

Volunteer Motivation and Participation Intention among Adolescents in Anhui, China

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Abstract

This study examined volunteer motivation and participation intention among adolescents in Anhui, China. The objectives were to determine the levels of motivation and intention to volunteer, examine if there is a significant difference between male and female adolescents' intention and motivation, and examine if motivation predicts intention. 353 adolescents aged 12-19 responded to questionnaire. Using SPSS to analyze the data, the results show high motivation and participation intention. While gender differences are found in participation intention and most motivation dimensions, age differences are not significant. Motivation predicted participation intention. Findings inform youth volunteer programme design aligned with SDG 11.

Keywords: Volunteer Motivation; Participation Intention; Adolescents; SDG 11

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1.0 Introduction

Volunteer service has become an important form of youth civic engagement in China, not only as a way of supporting communities but also as a means through which adolescents learn responsibility, cooperation, and social participation. In the context of sustainable cities and communities, volunteer programmes can contribute to community resilience, environmental awareness, social care, and the capacity of local public services. These links make adolescent volunteerism relevant to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which emphasises inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable communities (United Nations, 2015). However, the existence of volunteer opportunities does not automatically lead to continued participation. Many youth programmes can recruit adolescents for short-term activities, yet sustained willingness to participate remains uneven across groups, cities, and regions.

Anhui Province provides a meaningful setting for examining this issue. With stronger national policy support and increasing public awareness, schools, communities, and non-governmental organisations have created more opportunities for adolescents to participate in service activities. Nevertheless, maintaining adolescent participation remains a practical challenge. Some adolescents participate only once or only when activities are organised by schools, while others continue volunteering because the activity satisfies personal, social, or learning-related needs. Therefore, understanding the psychological factors that shape adolescents' willingness to continue volunteering is important for both research and practice.

Volunteer motivation is among the most widely used explanations for why people begin and continue volunteering. The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), developed by Clary et al. (1998), explains that individuals may volunteer for a range of functions, including values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement motives. For adolescents, value motivation, understanding motivation, and social motivation are especially relevant. They may volunteer because they want to help others, learn and improve themselves, or build social relationships and gain recognition from peers.

Although previous studies have examined volunteer motivation in different populations, empirical evidence focusing on adolescents in Anhui Province remains limited. In particular, little is known about how specific motivational dimensions are associated with

participation intention and whether gender or age differences affect the two constructs. Therefore, a study was conducted to determine the levels of motivation and intention to volunteer, examine if there is a significant difference between male and female adolescents' intention and motivation, and examine if motivation predicts participation intention. By doing so, the study provides evidence for schools, NGOs, and policymakers seeking to strengthen youth volunteer participation and support sustainable community development.

2.0 Literature Review

From an environment-behaviour perspective, adolescent volunteering is not only an individual behavioural intention but also a form of interaction between young people and their community environment. When adolescents participate in environmental protection, community care, or public education, they experience the community as a shared space in which their actions can produce visible outcomes. This makes the study relevant to the conference theme because it connects psychological motivation with behaviour that supports local community sustainability. – I suggest you move to 2.0- if you feel it is better in 1.0 – than unmove the paragraph

2.1 Volunteer motivation and the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)

Volunteer motivation refers to the psychological reasons that encourage individuals to participate in unpaid service activities. Clary et al. (1998) proposed a functional approach to volunteering, arguing that different volunteers may perform similar activities for different reasons. The VFI identifies six motivational functions: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement. This framework is useful because it links volunteer behaviour to individual needs and allows researchers to examine how different motivations influence participation and retention. Recent studies continue to support the usefulness of the VFI in different cultural contexts and volunteer populations (Martins et al., 2024; Pearce et al., 2022).

This study focuses on three dimensions. Value motivation is concerned with the expression of compassion, social responsibility, and concern for others. Adolescents with strong value motivation may see volunteering as a meaningful way to help communities and practice civic responsibility. Understanding motivation refers to the desire to learn, gain experience, acquire new knowledge, and develop personal skills through volunteer service. This dimension is especially important for adolescents because volunteering can support identity formation and personal development. Social motivation refers to the desire to build relationships, participate with friends, gain recognition, and feel part of a group. For young people, peer influence and a sense of belonging may shape whether they join and continue volunteering.

2.2 Participation intention

Participation intention refers to an individual's willingness or plan to take part in future volunteer activities. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour emphasises that intention is a strong predictor of behaviour when individuals hold favourable attitudes and perceive social or personal support for action. In volunteer studies, participation intention is often used to understand whether volunteers are likely to return, remain active, or recommend service activities to others. For adolescents, intention is important because long-term volunteerism is difficult to build if young people participate only once without developing a desire to continue or not at all.

Previous studies show that volunteer motivation is related to continued participation. Hu et al. (2023) found that intention patterns are important in predicting college students' volunteer service participation. Qiao and Zhang (2020) showed that student volunteers in international events were influenced by career, social, and value-related motivations. Studies on youth volunteering also suggest that learning, belonging, and meaningful contribution can encourage young people to engage in civic activities (Meemaduma & Booso, 2022; Nursey-Bray et al., 2022). These findings suggest that volunteer programmes should not only provide opportunities to serve, but also respond to the motivations that make service meaningful to young participants.

2.3 Gender, age, and youth volunteer participation

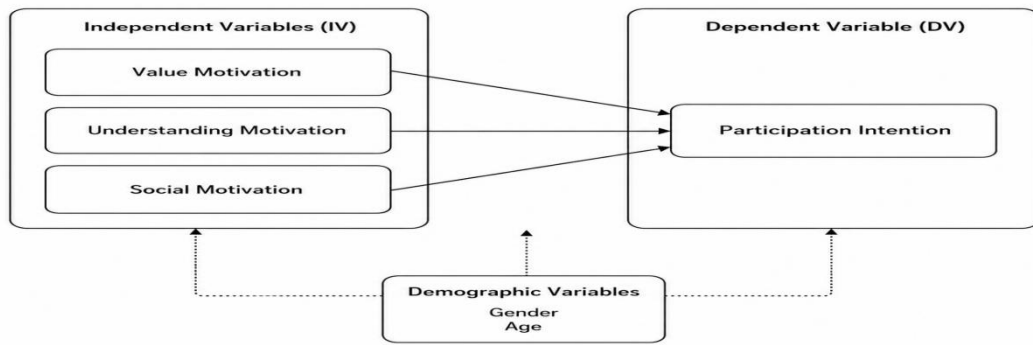
Gender and age may also influence adolescent volunteer participation. Recent research suggests that prosocial behaviour may differ by gender and volunteering participation (Olmos-Gómez et al., 2023). Female adolescents may report stronger prosocial attitudes, empathy, or community-oriented values, while male adolescents may respond more to activities linked to skill development, teamwork, or visible achievement. However, these patterns should not be treated as fixed, as they may be shaped by school culture, family expectations, peer groups, and activity type. Age may also matter because youth volunteering is influenced by learning opportunities, peer groups, and community context (Pearce et al., 2022). Therefore, this study includes gender and age as demographic variables, while focusing mainly on whether motivational differences explain participation intention

Youth volunteer participation is also related to sustainable community development. Programmes that encourage adolescents to participate in local service can develop civic responsibility and build habits of community involvement. For this reason, studies on volunteer motivation should not only ask whether adolescents participate, but also why they intend to continue. Understanding the motivational basis of intention can help organisations design activities that are more inclusive, educational, and sustainable.

2.4 Conceptual framework

Based on the VFI and behavioural intention theory, value, understanding, and social motivation are positively related to adolescents' participation intention. The framework, therefore, treats participation intention as the dependent variable, with value motivation, understanding motivation, and social motivation as key predictors, while gender and age are used to describe demographic differences in intention and motivation.

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study



Source: Developed by the authors based on Clary et al. (1998) and Ajzen (1991).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research design and participants

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted. 353 adolescents aged 12 to 19 in Anhui Province, China, who had experience of, or exposure to, volunteer activities, responded to the questionnaire. Of the 353 respondents, 216 (61.19%) ranged from 16 to 18 years old, 39 (11.05%) from 14 to 16, and 74 (20.96%) were 14 years old or younger. 168 (47.59%) are male, and 185 (52.41%) are female respondents.

3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire was adapted from the Volunteer Functions Inventory to measure volunteer motivation, comprising three dimensions, i.e., value motivation, understanding motivation, and social motivation (Clary et al., 1998). Although the original VFI contains six dimensions, only three were selected because they were most relevant to the adolescent and community-service context of this research. The use of three Secondly, Ajzen's (1991) behavioural intention construct comprises dimensions on willingness to participate again, intention to continue volunteering, and recognition of the importance of volunteer service. Each dimension was measured using adapted Likert-scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire is on a 5-point Likert scale. using five items adapted from,

Reliability and validity results also supported the measurement's quality. The overall Cronbach's alpha was .970, the KMO value was .960, Bartlett's test was significant, and the total variance explained reached 79.42%. These results indicate that the questionnaire items were sufficiently consistent and suitable for examining the relationship between the constructs. Therefore, subsequent difference tests and regression analyses were conducted using aggregated scale scores.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through an online questionnaire using the Questionnaire Star platform. Participation was voluntary, and no personal data was gathered. SPSS was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to determine levels of motivation and intention to participate. Reliability and validity analyses were conducted using Cronbach's alpha, KMO, and Bartlett's test. Independent-samples t-tests were used to examine gender differences, and a one-way ANOVA was used as an additional test for age differences. Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression were used to examine the relationship between motivation and participation intention.

4.0 Results

4.1 Levels of volunteer motivation and participation intention

The descriptive results indicate that respondents generally reported high levels of volunteer motivation and intention to participate.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of key variables

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Participation intention	353	1.00	5.00	4.367	0.886	High
Value motivation	353	1.00	5.00	4.514	0.763	High
Understanding motivation	353	1.00	5.00	4.546	0.739	High
Social motivation	353	1.00	5.00	4.050	0.914	High

As seen in Table 1, the participation intention recorded a mean score of 4.37, indicating that most adolescents expressed a strong willingness to volunteer in the future. Among the three motivation dimensions, understanding motivation recorded the highest mean score, followed by value motivation and social motivation. This suggests that adolescents were particularly likely to view volunteering as an opportunity for learning, personal growth, and gaining new perspectives.

4.2 Gender and age differences

Gender differences were examined using independent samples t-tests. Female respondents reported higher scores than male respondents for value motivation, understanding motivation, overall motivation, and participation intention. The difference in social motivation was not statistically significant. This suggests that female adolescents in the sample were more willing to participate and reported stronger motivation overall, while social motivation was relatively similar between male and female respondents. As an

additional demographic analysis, one-way ANOVA showed that age differences in participation intention were not statistically significant, $F(3, 349) = 1.329, p = .265$.

Table 2. Gender differences in motivation and participation intention

Variable	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	t	df	p	Result
Value motivation	4.402 (0.836)	4.616 (0.676)	-2.627	321.407	.009	Significant
Understanding motivation	4.421 (0.842)	4.658 (0.612)	-2.999	302.277	.003	Significant
Social motivation	3.954 (0.984)	4.137 (0.839)	-1.879	329.778	.061	Not significant
Overall motivation	4.259 (0.824)	4.471 (0.626)	-2.696	310.637	.007	Significant
Participation intention	4.187 (1.013)	4.531 (0.717)	-3.647	297.727	< .001	Significant

Table 3. Age differences in participation intention

Age group	N	Mean	SD / Result
18 or older	24	4.150	1.104
16-18	216	4.343	0.894
14-16	39	4.338	0.877
14 or younger	74	4.524	0.778
ANOVA result		$F(3,349) = 1.329$	$p = .265$

4.3 Correlation and regression analysis

Pearson correlation results showed significant positive relationships among value motivation, understanding motivation, social motivation, and participation intention. As shown in Table 4, Participation intention was strongly correlated with understanding motivation, followed by value motivation and social motivation. As shown in Table 5, the multiple linear regression analysis was then conducted to examine whether the three motivation dimensions predicted participation intention. The model was statistically significant, $F(3, 349) = 284.424, p < .001$, and explained 71.0% of the variance in participation intention. Understanding motivation was the strongest predictor, followed by social motivation and value motivation. The Durbin-Watson value was 1.982, and all VIF values were below 5, indicating no serious autocorrelation or multicollinearity concerns.

Table 4. Correlations among key variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
Participation intention	1			
Value motivation	.764**	1		
Understanding motivation	.813**	.858**	1	
Social motivation	.718**	.685**	.708**	1

** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Multiple regression predicting participation intention

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t/F	p	Tolerance	VIF
Value motivation	0.202	0.067	.174	3.022	.003	.252	3.968
Understanding motivation	0.578	0.071	.482	8.130	< .001	.237	4.225
Social motivation	0.250	0.041	.258	6.173	< .001	.476	2.099
Model summary	$R = .842$	$R^2 = .710$	$Adj. R^2 = .707$	$F = 284.424$	$p < .001$	$DW = 1.982$	

5.0 Discussion

The findings indicate that adolescent respondents in Anhui generally held positive attitudes toward volunteer participation. The high mean score for participation intention suggests that volunteer service has already gained recognition among many adolescents as a meaningful activity. This is important for sustainable communities because young people can contribute energy, creativity, and continuity to local service programmes when their intention is supported by suitable organisational conditions.

The obvious finding is the role of understanding motivation. Adolescents were most motivated by opportunities to learn, gain new knowledge, improve skills, and broaden their perspectives. This result is consistent with the VFI framework, which argues that volunteering serves cognitive and developmental functions (Clary et al., 1998). It also reflects the adolescent life stage, during which young people are developing identity, competence, and future aspirations. When volunteer activities are designed as learning experiences rather than only as service tasks, adolescents may feel that participation benefits both the community and their own growth. This may explain why understanding motivation showed the strongest relationship with participation intention.

Value motivation also has a significant positive effect. This implies that adolescents who saw volunteering as a way to help others and express social responsibility were more likely to intend to continue volunteering. In the Chinese context, where schools and communities often emphasise civic duty and collective responsibility, value motivation may provide a moral foundation for participation. However, its effect was weaker than understanding motivation. This suggests that moral encouragement alone may not be sufficient to sustain adolescents' intention to volunteer. Programmes also need to provide visible opportunities for learning, reflection, and achievement.

Social motivation also significantly predicted participation intention in the regression model, although the gender difference for social motivation was not significant. This means that social connection matters for both male and female adolescents. Volunteer activities that create friendship, recognition, and shared identity may therefore be more attractive. Instead of recruiting adolescents only through formal announcements, organisations can use peer groups, team-based activities, and recognition mechanisms to strengthen social connections.

The one gender suggests that female respondents reported higher overall motivation and participation intention than male respondents. This may indicate stronger empathy-oriented or community-oriented engagement among female adolescents in the sample. Nevertheless, this interpretation should be treated cautiously because gender differences can be shaped by activity type, school culture, and social expectations. Programme design should not assume that one gender is uninterested in volunteering. Instead, organisations

should create diverse volunteer tasks that appeal to different interests, such as environmental action, digital support, community care, educational mentoring, and event coordination.

The non-significant age result also deserves attention. Although adolescents aged 12 to 19 are at different developmental stages, the findings suggest that age alone did not explain differences in participation intention in this sample. One possible explanation is that the respondents were all exposed to similar school and community volunteer contexts. This implies that programme quality and motivational fit may be more important than age segmentation. Organisations should therefore avoid assuming that older adolescents are automatically more willing to volunteer, and should instead provide age-appropriate roles that make service meaningful for different groups.

The correlation and regression results also show that the motivation dimensions were closely related to each other. This means that adolescents may not volunteer for only one reason. A student may want to help others, learn new skills, and participate with friends at the same time. Effective volunteer programmes should therefore combine value-based messages, learning opportunities, and social support rather than relying on a single recruitment strategy.

Overall, the results confirm that volunteer motivation is closely related to participation intention. The findings, therefore, extend existing volunteer motivation research by providing empirical evidence from adolescents in Anhui Province and by connecting volunteer intention to sustainable community development. For SDG 11, adolescent volunteerism can support community sustainability when programmes are continuous, inclusive, and meaningful to young participants. A practical implication is that volunteer organisations should evaluate adolescents' experiences after activities, not only count attendance. If adolescents join a service activity but do not experience learning, social connection, or value fulfilment, they may not develop long-term intention.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This research examined volunteer motivation and intention to participate among adolescents in Anhui Province, China. The findings showed that adolescents reported high levels of volunteer motivation and a strong intention to participate. Female respondents showed higher overall motivation and intention than male respondents, while age differences in participation intention were not significant. Regression results confirmed that value, understanding, and social motivation significantly predicted participation intention, with understanding motivation being the strongest predictor.

Several recommendations can be made. First, volunteer organisations and schools should design programmes that provide clear learning outcomes, such as communication skills, teamwork, environmental awareness, and community problem-solving. Second, volunteer activities should include reflection sessions so that adolescents can connect service experience with personal growth and social responsibility. Third, peer-based recruitment and team activities should be strengthened to support social motivation. Fourth, programme managers should design diverse tasks that attract both male and female adolescents instead of relying on a single type of activity. Finally, NGOs and schools in Anhui should build longer-term volunteer pathways so that adolescents can move from one-off participation to repeated service, leadership roles, and community-based projects. In practical terms, this means that volunteer organisations should design a pathway from initial participation to repeated involvement. For example, first-time volunteers can be assigned simple service tasks, returning volunteers can be offered training and reflection, and experienced adolescent volunteers can be encouraged to coordinate small teams or mentor younger participants. Such a pathway would help transform short-term willingness into sustained community engagement.

The study has limitations. It focused on adolescents in Anhui Province and used self-reported cross-sectional data, so the findings may not be generalisable to all regions or prove causality. It also examined only three of the six VFI dimensions. Future studies could include career, protective, and enhancement motivation, compare urban and rural adolescents, and use longitudinal data to examine whether participation intention leads to actual sustained volunteer behaviour.

Acknowledgements

The first author would like to express sincere gratitude to the second author, Madhubala Bava Harji from the Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology & Music, SEGi University, Malaysia, and the third author, Fang Chuan from Huainan Normal University, China, for their valuable guidance, support, and contribution to the completion of this research. The authors also thank all respondents who participated in the questionnaire survey.

Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to environment-behaviour and youth civic engagement studies by showing how adolescents' psychological motivation relates to volunteer participation intention in Anhui, China. It highlights the importance of learning-oriented volunteer programme design for sustaining adolescent engagement and supporting SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

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