3 years (SD = 2.0) at T1. In terms of the school grade attended, a progressive transition towards upper secondary school is observed, involving 28.2% of the sample at T0 and 37.1% at T1, although the presence of lower secondary school students remains prevalent (71.8% and 62.9% respectively).

5. Results

The data analysis shows an articulated picture of the perceptions and experiences of the adolescents involved, with particular attention to the psychosocial dimensions connected to the sense of community, the quality of relationships, and perceived well-being.

From the correlation analyses (Table 1), a strong internal consistency emerges among the investigated dimensions. In particular, the sense of belonging shows a very high correlation with place attachment (r = .71, p < .001) and a significant relationship with all other variables, particularly with the satisfaction of needs and involvement (r = .55, p < .001) and emotional support in the community (r = .54, p < .001). Emotional support and connection with peers is significantly associated particularly with the satisfaction of needs (r = .66, p < .001). Positive emotions and optimism are correlated with each other (r = .65, p < .001) and with the main dimensions related to the sense of community.

Table 1 – Correlations between psychosocial dimensions at T0

Variables	*1.*	*2.*	*3.*	*4.*	*5.*	*6.*	*7.*	*8.*
1. Place Attachment	–							
2. Sense of Belonging	.71***	–						
3. Support and Emotional Connection in the Community	.44***	.54***	–					
4. Support and Emotional Connection with Peers	.47***	.43***	.45***	–				
5. Satisfaction of Needs and Involvement Opportunities	.43***	.55***	.50***	.66***	–			
6. Opportunity for Influence	.31***	.35***	.48***	.48***	.54***	–		
7. Optimism	.31***	.32***	.36***	.26***	.29***	.35***	–	
8. Positive Emotions	.26***	.32***	.31***	.22***	.28***	.23***	.65***	–

Note. *** $p < .001$.

The data (see Table 2) express a sufficient satisfaction of the subjects referred to place and sense of community: the means are positioned around the central value of the scale, thus demonstrating both scarce criticality and weak appreciation for the place and the local community. Statistically significant gender differences are observed related to some dimensions. Males report significantly higher mean values in terms of place attachment (M = 5.5 vs. 5.2; p = .017), sense of belonging (M = 3.9 vs. 3.7; p = .023), optimism (M = 3.6 vs. 3.4; p = .018), and positive emotions (M = 3.5 vs. 3.3; p = .011). No significant differences between females and males are found for the other dimensions.

Despite the impossibility, as specified above, of a methodologically rigorous comparison between the different phases of the project, it was nevertheless considered useful for the purpose of joint reflection with the working group, to proceed with an analysis that could highlight any signs of change among those who, even if in different ways, were exposed to the project activities.

Table 2 – Gender differences at T0

Psychosocial dimensions	*General Mean (T0)*	*Male*	*Female*	*Sign.*
Place Attachment	$M = 5.3$	$M = 5.5$	$M = 5.2$	$t = 2.4$, $p = .017$
Sense of Belonging	$M = 3.8$	$M = 3.9$	$M = 3.7$	$t = 2.3$, $p = .023$
Support and Emotional Connection in the Community	$M = 2.7$	$M = 2.8$	$M = 2.7$	n.s.
Support and Emotional Connection with Peers	$M = 2.8$	$M = 2.9$	$M = 2.7$	n.s.
Satisfaction of Needs and Involvement Opportunities	$M = 2.8$	$M = 2.9$	$M = 2.7$	n.s.
Opportunity for Influence	$M = 3.3$	$M = 3.0$	$M = 3.4$	n.s.
Optimism	$M = 3.5$	$M = 3.6$	$M = 3.4$	$t = 2.4$, $p = .018$
Positive Emotions	$M = 3.4$	$M = 3.5$	$M = 3.3$	$t = 2.6$, $p = .011$

Given these premises, considering any changes that occurred between T0 (October-November 2023) and T1 (May-June 2025), Table 3 shows a statistically significant decrease in place attachment (from $M = 5.34$ to $M = 5.14$; $p = .004$), sense of belonging (from $M = 3.78$ to $M = 3.54$; $p < .001$), perceived emotional support in the community (from $M = 2.74$ to $M = 2.54$; $p = .008$), and opportunities for influence (from $M = 3.32$ to $M = 3.12$; $p = .003$). Conversely, no significant variation was found in relation to peer support, satisfaction of needs, optimism, and positive emotions. In some cases (e.g., peer support), a slight, although not significant, increase in mean values is observed.

Overall, these results show a greater vulnerability of some psychosocial dimensions over time, especially those linked to the relationship with the community and the sense of territorial belonging.

Furthermore, comparing the data at T1 between the quasi-experimental group and the control group, no statistically significant differences are found, thereby confirming the data illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3 – Comparison T0/T1: paired-samples t-test (quasi-experimental group)

Psychosocial dimensions	*T0 (2023)*	*T1 (2025)*	*Sign.*	*Total n*
Place Attachment	$M = 5.33$	$M = 5.07$	$t = 3.67$, $p = .000$	270
Sense of Belonging	$M = 3.78$	$M = 3.54$	$t = 3.60$, $p = .000$	268
Support and Emotional Connection in the Community	$M = 2.74$	$M = 2.54$	$t = 2.67$, $p = .008$	265
Support and Emotional Connection with Peers	$M = 2.78$	$M = 2.82$	n.s.	268
Satisfaction of Needs and Involvement Opportunities	$M = 2.81$	$M = 2.86$	n.s.	267
Opportunity for Influence	$M = 3.33$	$M = 3.12$	$t = 3.19$. $p = .002$	265
Optimism	$M = 3.51$	$M = 3.51$	n.s.	267
Positive Emotions	$M = 3.46$	$M = 3.44$	n.s.	267

6. Discussion

In general, the results demonstrate a fair attachment of adolescents to the local district, and a good level of psychosocial well-being. The urban area involved in the project does not present characteristics of particular social risk; it is characterized by a social mix, with a prevalence of private residences inhabited by a middle and upper-middle class. The foreign citizens are composed mainly of people from Central-South America, generally well-integrated into the urban context. Discussions with parents and the teaching staff did not raise any particular critical issues about the environment; some areas were commonly considered as more dangerous or less frequented than others, but there is a general consensus in considering the neighborhood positively, also thanks to the presence of green areas. Teens use green spaces as a place to meet with peers, especially during the summer closing of schools. This period is considered critical by parents, because opportunities for socialization for their children are scarce. The summer activities that were indeed carried out through the project were widely attended and appreciated, even by the young participants.

The analyses also highlight significant differences between boys and

girls both in reference to place attachment and well-being, both dimensions being higher for males. Girls express less place attachment (Dallago *et al.*, 2011) probably because they have a greater desire to push territorial boundaries, hindered by an education that tends to protect girls, forced to remain longer under the control of the family and adults. Similarly, it could be hypothesized that the same desire for greater autonomy and freedom underlies the lower psychological well-being (identified here as "optimism") and emotional well-being that girls express compared to their male peers. On the other hand, it is known that boys and girls are educated with different rules (Bian, 2022), and the expectations towards them coming from the social world are different.

What is unexpected is the comparison between the data collected at the beginning and end of the project. We would have expected an increase in place attachment, sense of community, and psychological well-being; this is due not only to the desired results, but also in reference to the observations and communications exchanged with the young people during the project. All the proposed activities were positively evaluated, with participation both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Teachers and parents also expressed satisfaction with the proposed activities and the resulting reactions of the young people. However, the data collected at the end of the project did not show an increase in any of the investigated dimensions and even in some dimensions, an increase towards greater criticality was observed.

It seems important to elaborate on this point a reflection both on the meaning of an evaluation inspired by evidence-based principles and on the psychosocial processes underlying this result, including an analysis on how important the relationship with the place is for the adolescents.

First of all, we must consider that, since the data does not show any differences between the beginning and end of the project, for both control and experimental subjects, we cannot attribute the cause of the decrease in the sense of community to the project actions.

From a procedural point of view, it is known that a situated project has to "negotiate" the planned project with the concrete possibility of being able to realize it. In this specific case, internal issues in the school made it difficult to involve the same classes for two consecutive school years. The entire project described here was developed by agreeing with the partners on the need for changes *in itinere* due to unforeseen needs or conversely, seizing opportunities present in the territory that were either unknown or not yet existing at the time of the project drafting. The ongoing changes are due both to the impossibility of involving the same classes for two consecutive years and to the need to modify the proposed actions, maintaining the same aims: fostering place attachment and sense of community.

All of this does not constitute a problem in itself but raises methodological questions.

In case of a pre/post evaluation, based on expected objectives at time X, which are then modified on the basis of a situated approach, is it possible to certify the intervention as the best practice? A process evaluation can be carried out, but could it happen that the indicators identified at time X are not so relevant in light of the changes that occurred during the project realization? How suitable is a pre/post comparison to detect the effectiveness of a situated project, subject to changes *in itinere*? These issues highlight the need to adopt a different kind of perspective when this type of evaluation is performed, especially in regard to how the results are analyzed. It must also be considered that social projects such as the one presented in this paper often generate indirect effects, which are not always easily measurable. Despite the difficulties in continuing the planned actions in some classes, the network among the various institutions involved has been strengthened, making it possible, for example, to participate in other calls to obtain new funding and, consequently, expand the network and continue the actions, referring to the analysis of needs and the information collected in the initial phase (T0) of the project.

In the context of social policies, whose interventions have characteristics strictly linked to time, place, and subjects, the evidence-based approach is considered inappropriate by some (Pawson *et al.*, 2011), and unworkable by others (Lombi, 2008).

At a procedural level, two orders of reflection arise. The first concerns the need for more time to produce structural change: transforming individual attitudes and, even more, modifying social dynamics rooted in a local context requires long and continuous processes. See the issue of projects that last for a defined time. There is a need for structural interventions, which would also allow for a longitudinal methodological approach, thus being able to monitor the quality and extent of changes, inspired by an ecological approach to systems change (Peirson *et al.*, 2011) and integrating, in the evaluation process, the intervening variables and the intrinsic changes to the system itself, i.e., those not consequent to the realized intervention.

Participatory action research (Arcidiacono & Marta, 2008) could be an excellent reference, not only because it involves a participatory approach in all phases of planning, implementation, and evaluation, but also because, by involving partners from the outset, it can predict ongoing changes and, if necessary, adapt evaluation processes. However, as already discussed, these need time, dedicating the early phases to building participation and actively involving partners. If the usefulness of knowledge for social actors is one of the criteria that defines the validity of community psychology research

(Trickett & Espino, 2004), perhaps it is not necessary to demonstrate that a project, or intervention, is evidence-based, a criterion perhaps too much far from the systemic ecological approach. But this is an open question, requiring further exploration.

The second concerns the relation between place and adolescents. Extensive literature has demonstrated the relationship between place attachment and sense of community and well-being; our data also confirm this relationship. Perhaps not only the duration of the project and the difficulty in obtaining "pure" control classes and "pure" experimental classes can explain why the data did not show an improvement in the investigated constructs. Over the course of a year and a half, the participants have grown, and with age, perhaps their need to expand their space for movement has also grown – expressing criticism toward their usual place as a way of responding to a desire to explore other spaces, while on the one hand staying connected to their own history and on the other building new forms of belonging.

It cannot be ignored how, in recent years, socialization channels have undergone deep transformations, particularly due to the spread of social media. Online relationships have not replaced offline ones but today represent an additional space through which girls and boys initiate, develop, or maintain social bonds. The considered sample belongs to the so-called Alpha generation (i.e., young people born from 2010 to 2024), the first generation raised entirely in the digital age, for whom social media constitute a structural element of daily life and different forms of interaction and socialization.

7. Conclusions

A situated project requires capacity for adaptation, that is, the possibility of modulating the project phases in response to emerging needs, internal transformations of the community, unforeseen events and, more generally, everything that is not plannable *ex ante*. Our resulting evaluation data open up questions on a double level. On the one hand, they urge us to reflect on the limits of an evaluative framework inspired by "orthodox" research, as previously discussed. On the other hand, they impose a broader reflection on the relationship between local communities and adolescents, with a specific focus on Alpha generation. Having been born in the digital age, therefore accustomed to use, and to see using, the various devices, they do not consider these tools as innovative and original; they are approaching another way of use, integrating digital spaces with more traditional socialization spaces, ranging from online to offline. As Castiglione (2023) reminds us,

referring to research conducted in a neighborhood of Palermo, «all participants agreed on the pleasure of playing together, both with physical and virtual companions reached online. Their choices must therefore be traced back to the broader motivation to use socializing spaces» (p. 59).

Among the needs detected during the initial meetings in the classes, the need to be involved in in-person social activities clearly emerged, thus leading to significant participation during the proposed activities, even outside the school context. It is therefore important to ask how the relationship between a pervasive and familiar online universe and in-person relationships, the construction of territorial bonds, and the possibility of inhabiting offline spaces that offer opportunities and recognition are articulated for them. How to combine, in the evolutionary trajectory of these adolescents, the need for belonging and the desire to remain mobile, unanchored.

Questions that remain open and that could constitute fertile ground for future projects and new investigations, underlining the need for long-term projects, capable of embracing transformations, modifying themselves on the basis of structural changes and adapting to new needs and emerging evolutionary trajectories.

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Parasocial Feminism and Social Media Communities: Subjective Empowerment and its Ambivalences

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Abstract

Contemporary digital feminist activism is often embodied and represented through individual influencer accounts, which enable a form of parasocial feminism, likely being effective due to parasocial mechanisms and their significance for the social self. This study explores the influence and meaning of parasocial feminism for followers. To this end, 46 narratives by social media followers of an influencer who is a German artist and practices a distinct form of parasocial feminism known as #volanismus ("#volanism"), addressing misogyny, inequality and suppression through drawings and performance art in the form of online responses to hateful social media comments. Applying a psychoanalytic paradigm, we investigate how content and parasocial community dynamics are subjectively experienced through explicit and latent layers of meaning. The findings reveal how parasocial feminism bears significant meaning on the subjective level for the self, but also in the form of practical relevance, shaping everyday life and social and relational dynamics (e.g., divorce, having another child, transforming sexual scripts). We discuss these findings in terms of resistance and group dynamics, with a particular focus on how social mechanisms are transformed under spreading parasociality, with social media communities becoming a key part of the social self and contemporary social organizing. We also highlight limitations, noting that online activism perpetuates an individualizing logic within contemporary liberal feminism and platform capitalism.

Keywords: social media, community psychology, feminism, online communities, parasocial relationships, parasociality, parasocial feminism

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Riassunto. ***Femminismo parasociale e comunità sui social media: l'empowerment soggettivo e sue ambivalenze***

L'attivismo femminista digitale contemporaneo è spesso rappresentato da profili individuali di influencers, che consentono una forma di femminismo parasociale di potenziale efficacia grazie ai meccanismi parasociali e al loro significato per il sé sociale. Questo studio esplora l'influenza e il significato del femminismo parasociale per gli utenti del profilo. A tal fine, sono state analizzate 46 narrazioni di utenti di un profilo social di un'influencer tedesca che pratica una forma distintiva di femminismo parasociale nota come #volanismus ("#volanism"), affrontando la misoginia, la disuguaglianza e la repressione attraverso disegni e performance artistiche sotto forma di risposte online ai commenti odiosi sui social media. Applicando un paradigma psicoanalitico, indaghiamo come i contenuti e le dinamiche della comunità parasociale siano soggettivamente vissuti attraverso livelli di significato espliciti e latenti. I risultati rivelano come il femminismo parasociale abbia un significato rilevante a livello soggettivo per il sé, ma anche sotto forma di rilevanza pratica, modellando la vita quotidiana e le dinamiche sociali e relazionali (p.e., divorzio, genitorialità, pratiche e intimità). Discutiamo questi risultati in termini di resistenza e dinamiche di gruppo, con particolare attenzione a come i meccanismi sociali vengono trasformati dalla diffusione della parasocialità, con le comunità dei social media che diventano una parte fondamentale del sé sociale e dell'organizzazione sociale contemporanea. Evidenziamo anche i limiti, osservando che l'attivismo online perpetua una logica individualizzante all'interno del femminismo liberale contemporaneo e del capitalismo delle piattaforme internet.

Parole chiave: social media, psicologia di comunità, femminismo, comunità online, relazioni parasociali, parasocialità, femminismo parasociale

1. Introduction

Social media has become a key site of contemporary social dynamics and mechanisms, being central not only for entertainment or information seeking but foremost for orientation, identity formation, and communal belonging. Within this environment, gendered dynamics are rearticulated, and feminist practices emerge that are deeply entangled with parasocial relationships and group dynamics (Locke *et al.*, 2018). Such constellations may be described as arising from parasocial feminism, adapting the notion of the fourth wave of feminism and online activism (Akhila & John, 2024) to contemporarily signifying parasocial mechanisms, where artistic expression, digital interaction, and collective processes converge to challenge inequality and misogyny under the specific conditions of social media communication and related parasocial mechanisms (Jouët, 2018).

This contribution explores parasocial feminism through the case of Maris Rauch, a German feminist artist and influencer who works under the artist-name Volane, whose practice of #volanismus combines surreal artistic expression (e.g., paintings), feminist critique, and digital performance. Her work exemplifies how parasocial feminism materializes in online spaces,

linking aesthetic provocation and a business case of selling artworks with everyday community interaction in the profane environment of social media.

Volane's work merges graffiti, street art, photorealism, and performance into a distinct artistic practice. This aesthetic framework centers thematically on bodily functions and appearances, particularly female genitalia and related products such as menstrual cups, while emphasizing natural corporeality, including body hair, bleeding, skin folds, or gum inflammation. These motifs are integrated into a visual language of pragmatic sensuality and revealing "ugliness". Volane's representations juxtapose everyday and conventionally unattractive objects, including cigarettes, used tissues, or garbage, with fantastical hybrids such as rabbit heads on ice cream cones or oversized tampons in forest landscapes. Her art navigates loneliness in urban housing blocks, digital saturation, and consumerism, framing beauty in the unspectacular and absurd. The grotesque becomes a medium for critiquing neoliberal subjectivities and aesthetic (ab)norms.

However, Volanism extends beyond visual artworks into social media performance. Volane articulates a form of online feminist activism that combines artistic expression, political commentary, and educational engagement in (un-)learning. Her performances include reaction videos and responses to (hate) comments, where she stages resistance to perceived misogynistic discourse and online aggression. These acts, explicitly aimed at digital (self-)empowerment, are framed within a broader critique of restrictions and limited scope, societal expectations and norms regarding the roles of motherhood, femininity, gender, and agency, ultimately promoting peace and respectful coexistence as a value.

Volane's work process is frequently shared in livestreams, where she explains techniques and discusses artistic decisions, blurring the line between teaching, art practice, and community participation. Through self-managed marketing and distribution, she simultaneously challenges established gatekeeping in the art world and leverages gig economy structures for artistic autonomy as she sells her artwork, courses, and prints through her website. Accordingly, Volane has cultivated an interactive online community with over 280.000 followers to date on Instagram.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Significance of Parasocial Relationships

Time spent on social media has grown substantially over the past decades, establishing itself as a dominant activity, with an increasing share of

everyday life and social life unfolding online (Kleeberg-Niepage & Degen, 2022; Scott *et al.*, 2017). Social media platforms, such as Instagram, function not only as sites of entertainment and distraction but also as spaces for accessing trends, information, and glimpses into the presentations of (supposedly authentic) lifestyles and the privacy of others (Abidin, 2016). This bears significance, as influencers' content is often perceived as more trustworthy than traditional media sources (e.g., TV, newspapers) or advice from family and peers (Degen & Simpson, 2022; Hasebrink *et al.*, 2021; Park *et al.*, 2022; Shareef *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, the platforms are increasingly perceived as pathways to professions, promising economic gain through visibility within the gig economy, which leads to an overall professionalization and enforcement of market-driven dynamics and enforced utilization of mechanisms (Jarman *et al.*, 2021; Fetter *et al.*, 2023; Newlands & Fieseler, 2020; Rodgers *et al.*, 2021). This includes the utilization of relational components of everyone involved, which can be discussed critically in terms of their direction, power dynamics, meanings, and related ethics in the context of algorithmic control and digitally enforced individualization (Johanssen, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

Research has drawn attention to the meaning and impact of social media use, primarily from the perspective of followers and ordinary users. Around the topic, different positions have emerged, fluctuating between rather pragmatic assessments of social media and potential benefits, e.g., access to information and decentralization on the one hand; and critical perspectives focusing on vulnerabilities and risks, including adverse effects on physical and mental health, as well as social impact, with social media increasing individualization and loneliness on the other hand (Hou *et al.*, 2019; Kessling *et al.*, 2023; Keum *et al.*, 2023). Other disciplines, such as critical political economy, have stressed the inherently exploitative core of commercial social media platforms, which function through a business model of user exploitation as user data is sold to advertisers and minimal remuneration in the case of influencers, compared to overall profit margins (Fuchs, 2014).

Digital media use has sometimes been described as driven by fear (fear of missing out), addiction, and loss of control (problematic social media use) (Cheng *et al.*, 2021; Roberts *et al.*, 2020; Tandon *et al.*, 2021). More recent work, however, foregrounds the relational significance of social media, being increasingly recognized as central to inner and relational processes, framed as a parasocial relationship (Degen, 2023b; Degen *et al.*, 2025).

The term "parasocial relationship" is adapted from traditional fandom

(e.g., movie/sports stars) relationships and their meanings, which articulate themselves on social media under contemporary conditions of everyday life. Within online environments, parasocial relationships, now between influencer and follower(s), acquire new characteristics shaped by quasi-privacy, individualization, and the integration of the influencer into micro-sequences and the embodied routines of followers, often quite literally as an extension of the body through the smartphone (Clark & Lupton, 2023). These conditions foster habitual modes of engagement, with parasocial communication embedded in images and audio, and meaning and impact mediated by affective cues, entangled with bodily regulation, being effective beyond explicable reflection (Bayer *et al.*, 2022; Degen, 2023b, 2024, 2025).

In the form of a parasocial relationship, social media use becomes a significant factor for subjects, serving basic psychological needs, including validation, comfort, and soothing (Degen *et al.*, 2025). On the social dynamic and relational level, social media bears significance for the social self, shaping identity through processes of social positioning, social belonging (Farivar *et al.*, 2022; Maxwell *et al.*, 2025; Paravati *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, both ordinary users and popular influencers on social media and related communities become a meaningful reference point, shaping attitudes and influencing behavior and decision- and meaning-making online and beyond (Leaver *et al.*, 2020; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2022; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). As such, digital reality shapes scope, norms, interpretation, and ultimately perceived truths and (materializing) realities (Schraube, 2024; Walls *et al.*, 2025; vanSlette, 2025).

2.2 Contemporary Social Media Between Backlash and Gender Activism

On social media, communicative processes are characterized mainly by simplification, fragmentation, and unification, in which complex phenomena are simplified into unequivocal positions and a polarized ad hominem logic (subjects are urged to identify with unequivocal stances and are understood to be tied to the stances in their entirety) (Shea *et al.*, 2025). Alongside (political) stances, influencer networks emerge, framing particular ideas. Such dynamics frequently generate echo chambers that validate internal perspectives while diminishing cross-group exchange, negotiation, and (constructive) discourse (Cinelli *et al.*, 2021). Discursive diversity is thereby reduced, and internal consensus becomes increasingly self-reinforcing (Interian *et al.*, 2023; Velasco, 2020).

This structure has the potential to foster polarization between groups that

consolidate around particular themes or even agendas, which in turn mobilize collective action. In some cases, this manifests in practices such as coordinated trolling or cancel movements, where online dynamics translate into material interventions online and beyond the digital environment (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Here, the mechanisms of validation and amplification within online communities not only shape attitudes but also activate collective behavior in the physical realm with tangible consequences. Scholars in science and technology studies have argued that such social dynamics are exacerbated by algorithmic clustering and other dynamics of grouping based on the notion of homophily (Chun, 2023), whereby friends, followers, themes, and ideas are clustered together in the service of creating "communities" of sameness, while actually amplifying discrimination and polarization.

Many online communities mobilize around everyday challenges, seeking comfort and developing strategies for dealing with them. One such alleged challenge is the perceived crisis of dating, intimacy, and identity within growing (neo-)nihilism and neoliberalization of relationships and intimacy (Degen *et al.*, 2024; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2025; Plesa, 2024; 2025). Among the most publicly prominent and problematized groups within this theme are incels ("involuntary celibates"), who frame their exclusion from sexual and romantic relations as the result of systemic injustice and the apparent emancipation and liberalization of women (Johanssen, 2022). Similar narratives circulate in adjacent formations under the umbrella term of the "manosphere", including pick-up artists or self-declared "alpha males", where practices of lifestyle coaching and male self-care intertwine with the devaluation of women (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Here, patriarchal fantasies are reproduced through online rituals of trolling, shaming, and re-traditionalizing femininity as young, dependent, and sexually inexperienced (Johanssen, 2022). These movements can be interpreted as collective economies of fantasy and disinhibition, where male communities derive cohesion by projecting anxieties (e.g., of devaluation and rejection) onto women, imagined as threatening or malicious (Johanssen, 2022). The parasocial dimension is central where posts are not directed toward real and concrete significant others (Gergen, 2009) (women) and relationships (negotiating needs and experiences, risking the self) but generalized toward collectivized figures of "womanhood" and "femininity" that function as antagonistic objects (generalized others: Gergen, 2009). However, men of the manosphere have also committed acts of targeted digital and physical violence against women. The related (online) hostility, ranging from mocking body types to policing life choices, thus becomes a parasocial practice of reinforcing (or attempting to regain) patriarchal dominance (Galpin, 2022; O'Malley *et al.*, 2020; Palma, 2023; Karthika, 2023).

Against these formations, counter-movements have gained significant momentum. While small-scale phenomena such as female incels illustrate a gendered mirroring of manosphere logics (Johanssen & Kay, 2024), the more consequential dynamic lies in social media and online feminist activism. Contemporary online feminism is often located on social media. It operates through campaigns such as #MeToo, #NotAllMenButAlwaysAMan, or @ByeFelipe, which expose misogynist practices and challenge visibility logics that perpetuate suppression and sexism (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Shaw, 2016). Strategies include documenting harassment through screenshots, collective ridicule, and reaction videos, thereby transforming parasocial antagonism into parasocial resistance (Snyder, 2022). Digital feminist activism is not necessarily parasocial as it is often grassroots and collectivity driven. In recent years, feminists have sought to reclaim and rearticulate notions of anger and other allegedly "bad feelings" circulated through social media (Boyce Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019) in response to a backlash against women's and LGBTQ+ rights. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) has shown, a distinct form of feminism has entered the mainstream and public consciousness, partly brought about by the feminist online activism of the 2000s, which often remained liberal and white and has been appropriated by capitalism and forms of progressive consumption in the name of equality. A kind of popular feminism that has been met with an increase in misogyny (Kay, 2024).

Research on parasociality has predominantly adapted the original star–fan framework to social media environments, often by transferring existing constructs to the influencer–follower context. While this work has revealed essential continuities, only a limited number of studies critically suspend these assumptions and pursue inductive or exploratory approaches that allow new functions and meanings of parasociality to emerge, taking into account the fundamental changes in context and conditions of social media and its specific mechanisms and meanings, depicted in novel conceptualizations and changes in social life– entangling online and offline realms and logics.

The present study contributes to this area by grounding parasociality not in pre-defined categories, but in its lived, situated articulations from a phenomenological stance, bringing together novel insights on the mechanisms and meanings of parasociality and insights on parasocial feminism and the meanings and means of online communities for everyday life and social organizing, asking the following research question: What does social media feminist activism within the #volanism movement means to followers?

3. Methodology

The study employs an exploratory-qualitative approach, integrating artistic and open-ended elements of data collection with the rigor of interpretive, long-standing analytic traditions that predate positivism (Brinkmann, 2017). This positioning is reflected in the formless, participant-driven impetus, which produces a natural and non-controlled sample. The analytical procedure, in turn, draws on psychoanalytic hermeneutics, allowing for an engagement with the symbolic, affective, and latent dimensions of participants' accounts (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hollway & Jefferson, 2012; Johanssen, 2016). By combining this emergent, participant-led mode of data generation with interpretative depth, the study aims to extend existing research, providing a framework for rethinking and unlearning ingrained assumptions about parasociality in light of its contemporary manifestations.

3.1 Collection and Sample

To address the research question, 46 entries (28 short essays, one collage, one poem, and 16 comments) were collected from followers of the #volaneart community. The material was generated in response to a public call issued in early 2025 via one of the authors' Instagram accounts and the artist's own account, @volaneart. The call invited followers to submit personal reflections and introspections on what following Volane and engaging with her digital space meant to them. The wording was deliberately open: "To all followers of Volane, please support your local (pun intended) nerd and hand in a reflection in any form, length, and of any kind, on what following Volane and her space on social media means to you".

Participation was invited through the story function of the social media platform, which remains visible for 24 hours. After 48 hours, the submission rate decreased substantially, marking a natural cut-off point for data collection. We therefore included the first 46 submissions received within this initial period, ensuring a coherent data corpus collected under comparable conditions. Later submissions, which continued to arrive sporadically over several weeks, were excluded to maintain temporal consistency and analytical focus.

The data was submitted anonymously; therefore, age and gender can only be reported with caution. However, the essays appear to be written by five men and 21 women; one woman wrote a poem; the collage seems to have been created by a woman; and the comments cannot be assigned to a specific gender, though they seem predominantly written by women, except

for one that reflects a male perspective. In terms of age, participants refer to life stages of being in intimate long-term relationships, raising a family, or experiencing divorce, suggesting a distribution skewed toward predominantly middle-aged participants.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The analysis integrates principles of psychoanalytic interpretation with related hermeneutics adapted to digital contexts. This approach treats followers' introspections not as direct accounts of experience, but as symbolic articulations shaped by unconscious processes, affective investments, and the affordances of the online environment. Psychoanalysis and hermeneutics assume that meaning emerges at the intersection of individual psychic structures and the socio-technical configurations of digital media (Johanssen, 2016, 2019, 2021).

Interpretation proceeded in iterative cycles of close reading, attending to both the manifest content of the essays and their latent dimensions, such as metaphorical framing, omissions, and affective tone. The hermeneutic movement between parts and whole enabled tracing recurrent symbolic constellations.

The analysis proceeded in iterative readings that moved between the manifest content of each text and its latent dimensions. Close attention was paid to the choice of words, metaphors, and affective tone, as well as to omissions and shifts in perspective. Interpretations were developed by situating these elements within the broader context of the follower–influencer relationship and the dimension of community, here the symbolic universe of #volanismus. Below, we present exemplary data alongside each dimension of meaning and relevance, describe the overarching mechanisms and meanings associated with them, and then discuss these findings.

4. Analysis: Narratives of Parasocial Feminism

Notably, the impetus for data collection was open-ended, asking for the meaning of Volane's account for her followers, and consequently could have been interpreted as addressing online behaviour; however, the data collected predominantly addresses the meaning beyond online activity, reaching into everyday practices and life in face-to-face settings.

"*I was ashamed and divorced for the second time, seeing her (Volane) own her divorces, brought back pride for me*".

"*I have surrounded myself with items from her merch: the tampon cushion, some wallpapers, and a mug. I find myself in an abusive relationship and am not yet ready to leave, also due to financial issues and dependencies, emotionally and practically. However, the items give me the strength to speak up and remember that we are many and there is a community out there, having my back, when the day comes. I do not have many friends, so this means the world to me, seeing how much support there is*".

"*When my husband talks down to me, I try to react alongside the model of her videos and it works, it is like borrowing a voice, turning a bit into my own*".

On the manifest level, participants recount situations of relational subjugation, including divorce, abusive partnerships, and marital belittlement, that left them in states of shame, dependency, or silencing. Exposure to Volane's public example of communication and (self-)empowerment is described as a counter-symbol that helps followers to reclaim dignity in circumstances typically marked by stigma, and related normative restrictions and punishment. Similarly, the presence of merchandise within the domestic space becomes a tangible extension of the role model and belonging to the community, a reminder of shared solidarity and a projected promise of future autonomy and power, carrying the symbolic charge of strength and collective/social support.

Latently, these accounts reveal a mechanism of symbolic anchoring, in which material artefacts and performance are introjected and enacted as psychic stabilizers (e.g., fosters hope) or concrete action (e.g., by mimicking strategies). As such, it functions both as a defensive and empowering manoeuvre, with the parasocial figure serving as a role model. As such, there might be (positive) effects on practices, demeanour, and confidence of the followers. Such practices illustrate a shift from internalized suppression toward an externalized identification that enables the assertion of the self in micro-sequences of everyday interaction as a form of (un-)learning.

Within the broader frame of social media communities, these practices shape the parasocial relationship in forms that traverse the symbolic, materializing in everyday behaviour and strategies (on the relational and pragmatic level: who one maintains relationships with), but also the constitution of the self and the body and embodied appropriation of performative models and regulation as a form of functional resistance (regulation): "She

calms me, when I am triggered". As such, this facet addresses mechanisms of suppression and emancipation on the level of privacy and the subject and processes of identity building and the self.

"*After my daughter was diagnosed with cancer, I discovered painting for myself during rehab in 2022. Afterwards, Volane further fuelled my enthusiasm when her art was shown to me on Instagram. Since then, I have become a real fangirl, with t-shirts, painting materials, brushes and much more from her. In her courses, I tried oil painting and learned to see – to really look. Since then, painting with her reference has become standard for me. I do not just admire her as an artist, I also love her personality. I would like to be as free as she is and take her as a role model, or at least work towards it* 🤍".

"*The friend I wish I had*".

"*I love how encouraging she is, it is all about just getting started and doing it, not about being skilled or perfect*".

In manifest terms, the participant recounts needs for community, belonging, social support, and a role model for orientation, e.g., for practices and skill training, but also in terms of acquiring life (hobbies and being in the world) and coping in crisis. This explicitly situates the influencer's impact within a vulnerable emotional state and existential needs, indicating not only pull factors (being attractive/empowering) but also pointing out push factors (e.g., loneliness/ individualization). The narratives centre not only around symbols and communication, but also strategies and a stance and values in life, questioning norms (deconstructing profane aesthetics and competitive comparison/ steady movement as end itself/ aimless striving).

The narrative centres on Volane's encouragement, which is presented not as a demand for achievement but as an invitation toward process and persistence, targeting confidence, exploration, and ever becoming. The stated effect – "it brought me back to life" – marks a turning point and positions the influencer as a catalyst for psychic and creative reactivation, as well as experiences of meaning, movement, and creation as a form of being in the world in a meaningful (and meaningless in terms of aims) way. Conversely, it reveals the pressure and state of being lost in the world, constituting the need and dependency for life wisdom and role modelling, now by a parasocial place and figure.

Latently, the account reflects a dynamic of identification and introjection: Volane's mantra becomes an internalized voice that counteracts paral-

ysis, functioning almost as a benevolent superego. The emphasis on "not being good" and the absence of the need for external acknowledgment suggest a shift away from optimization and external validation toward a self-sustaining form of agency addressing self-esteem and worth.

In the context of #volanismus, this resonates with the movement's rejection of normative measures of worth, re-signifying artistic expression and steady movement (aimless) as a form of embodied resistance, beyond personal coping or occupation. As such, such narratives address social belonging on the relational level of the social self, community, but also learning and orienting (role modelling), communicating a form of wisdom in a world, possibly lacking such competencies and ideas of being in the world, and experiencing meaning.

"*I actually(!) left my husband. I could never really put a finger on what was so freakin' annoying until she made it visible. I had the male dickhead blindness, and she made it go away with three videos*".

"*I came out as a lesbian because of Volane*".

On the manifest level, participants recount decisive and irreversible life changes directly attributed to Volane's content: leaving one's husband or coming out in terms of sexual orientation– exposing and risking the self. These accounts emphasize moments of rupture, marked by surprise at one's own action and the realization that previously diffused dissatisfaction or unarticulated desire can be named and acted upon. The parasocial encounter thus provides a symbolic intervention that transforms latent unease into clarity and conviction.

Latently, these narratives reveal a dynamic of disidentification from long-held relational positions, catalysed by the influencer's symbolic gestures and interpretations, fostering new possibilities. What had been silenced or denied becomes durable and important, triggering profound restructuring of self-positioning, fostering integrity. The mechanisms resemble reflection and enlightenment, where repressed and unformulated thoughts become thinkable, enabling transformative action.

Within the framework of #volanismus, these shifts embody the enactment of feminist critique within the most intimate domains of social life. The parasocial relationship serves as a mediated form of consciousness-raising, breaking habitual blindness and legitimizing decisive steps toward emancipation. As such, this facet addresses processes of empowering enlightenment in the sense of critical theory and reflection on power structures and positioning, leading to concrete practical change in terms of rela-

tions, social dynamics, force and resulting agency. This entails differentiation, group processes (including identity and belonging), and aggression (e.g., to regain agency, assert dominance, and expand scope).

"*Do not be like Peter, be like Volane*".

"*Because of Volane's account, I have reflected a lot, also about my role as a man. I realized how toxic I sometimes was myself, and I have left a lot of that behind. To this day, I am ashamed of some things I have done, sexually, too. I was forceful. That includes sexuality, but also the way I judged and commented on women's bodies. Volane is cool, and she re-taught me femininity in a whole different way*".

On the manifest level, the participant positions himself explicitly in relation to gendered models of behaviour – rejecting "Peter", framed as a stereotype of older German masculinity ("Boomer"), and aspiring instead to "be like Volane". This contrast delineates a shift from normative male socialization toward an alternative model of interaction and orientation, especially in terms of (sexually) coerciveness and (self)-subjugation. The self-description as "a male Volane" signals not only admiration but an attempt to inhabit the influencer's ethos, with consequences for intimate conduct such as refraining from imposing personal sexual scripts on his partner, questioning stereotypical gender roles, and addressing, e.g., male sensitivity and an ability to reflect.

Latently, the statement conveys a dynamic of repudiation and introjection. As such, male identification distances itself from inherited masculine codes by internalizing a counter-figure who functions as a relational and ethical compass. This process implies not only behavioural adjustments but a psychic reorganization of moral orientation, revealing inner compositions (e.g., desire) and restrictive mechanisms (e.g., shame). The acknowledgment of forcefulness in past sexuality reveals the depth of this transformation, as it re-signifies previous practices through the lens of accountability, overcoming defence mechanisms (e.g., projection, devaluation, denial).

In the context of #volanismus, this account demonstrates how parasocial relationships can become vehicles of gendered self-reconstruction and redefining of orientation (across gender) roles, forces, and values. The influencer's symbolic presence mediates an unlearning of normative masculinity and facilitates alternative identifications that reshape intimate and social relations. Here, the parasocial tie operates as a site of ethical and libidinal reorganization, extending the movement's feminist critique into male subjectivities. As such, this effect addresses reflection and stance within social

relations and roles, making a difference in relationships and the broader social context, as a form of reflexive (and philosophical) development (e.g., the search for new masculinities).

"*I had another child because she was never ashamed about being a mother and still having a personality and life. I was about to have an abortion, due to shame and fear, but then her podcast aired and she was all about love and unproblematizing being a mom of four, and now I am having that child, and I think it was the right decision*".

On the manifest level, the participant recounts a decisive reproductive choice – continuing a pregnancy – directly influenced by the influencer's public stance on and representation of motherhood. The narrative contrasts an initial intention to have an abortion, framed as driven by "shame and fear". Volane's depiction of motherhood as compatible with personal autonomy and vitality, described as pivotal in reframing roles and ideas, revealing negative stereotyping, social threats, marginalization, and related distress directed at mothers (urging existential measures).

Latently, the account reflects a reorganization of maternal identity in the symbolic register. The original decision toward abortion is linked to internalized societal narratives in which motherhood constricts individuality and agency. Volane's example functions as a counter-symbol – an alternative maternal figure in which creativity, autonomy, value without recreation pressure and paradoxes, and multiplicity coexist with parenting in an equalizing manner.

Within the context of #volanismus, this is an instance of parasocial influence operating at the level of existential choice. The influencer's public performance of motherhood becomes a tool for dismantling stigmatized maternal scripts, enabling followers to construct an alternative narrative of reproductive agency, paving the way for acquiring motherhood in ways of subjectification, beyond the social role. The parasocial tie here mediates a psychic and symbolic transformation with enduring consequences for identity and life trajectory, demonstrating the depth at which such relationships can intervene in the follower's lived reality. Overall, this perspective addresses life decisions and (existential) pressure within society, highlighting the significance of social support and role modelling for encouragement, to the extent that it seems relevant in terms of implicit and explicit violence, coercive mechanisms, and bodily and mental integrity and wholeness.

"*I started wearing whatever I want because of her, and I also started saying what I want. And I have her with me, her merch but also in my habi-*

tus, and finally I deeply reflected about how to be loyal towards other women really impacting how I think and act towards them".

"*I will just say it: I got a tattoo of her. Because of her, I have become a better father, I have reflected on myself, and I have learned a lot. I do not even want to imagine what kind of father I would have become otherwise. I am fully prepared, tampon plush toy and all, for when my kids get their periods. That would never have been on my radar before*".

On the manifest level, participants describe concrete behavioural changes across domains of appearance, expression, and positioning. These range from adopting new modes of clothing and speech ("wearing whatever I want," "saying what I want") to rethinking one's stance toward gendered relations and loyalty to women, or even preparing as a father to engage differently with daughters' bodily experiences. References to "having her with me", whether through merchandise, a tattoo, or symbolic artefacts, point to the tangible and embodied presence of the influencer within everyday life, bridging culture and lived practice.

Latently, these accounts reflect processes of empowerment through symbolic incorporation and a reorientation of social positioning. Internalized constraints are loosened as clothing, speech, and parenting are reframed not only as individual choices but as enactments of solidarity and respect, adding to a re-organization of the social by micro-changes (bearing the potential to add up as collective action). Material artefacts such as merch or tattoos signify more than consumer affiliation: they inscribe the parasocial tie into daily existence and embodied realm, communicating themselves (becoming a symbol in the world, and thus a part of possible recognition and spreading change– as such a tattoo can signal a moral stance, for those familiar with the movement). The reference to "in my habitus" resonates with Bourdieu's notion of durable dispositions (Bourdieu, 2018), indicating that Volane's ethos has been absorbed into embodied patterns of being, reaching beyond admiration to the restructuring of self-conduct and relational scripts.

Within the symbolic framework of #volanismus, these testimonies illustrate how parasocial relationships materialize as embodied self-expression, where identification, affective allegiance, and culture (e.g., loyalty, identification, group belonging) converge. The parasocial connection thus becomes part of the follower's symbolic and bodily repertoire, enacted continuously in public and private life as a form of self-expression and incorporated habitus, with the potential of relational relevance and social change (group processes).

"*Everything about Volane is like a fairy tale with a good ending*".

"*Volane is a safe space for sensitive people*".

On the manifest level, this framing conveys both a personal attribution and a broader, almost communal meaning. The additional statement, "Everything about Volane is like a fairy tale with a good ending," situates her presence within a narrative structure, associating her with resolution, security, and hope, constituting not only a space, but place (including traditions and culture).

Latently, this testimony reveals a psychic mechanism that resembles containment and reparative fantasy. The notion of a "safe space" suggests a counterbalance to experiences of (collective) vulnerability, hostility, or lack of recognition in other spheres of life, but also in terms of places, pointing out how followers might be lost in the physical realm (where to go?). Volane functions similarly to a transitional object and holding environment, offering symbolic protection and stability, something to turn to. The reference to a "fairy tale with a good ending" suggests a desire for narrative closure, in which ambiguity and threat are resolved into certainty and reassurance. This indicates an introjection of the influencer as an idealized figure capable of providing both safety and narrative coherence.

Within the symbolic frame of #volanismus, this account illustrates how parasocial relationships extend beyond inspiration or empowerment into affective regulation. Volane is positioned as a psychic container for vulnerability, transforming exposure in digital environments into an experience of shelter and solidarity. The parasocial tie is not described in terms of content consumption, but as a relational structure that offers refuge, continuity, and the promise of a favourable resolution, indirectly addressing transcendence. In this way, the influencer becomes part of the follower's emotional architecture, a symbolic guarantor of safety. Here, the parasocial figure and the related community serve as a locus of solace, where followers withdraw from face-to-face realms and turn toward digital belonging, balancing distress and alienation. This underscores the significance of echo chambers and influencer-specific tone and scope, which shape a recognizable and steady environment with soothing effects. As such, the parasocial community becomes an important social mechanism for followers' sense of self, depicted as group-specific and serving as a source of identity (for instance, through self-identification as "sensitive").

5. Findings: Shaping the Everyday Life of Parasocially Entangled Relational Beings

The analysis revealed that followers' accounts operate on multiple, interwoven levels of meaning. On the most immediate level, participants describe inspiration and role modelling, as well as the resulting concrete actions, decisions, and behavioural shifts that they attribute directly to their engagement with Volane's content. Beneath these explicit changes lie latent processes on different levels of the self as (parasocially entangled) relational being. These include processes of parasocially altered identification, social belonging and orientation, and related experienced reconnect with inner values, beliefs, and wants, as a way to get in touch with intuition and integrity. On the relational level, the parasocial entanglement includes introjection and disidentification with roles and external expectations, including (re-)negotiations of (incorporated and external) social restrictions and scope. Being part of Volane's community materializes in followers' everyday lives in both tangible and intangible forms. Embodied changes appear in clothing choices, bodily comportment, and modes of self-presentation and behaviour (glancing at other women, changing who to focus on in meetings, and how and when to speak up). In some cases, Volane's presence is physically carried into daily life through merchandise and tattoos, or existential decisions, while in other cases it is incorporated into the "habitus" as a durable disposition shaping perception and conduct. As such, the parasocial figure and the related community (i.e., Volane) are internalized as a psychic and symbolic figure, an ego-ideal or counter-symbol, capable of displacing restrictive scope and relational scripts and self-subjugation.

Taken together, these dynamics can be clustered into four thematic constellations that articulate core psychological and social mechanisms of parasociality. Emancipation emerges in accounts where followers identify and resist oppressive dynamics that had previously constrained decision-making, enabling profound life changes and resistance against suppression and entrenched power relations. Prudence (competence to care for the self and others in sustainable ways) denotes the cultivation of orientation and practical wisdom in everyday life, where followers mobilize Volane's example to approach the world with enhanced reflexivity and to re-signify experiences of vulnerability and disorientation. Reorientation within gender roles highlights shifts in the negotiation of masculinity and femininity through alternative identifications, leading to transformations in intimate conduct, bodily practices, and sexual behavior, and fostering embodied and mental integrity. Self-expression and habitus designate processes through which followers integrate symbolic and material artefacts into their daily lives, embodying dispositions

of confidence, self-worth, and dignity. Finally, Volane is repeatedly described as a place of solace, a psychic and communal container that provides continuity, belonging, and validation, while simultaneously devaluing generalized others who embody oppressive structures.

Latently, these constellations reveal parasocial mechanisms that stabilize the self: confidence and self-esteem are fostered through identification with the influencer's ethos; validation and recognition are derived from her voice and the community's stance; predictable continuity in the online space serves as an anchor against experiences of alienation; and social belonging provides a framework for resisting devaluation in offline contexts. As such, parasociality is not limited to imagination or symbolic attachment but materializes as embodied reorientation, affective regulation, and the formation of a collective habitus, turning individual vulnerability into shared strength.

Across these clusters, the parasocial tie emerges as a mediated psychic attachment that fuses affect, symbolism, and practice. Through sustained exposure to Volane's persona, ethos, and community (including scope in expression, culture, and traditions), followers not only absorb but enact elements of her digital presence in their own lives. In this sense, parasociality is not confined to the realm of imagination but becomes materially and symbolically embedded in everyday conduct, shaping the parasocial self in profound and lasting ways.

Such forms of parasocial feminism have a distinct impact beyond digital platforms, as we have shown. Yet, a fundamental tension and ambivalence remain between individual and collective actions. At the same time, subjects might feel and act empowered on the micro level (decision in their everyday life), while empowerment remains tied to being a consumer in a transactional logic, kept in an individualized mode (being on the phone, usually alone, disconnected from others in a physical realm and oriented towards one parasocial figure).

6. Discussion: Potentials and Pitfalls of Parasocial Feminism

The findings highlight the empowering potential of parasocial relationships in the framework of parasocial feminism. For many followers, Volane functions as a figure of emancipation and resistance, offering not only symbolic wisdom but also a model for navigating structural and intimate constraints. Her presence fosters reflexivity, encourages a renegotiation of gender roles, and supports forms of self-expression that affirm both bodily and psychological autonomy.

Participants report tangible effects in their daily lives. These range from creative activation and emotional reorientation to fundamental life changes, including separation, reproductive decisions, shifts in sexual scripts, and parenting practices. In this way, the data not only echoes earlier research on the psychological relevance of parasociality, such as identity validation and emotional regulation, but also extends it by revealing how these processes of materialization acquire relational weight in everyday practice (Schraube, 2009).

At the same time, the data reveals a critical state of social organizing and relatedness, indicating a broader crisis of intimacy marked by diminished relational and sexual competencies. This is reflected in narratives of coercion, implicit violence, and internalized subjugation, relocating imbalances of power and violence into the subtle and implicit (e.g., in the form of incorporation). Intimacy, in these accounts, appears reduced to procedural skills and explicit negotiation, especially around consent, while deeper dimensions such as cultural literacy, embodied intuition, and sexual self-worth remain underdeveloped or disconnected. These findings resonate with current critiques that problematize the mechanization of sexuality and its confinement to rationalized, transactional frameworks (Degen, 2023a, 2025; Hartmann *et al.*, 2024).

Beyond the individual level, the data emphasizes the significance of community and social embeddedness. Followers describe Volane's online space as a site of solace and symbolic continuity, offering both validation and protection against relational alienation. Parasociality here extends beyond the influencer-follower dyad and is reinforced through communal affective dynamics, which resonates with social identity theories (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) that highlight the stabilizing function of shared meaning-making. Such online feminist spaces appear to offer an affective infrastructure that compensates for lacking face-to-face (offline) experiences of fragmentation and loneliness and growing (neo-)nihilism (Plesa, 2025). As such, they become effective through pull- and push-factors: on the one hand, users are drawn by inspiration, community, and empowerment; on the other, they are driven (pushed) by feelings of continued and reinforced isolation and social disconnection in non-digital realms.

Despite its transformative potential, the findings also reveal apparent limitations. The reported changes, ranging from self-optimization and confidence to life-altering decisions, remain distinctly individualized. They do not translate into collective mobilization or structural critique. This mirrors the concerns raised by critics of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), who argue that digital feminist activism often replicates the logics of platform economies: personalization, branding, and the commodification of authenticity (Saraswati, 2021; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). Volane's activism, while positioned against misogyny, follows recognizably entrepreneurial patterns. Parasocial intimacy is cultivated, symbolic capital monetized, and self-representation framed

through authority, authenticity, and autonomy. This reflects a central ambivalence: the same structures that enable empowerment – platform capitalism, influencer culture – also constrain its radical potential (Srnicek, 2017).

Feminist influencers are frequently contrasted with traditional activists, often dismissed as less serious or effective. While this critique highlights the softness of parasocial activism and its appeal to affective needs, it risks reproducing hierarchical distinctions that delegitimize feminized forms of labour. As Scharff (2024) notes, influencers may be embedded in broader activist networks, even when their output appears individualized. Yet their labour is often trivialized as "unskilled", a gesture that reinscribes gendered devaluation. This means that exclusionary femininity is paradoxically affirmed through ideals of perfection, while femininity itself remains undervalued. Accordingly, such structural tensions are not addressed in the follower narratives. Users focus on Volane's personal relevance and personal gain rather than articulating social critique or collective struggle, revealing ambivalences of parasocial feminism; while deeply affecting and subjectively empowering, it remains tethered to individualized frameworks that risk substituting symbolic connection for political transformation. Distinctions between the political and the economic are all the harder to draw in platform capitalism. Yet, it is interesting that they were not raised in the data and users emphasised Volane's significance for their own lives rather than also speaking about collective struggles or social issues.

The dynamics of parasociality in this context reveal a structural ambivalence. Processes such as validation, emotional continuity, and esteem-building foster subjective stability and agency. At the same time, the emotional and ideological investment in a singular figure risk reinforcing dependency, narrowing the scope of engagement, and entrenching polarization, finally reinforcing individualization and isolation. Empowerment, in this model, is mediated not through collective identification but through symbolic alignment with a charismatic individual.

These findings suggest that parasocial feminism offers a distinct mode of affective and cognitive reorientation. It facilitates forms of emancipation and resistance that are deeply embedded in everyday life. Yet, its transformative power remains restricted by the limitations of platform capitalism. The emphasis on individualized empowerment then eclipses structural critique and impedes collective action.

In sum, the findings depict how parasocial feminism relocates central power structures and social functions into the digital, where they are renegotiated through mediated intimacy and symbolic belonging. This reconfiguration is not adequately captured by focusing on the symptom of "being online". Instead, it demands an analysis of causality, reason, and meaning as they emerge from the subject's perspective. Parasocial relations are not secondary or compensatory

but become central modes through which individuals orient themselves psychosocially and socially. Understanding these dynamics means approaching digital communities as spaces where intimacy, authority, and community are actively constituted, under conditions shaped by fragmentation, individualization, and platform governance, creating a sphere of ambivalences and contradictions between explicit and implicit (subtle) dynamics.

A limitation of the present study lies in the choice of platform. The material was collected exclusively on Instagram, which represents only one segment of the social media landscape and one mode of parasocial relation. Unlike TikTok, where ephemeral trends and algorithmic circulation outweigh the relevance of individual accounts, Instagram still privileges personal followership and narrative continuity. Consequently, the mechanisms of attachment and meaning-making observed here may differ from those found on more trend-driven platforms.

In addition, the account selected for this exploratory analysis was German and represented a distinct feminist voice from Germany. This context likely shaped both the kind of audience engagement and the thematic focus of responses. The sample, predominantly composed of middle-aged women, therefore limits the range of generalizability. Nevertheless, it provides insight into broader mechanisms and meaning structures that transcend demographic specificity.

7. Conclusion

The findings reveal that parasocial relatedness shapes the social self at its core, with influencers and their communities becoming meaningful reference points that expand identity through group processes, social belonging, and mechanisms of validation and soothing. As such, the study reveals how core functions of social life and community are relocated into the digital realm, which is of course not a neutral place, but entangling social processes with specific characteristics and conditions (polarization, underlying economic logics, one-sidedness, artificially produced unequivocally, and reduction and fragmentation, and many more). Parasociality on social media is effective through pull factors (available, predictable, reliable, effective forms of relationality) and also reveals push factors (individualization, loneliness, relationship problems). As such, the present conjuncture enables and increases the relevance of parasociality for subjects, indirectly constituting a critique of contemporary social life and the idea of community. Parasocial relationships, then, carry significant psychological meaning and practical relevance, functioning as corrective and transformative forces that

enable followers to address unmet social needs. Parasocial relationships become resources for self-repair and everyday resistance while contributing to collective identity. Importantly, the communal dimension fills gaps left by contemporary forms of social organization, replicating and relocating central mechanisms of social life into online contexts. As such, the community becomes functional in providing continuity, orientation, and a sense of belonging, yet it remains shaped by the conditions of platform capitalism, where individualization and commodification risk impeding the development of more radical forms of collective action.

The significance and mechanisms of parasocial relationships recently observed and supported with in-depth insights from this exploratory study point to several practical implications. First, the findings demonstrate how functions of the social self, social organization, and community are increasingly being relocated into the digital realm. This is crucial for understanding the meanings of the digital, which is often demonized or dismissed as merely problematic, accompanied by calls for subjects to reduce the time they spend online. Such perspectives overlook that online spaces fulfil substantial social and psychological functions that cannot simply be eliminated but must be understood in their causality. Prevention and intervention efforts could therefore address causes rather than symptoms of excessive or distressing online engagement.

Moreover, the results indicate that parasocial relationships operate beyond cognitive reflection, involving deeper affective and relational mechanisms. This insight is relevant for educational, psychoeducational, and therapeutic work. The assumption that "online is not real" is empirically inaccurate and conceptually misleading. Online interaction constitutes a form of reality and recognizing it allows for more adequate interventions. Rather than contrasting digital with face-to-face communication, examining what needs these mediated relations fulfil, what forms of connection they compensate for, and finally, how these can be reinstated in face-to-face settings becomes essential.

Finally, policies and educational approaches primarily aimed at restriction or behavioral regulation tend to address symptoms rather than structural causes. The more demanding and necessary task lies in addressing the quality and possibility of social life itself, its increasing fragmentation and individualization, and the need for meaningful forms of belonging and community as an alternative to the digital realm, in the best case, making it obsolete, without restrictions. Policies, therefore, need to engage with the question of how community and a sensual and social life – maybe even as forms of resocialization – can be envisioned and sustained beyond neoliberal capitalist dynamics and increasing nihilism, rather than merely mitigating their effects.

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

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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

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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

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.

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

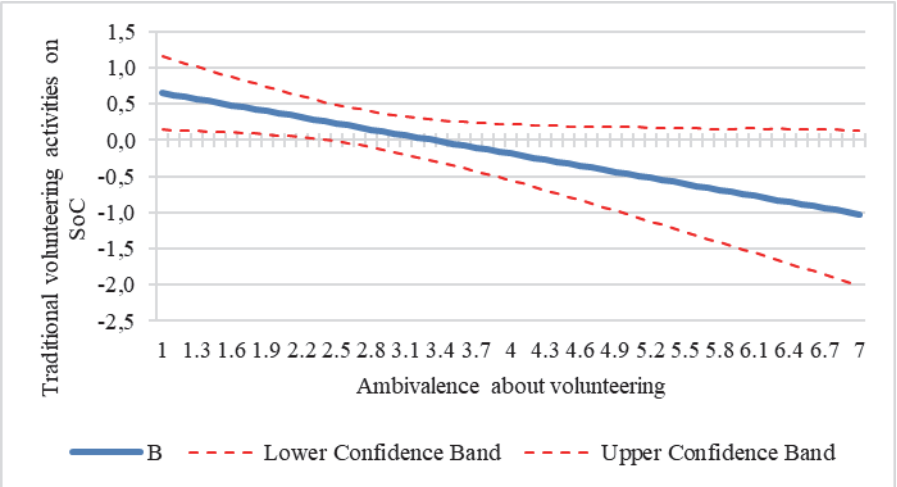
relationships emerged as non-significant – that is, volunteering-related ambivalence did not play a significant moderator role in the other hypothesized relationships.

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]

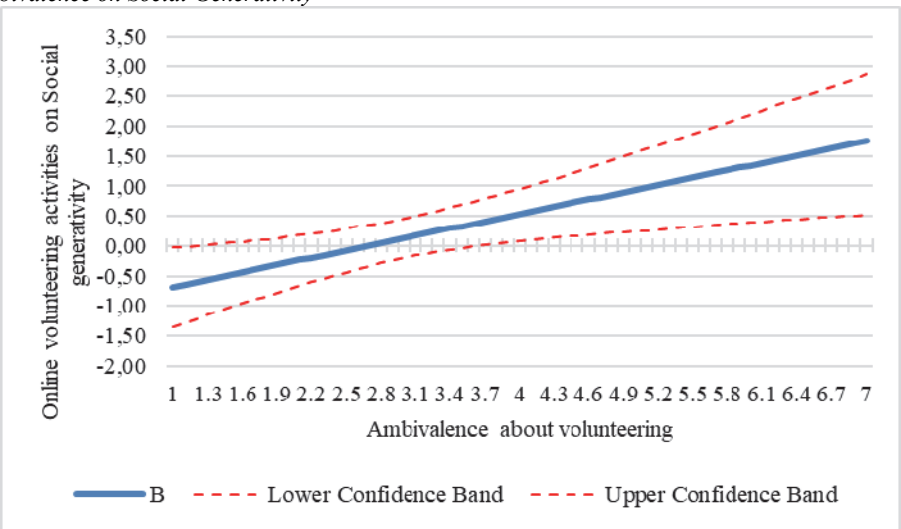
Note. $n = 300$.
** $p < .01$ (2-tailed); * $p < .05$ (2-tailed).
S.E. = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval.
The moderator was centered.

Figure 1 – Interaction effect of Traditional Volunteering Activities and Volunteering-related Ambivalence on SoC



Note. $n = 300$.
Unstandardized coefficients (*B*) for the slope and their confidence bands are shown. The moderator is centered
Age was included as a control variable.

Figure 2– Interaction effect of Online Volunteering Activities and Volunteering-related Ambivalence on Social Generativity



Note. $n = 300$.
Unstandardized coefficients (*B*) for the slope and their confidence bands are shown. The moderator is centered
Age was included as a control variable.

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

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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