

Volunteer Motivation and Participation Intention among Adolescents in Anhui, China

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Abstract

This study examined how volunteer motivation influences adolescents' intention to participate in Anhui, China. Based on the Volunteer Functions Inventory, value, understanding, and social motivations were assessed using questionnaire data from 353 adolescents aged 12-19. SPSS analyses included descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, correlation, and multiple regression. The results showed high motivation and intention to participate. Gender differences were significant, whereas age differences were not. All three motivations significantly predicted participation intention, with understanding motivation as the strongest predictor. Findings support the design of learning-oriented youth volunteer programs for sustainable communities.

Keywords: Volunteer Motivation; Participation Intention; Adolescents; Urban Environmental Quality

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1.0 Introduction

Volunteer service has become an important form of youth civic engagement in China. It supports communities, strengthens youths' sense of responsibility, and provides opportunities for cooperation, care, and social participation. In relation to sustainable cities and communities, youth volunteering can contribute to community resilience, environmental awareness, public education, social support, and urban environmental quality. These links make adolescent volunteerism relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 11, which emphasizes inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable communities (United Nations, 2015). However, the availability of volunteer opportunities does not automatically translate into sustained participation. Some adolescents participate only in school- or community-organized mandatory activities, while others continue to volunteer in youth service to meet their personal, learning, or social needs.

Anhui Province is an appropriate setting to examine this issue. In recent years, schools, communities, and non-governmental organizations have provided more opportunities for youth service in areas such as community care, environmental protection, public education, and event support. Nevertheless, sustaining adolescent participation remains a practical challenge. The major issue is not only whether adolescents participate once, but whether they develop a sustained intention to volunteer. Hence, understanding the psychological motivations underlying adolescents' intention to participate is pertinent.

Volunteer motivation is one of the most widely used explanations for why people begin and continue volunteering. The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), proposed by Clary et al. (1998), identifies several functions of volunteering, including values, understanding,

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social, career, protective, and enhancement motives. For adolescents in community service contexts, value, understanding, and social motivation are especially relevant. They may volunteer to assist others, learn and improve themselves, or build social relationships and gain recognition from peers.

Although previous studies have examined volunteer motivation across diverse groups, empirical evidence on adolescents in Anhui Province remains limited. Numerous studies addressed volunteer service at the macro-policy or organizational level. However, few examine how specific psychological motives shape adolescents' intention to continue volunteering. It is crucial to examine this gap because program expansion alone may not ensure continuity if young volunteers lack personal intention, meaningful participation, or a sense of belonging. Thus, this study aims to examine adolescents' motivation to volunteer and intention to participate in youth services in Anhui Province. The research objectives are:

- 1: To determine the levels of volunteer motivation and participation intention.
- 2: To examine whether motivation and participation intention differ by gender and age.
- 3: To examine whether value motivation, understanding motivation, and social motivation predict participation intention.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Volunteer motivation and VFI

Volunteer motivation refers to the psychological factors that encourage individuals to engage in unpaid service activities. Clary et al. (1998) proposed a functional approach to volunteering, arguing that people may engage in similar volunteer activities for different reasons. The VFI is useful because it links volunteer behavior to individual needs and enables researchers to examine why individuals participate and why they may continue to do so. Recent studies continue to support the voluntary function (VF) values across diverse cultural contexts and volunteer groups (Martins et al., 2024; Pearce et al., 2022).

This study focuses on three dimensions. *Value motivation* encompasses compassion, social responsibility, and concern for others. Adolescents with strong value motivation may view volunteering as a meaningful way to help communities and practice civic responsibility. *Understanding motivation* is the desire to learn, gain experience, acquire new knowledge, and develop personal skills through volunteer service. This dimension is particularly important for adolescents because volunteering can support identity formation and personal development. *Social motivation* is the desire to build relationships, participate with friends, gain recognition, and feel part of a group. For adolescents, peer influence and a sense of belonging may shape whether they join and continue volunteering (Sulaiman et al., 2022).

These three dimensions were adopted in this study because they explicitly reflect the core practical concerns in adolescent volunteer management. Value motivation captures the moral and civic meaning of service; understanding motivation captures the learning benefits young people expect; and social motivation captures the peer- and group-based nature of youth participation. Together, these dimensions provide a focused model for examining whether motivation can support repeated participation rather than one-off involvement.

2.2 Participation intention

Participation intention is an individual's willingness or plan to engage in future volunteer activities. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior asserts that intention strongly predicts behavior when individuals hold favorable attitudes and perceive personal or social support for action. In studies, participation intention is often used to assess whether volunteers are likely to return, remain active, or recommend service activities to others. For adolescents, intention is important as long-term volunteerism is difficult to sustain if they participate only once and do not develop a desire to continue.

Previous research shows that motivation is closely linked to sustained volunteer participation. Hu et al. (2023) found that intention patterns are important predictors of college students' participation in volunteer service. Qiao and Zhang (2020) showed that student volunteers at 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 imply that volunteer programs 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 volunteering

Gender and age may also influence adolescent volunteer participation. Recent studies suggest that prosocial behavior and volunteering may vary by gender (Olmos-Gómez et al., 2023). Female adolescents may report stronger empathy or community-oriented values, whereas male adolescents may respond more to activities linked to teamwork, skill development, or visible achievement. These patterns should not be treated as perpetual, as they may be shaped by school cultures, family expectations, peer groups, and types of activities.

Age may also matter because adolescents aged 12-19 are at different developmental stages. Younger adolescents may rely more on school or family arrangements, whereas older adolescents may view volunteering as a means of personal growth, leadership, or future planning. However, Pearce et al. (2022) found that local contexts, learning opportunities, and social barriers also shape adolescents' motivation to volunteer. Therefore, this study examines gender and age as demographic variables and focuses primarily on whether motivational dimensions relate to participation intention. The central argument of this study is that sustained intention depends more on whether volunteering meets adolescents' value, learning, and social needs than on age group. This approach helps avoid reducing adolescent volunteering to demographic categories and instead highlights program design and motivational fit.

Adolescent volunteer intention is not only a private psychological tendency; it is linked to how young people experience their community environment. When service activities provide learning, a sense of belonging, and the fulfillment of values, adolescents may be more likely to see the community as a shared space where their actions can create visible outcomes.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

Building on Clary et al.'s (1998) Volunteer Functions Inventory and Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, this study posits that value, understanding, and social motivation are positively related to adolescents' intention to participate. The conceptual framework (Figure 1) presents the independent and dependent variables examined in this study.

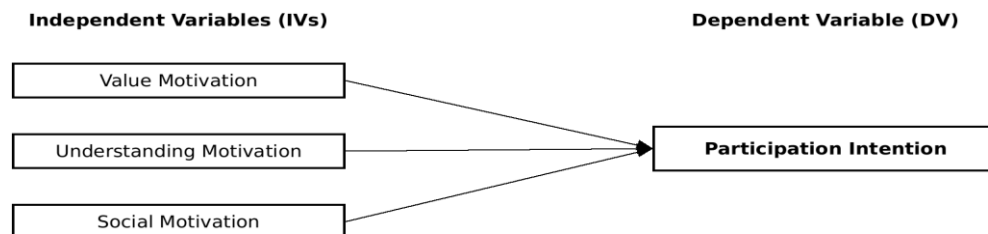


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 1, the three motivational dimensions (value, understanding, and social motivation) are the independent variables and are examined as predictors, while participation intention is the dependent variable. Demographic factors, particularly gender and age, are also examined.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research design and participants

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was used to examine adolescents' levels of motivation and intention, compare demographic groups, and test predictive relationships among variables. The participants were 353 adolescents aged 12-19 in Anhui Province, China, who had experience with or exposure to volunteer activities. Of the total respondents, 168 were male, and 185 were female. In terms of age, 24 were 18 years or older, 216 were 16-18 years, 39 were 14-16 years, and 74 were 14 years or younger.

3.2 Instrument and data analysis

The questionnaire was adapted from the Volunteer Functions Inventory to assess volunteer motivation across the dimensions of value, understanding, and social motivation (Clary et al., 1998). Although the VFI contains six dimensions, these three were selected for their relevance to the adolescent and community-service context of this study. Participation intention was measured using items assessing willingness to volunteer again, intention to continue volunteering, and recognition of the importance of volunteer service. All items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Reliability and validity results supported the measurement quality. The overall Cronbach's alpha was .970, the KMO value was .960, Bartlett's test was significant, and the total variance explained was 79.42%. Data were collected via the Questionnaire Star online platform. Participation was voluntary, and no personal data were collected. SPSS was used for descriptive statistics, reliability and validity analyses, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression.

The analysis procedure was aligned with the research objectives. Descriptive statistics were used to assess overall levels of motivation and intention. T-tests and ANOVA were used to examine demographic differences. Correlation and regression analyses were then used to test whether motivation dimensions were associated with and predicted participation intention.

4.0 Findings

The findings are presented according to the three research objectives. First, descriptive results report the levels of motivation and intention to participate. Gender and age differences are then reported. Finally, correlation and regression results are used to examine whether the three motivation dimensions predict participation intention. Table 1 presents adolescents' levels of volunteer motivation and intention to participate.

Table 1. Volunteer Motivation and Participation Intention Levels

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Participation intention	4.367	0.886	High

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Value motivation	4.514	0.763	High
Understanding motivation	4.546	0.739	High
Social motivation	4.050	0.914	High

Table 1 shows that respondents reported high levels of both volunteer motivation and intention to participate, with mean scores above 4.0. *Understanding motivation* attained the highest mean score ($M=4.546$), followed by value ($M=4.514$) and social motivation ($M=4.050$), suggesting that adolescents viewed volunteering primarily as an opportunity for learning, personal growth, and meaningful contribution.

The adolescents' levels of volunteer motivation and intention to participate by gender are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Gender Differences in Motivation and Participation Intention

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

Table 2 shows that female respondents reported significantly higher scores than male respondents across value motivation, understanding motivation, overall motivation, and participation intention. The gender difference in social motivation is not statistically significant, indicating that social links are similar between male and female respondents.

Table 3. Age Differences in Participation Intention

Age group	N	Mean	SD	ANOVA result
18 or older	24	4.150	1.104	$F(3,349)=1.329, p=.265$
16-18	216	4.343	0.894	Not significant
14-16	39	4.338	0.877	Not significant
14 or younger	74	4.524	0.778	Not significant

As shown in Table 3, one-way ANOVA results indicate that age differences in participation intention are not statistically significant, $F(3, 349) = 1.329, p = .265$. Although the youngest group had a slightly higher mean, the difference is not sufficient to conclude that age influenced participation intention in this sample.

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlations among the three motivation dimensions and participation intention.

Table 4. Correlations among Variables

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

** $p < .001$.

As seen in Table 4, significant positive relationships are found among the variables: *value motivation*, *understanding motivation*, *social motivation*, and participation intention.

Table 5 presents the multiple regression results for predictors.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Predicting Participation Intention

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

As shown in Table 5, the multiple regression results indicate that the model is statistically significant ($F(3, 349) = 284.424, p < .001$) and accounts for 71.0% of the variance in participation intention. *Understanding motivation* was the strongest predictor, followed by *social motivation* and *value motivation*. All VIF values are below 5, indicating no serious multicollinearity concerns.

5.0 Discussion

The findings indicate that adolescents in Anhui generally hold positive attitudes toward volunteering. High levels of intention to participate suggest that volunteer service has gained recognition as a meaningful activity among participants. This aligns with previous studies on youth volunteering, which show that volunteering can contribute to healthy development and community engagement when adolescents experience it as meaningful (Meemaduma & Booso, 2022; Nursey-Bray et al., 2022). From an environment-behavior perspective, this result is pertinent because adolescents' willingness to continue volunteering can strengthen local community support and contribute to SDG 11.

The key finding concerns the role of *understanding motivation*. Adolescents are most motivated by opportunities to learn, gain knowledge, improve skills, and broaden their perspectives. This aligns with the VFI framework, which posits that volunteering can serve cognitive and developmental functions (Clary et al., 1998). It also fits 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 merely as service tasks, adolescents may feel that participation benefits both the community and their own growth. This explains why *understanding motivation* showed the strongest relationship with the intention to participate.

Value motivation also has a significant positive effect. Adolescents who view volunteering as a way to help others and express social responsibility are more likely to intend to continue volunteering. This finding aligns with the value function in the VFI and with studies that emphasize meaningful contribution as a basis for sustained engagement (Clary et al., 1998; Qiao & Zhang, 2020). However, its effect is weaker than that of *understanding motivation*. This suggests that moral encouragement alone may not be sufficient to sustain adolescents' intentions. Programs should combine value-based messages with visible opportunities for learning, reflection, and achievement.

Social motivation also significantly predicted participation intention, although the gender difference in *social motivation* was not significant. This suggests that social ties matter for both male and female adolescents. Volunteer activities that foster friendship, recognition, and a shared sense of identity may therefore be more appealing. This aligns with previous research indicating that belonging and peer influence can shape youth volunteerism (Pearce et al., 2022; Sulaiman et al., 2022). Rather than recruiting adolescents solely through formal announcements, organizations can use peer groups, team-based activities, and recognition mechanisms to strengthen social ties.

Results on gender differences indicate that female respondents reported higher overall motivation and intention to participate than male respondents. This may reflect stronger empathy- or community-oriented engagement among female adolescents, consistent with research linking prosocial behavior and volunteering to gender differences (Olmos-Gómez et al., 2023). Nevertheless, this interpretation should be approached with caution, as school culture, activity type, family expectations, and social norms may shape gender differences. Program design should not assume that one gender is uninterested. Instead, organizations should offer a range of tasks, including environmental action, digital support, community care, educational mentoring, and event coordination, that appeal to both genders.

The non-significant age result also warrants attention. Although adolescents aged 12-19 are at different developmental stages, age alone did not explain differences in intention to participate in this sample. One possible explanation is that respondents were exposed to similar school and community volunteer contexts. This suggests that program quality and motivational fit may be more important than age-based segmentation. Organizations should avoid assuming that older adolescents are automatically more willing to volunteer; instead, they should offer age-appropriate roles that make service meaningful for different groups.

Overall, the results confirm that volunteer motivation is closely linked to participation intention. The findings extend existing research on volunteer motivation by providing empirical evidence from adolescents in Anhui Province and by linking volunteer intention to sustainable community development. A practical implication is that volunteer organizations should assess adolescents' experiences after activities, not merely their attendance. If adolescents join a service activity but do not experience learning, social connection, or a sense of fulfillment aligned with their values, they may not develop a long-term intention.

The implications extend beyond the current sample, as many youth volunteer programs face similar challenges: they can recruit adolescents for short-term service but struggle to sustain participation. The results suggest that sustainable program design should combine three elements. First, activities should explain why the service matters to the community. Second, adolescents should be able to learn skills or gain new perspectives. Third, activities should provide opportunities for peer support and recognition. These elements can help transform volunteering from a compulsory or occasional activity into a meaningful pathway for youth civic engagement.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined volunteer motivation and participation intention among adolescents in Anhui Province, China. The results showed that adolescents reported high motivation to volunteer and strong intentions to participate. Female respondents reported 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 motivations significantly predicted participation intention, with understanding motivation the strongest predictor.

Several recommendations can be made. First, schools and volunteer organizations should design programs with clear learning outcomes, including communication, teamwork, environmental awareness, and community problem-solving. Second, reflection sessions should be incorporated to help adolescents connect service experiences with personal growth and social responsibility. Third, peer-based recruitment and team activities should be strengthened to foster social motivation. Fourth, program managers should offer a

range of tasks that attract both male and female adolescents. Finally, NGOs and schools in Anhui should build longer-term pathways from first-time participation to repeated service, leadership roles, and community-based projects to support sustainable urban environmental quality.

The study's limitations include its focus on adolescents in Anhui Province and its reliance on self-reported cross-sectional data, which limit generalizability and preclude causal inference. Because only three of the six VFI dimensions were examined, future studies could include the remaining three dimensions (career, protective, and enhancement motivations), compare adolescents in urban and rural settings, and adopt a longitudinal design to assess whether intention leads to sustained volunteer behavior. Future research may also examine how school policy, family support, prior service experience, and activity type affect motivation. These factors may help explain why some adolescents translate positive intention into repeated participation while others remain occasional volunteers.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to research on environment-behavior and youth civic engagement by demonstrating how adolescents' psychological motivation relates to their intention to participate in Anhui, China. It highlights the importance of learning-oriented volunteer program design for sustaining adolescent engagement and supporting SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

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