

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Volunteering in Transition: Psychological Motivations Across Traditional, Episodic, and Digital Forms

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ABSTRACT

Episodic and digital forms of engagement have been marking volunteering as in transition. Individuals tend to engage in volunteering activities in multiple ways other than traditional volunteering, that is, an enduring activity, long-term and organization-centred volunteering. While episodic volunteering refers to occasional forms of engagement, digital volunteering represents the new avenue of engagement via information technologies and the internet. This research examines how motivations to start and maintain engagement differ among individuals across various volunteering forms. We did so by conducting a qualitative study based on nine focus groups involving 67 volunteers (age mean = 44, 45% female). Reflexive thematic analysis confirms the applicability of functionalist motivations yet identifies emergent motives unique to each volunteering form. Traditional and digital volunteers initiate volunteering for social change, whereas episodic volunteers prioritize practical engagement. Regarding sustained commitment, traditional volunteers emphasize organizational belonging, episodic volunteers focus on perceived community impact, and digital volunteers prioritize autonomy and personal growth. These results demonstrate how the evolving landscape of volunteerism reflects shifts in individual motivations, contributing new insights to social and community psychology.

1 | Introduction

Participation in traditional forms of volunteerism has evolved considerably. In recent years, this has resulted in a heightened prevalence of short-term, flexible, and digitally mediated forms of participation (Ackermann and Manatschal 2018; Meneghini and Stanzani 2019; Pozzi et al. 2019). This phenomenon is particularly evident in the Italian context, where the prevalence of volunteering conducted within formal organizations declined from 7.9% in 2013 to 6.2% in 2023 (ISTAT 2025). This decline was more contained in Northern Italy (−1.5 percentage points for organized volunteering, while direct aid remained stable), but more pronounced in Central (−2.1 and

−1.9 p.p.) and Southern Italy (−1.9 and −1.3 p.p.). Conversely, occasional and informal participation remains significant, with 57.7% of volunteers now engaging on an episodic basis (Generali Italia 2024). Driven by the need to balance professional and personal responsibilities, contemporary engagement is shifting toward more flexible and individualized forms (Gatti et al. 2025; Johnson 2015; Rochester 2018). This transition is marked by a declining inclination toward regular commitments in favour of project-based activities and multiple memberships (Eimhjellen et al. 2018; Mutti et al. 2026). As suggested by Chambré (2020), this shift reflects a cyclical evolution of volunteering rather than a mere decline. One potential explanation is the increasing professionalization of

certain services, as organizations now assign delicate tasks to paid staff to ensure stable care, while relying on occasional volunteers for specific tasks (Chambré 2020). Consequently, traditional identification with a single organization is being replaced by a more customized involvement across diverse service contexts that underscore different motivations (Gatti et al. 2025).

Moreover, the proliferation of digital technologies has further contributed to a transformation in the nature and meaning of civic engagement (Gatti and Procentese 2022, 2024). The rise of digital participation is reflected in the fact that 79.5% of Italian non-profit organizations now employ digital technologies (ISTAT 2023). Digital tools have enabled remote volunteering and collective activities through social media (Rochester 2018), often integrating offline prosocial behaviours (Aresi et al. 2022; Tommasi, De Cordova, et al. 2025). This digital transformation was drastically accelerated by the COVID pandemic, which forced a rapid transition to digital infrastructures and new service delivery models to meet emergent social needs (Marzana et al. 2021). However, this shift introduced unique managerial challenges regarding the recruitment and retention of a new profile of digital volunteers whose motivations may differ from those of traditional ones (Lachance 2020).

Psychological literature has long been interested in examining the motivations for initiating and sustaining volunteer activities, with the functionalist approach remaining one of the most widely used frameworks to classify motivations within institutionalized, long-term volunteering (Tommasi, Meneghini, and de Cordova 2025; Yang 2025). However, given the emergence of new forms of engagement, the present study aims to investigate whether the motivational functions model can adequately explain engagement across diverse forms. Specifically, this research seeks to address the following questions: Does the functionalist approach effectively explain motivations across different forms of volunteering? What are the differences and similarities in initial and sustained motivations among traditional, episodic, and digital volunteers?

1.1 | Motivations: Functionalist Approach

In the literature on volunteering, there are several approaches that investigate motivations. Among these, the best known is the one proposed by Omoto and Snyder (1995), based on the functionalist approach to attitude theory of Katz (1960). This perspective operates on three core propositions: first, it investigates personal and social processes that originate, direct, and sustain action. Second, it posits that different individuals may perform the same volunteer activities to fulfil diverse psychological functions. Thirdly, it suggests that the initiation and maintenance of volunteering depend on matching an individual's motivational concerns with situations that can satisfy them (Clary and Snyder 1999). Therefore, the functionalist approach conceptualizes volunteerism as a purposeful behaviour directed at fulfilling specific psychological functions. The Volunteering Function Inventory (VFI; Clary et al. 1998) operationalizes this approach by identifying six core motivational functions, namely *value*, which encompasses the expression of altruistic concerns and the promotion of humanitarian ideals; *social*, which involves

the opportunity to do activities with friends or the conformity to social expectations; *understanding*, which refers to the pursuit of knowledge or the utilization of existing skills; *career*, which refers to the acquisition of experiences that may advance professional development; *protective*, which refers to the alleviation of personal distress or guilt through prosocial action; and *enhancement*, which refers to the promotion of personal growth and the strengthening of self-esteem. These functions are not mutually exclusive, and volunteers often endorse multiple motives simultaneously, creating complex motivational profiles (Kiviniemi et al. 2002; Marta et al. 2006). Despite its widespread use, the VFI has been subject to critique and extension, particularly concerning its comprehensiveness. Recent research suggests that the range of motivational functions may be broader than originally conceptualized (Chacón et al. 2010; Dávila et al. 2021; Vecina and Marzana 2019). For instance, studies using open-ended questions have revealed that volunteers spontaneously cite fewer motivations than suggested by the questionnaire, while also highlighting emerging categories not captured by the VFI, such as organizational commitment, personal development, social change, community concern, enjoyment, reciprocity and more (Chacón et al. 2010). Furthermore, while the VFI remains a stable tool, it may be subject to bias, leading volunteers to endorse motives that are more expectations than actual drivers of action (Vecina and Marzana 2019). Nonetheless, a systematic review of the VFI across multiple samples confirms that the *value* function consistently receives the highest scores across all demographics, followed by *understanding*, while *career* and *protective* motives typically receive lower endorsements (Chacón et al. 2017).

Volunteers' motivations do not always align perfectly with the activities they take on. Functionalist theorists have emphasized that sustaining motivation depends on how well volunteering motivational goals match with individual experiences (Clary et al. 1996; Stukas et al. 2009). While initial motives are important, they alone cannot fully explain ongoing engagement (Gaboardi et al. 2024). When the volunteering environment does not align with the functions individuals seek to fulfil, continued engagement becomes less likely. Conversely, when volunteering experiences are aligned with volunteers' motivational goals, there is a greater probability of sustained involvement (Stukas et al. 2009). Stukas and colleagues highlight the importance of organizational responsiveness—the ability of organizations to recognize and adapt to volunteers' evolving motivational needs (Stukas et al. 2009). Rheinberg's theory of motivational learning (2000; 2006) further underscores this notion by positing that motivations undergo a process of evolution as individuals gain experience. Positive reinforcement has been demonstrated to strengthen intrinsic motivation, while perceived misalignment or disappointment has been shown to lead to demotivation or dropout. Consequently, these perspectives collectively present motivation as a process, where alignment, feedback, and adaptation are central to long-term participation (Rheinberg 2006; Stukas et al. 2009).

1.2 | Different Forms of Volunteering

To address the lack of definitional consensus, this study categorizes volunteering along three dimensions as proposed

by Tommasi and colleagues (Tommasi, Meneghini, and de Cordova 2025): (i) institutionalization (formal vs. informal); (ii) spatiality (in-presence vs. online); and (iii) temporality (continuous vs. episodic). The present research focuses exclusively on formal volunteering—defined as activities conducted within an organization—to examine how these configurations influence motivational drivers.

Therefore, traditional volunteering is conceptualized as a continuous and altruistic activity conducted within formal non-profit organizations, where individuals consistently contribute skills to create benefits for others (Omoto and Snyder 1995; Snyder and Omoto 2000, 2009). However, in recent decades, alternative forms of volunteering have emerged, particularly episodic and digital volunteering, driven by changing lifestyle patterns, increased demands for flexibility, and technological innovation (Ackermann and Manatschal 2018; Macduff 2005). In our conceptualization, episodic volunteering refers to formal, in-person, time-limited engagements tied to specific events (Cnaan et al. 2021). This form aligns with the lifestyles of individuals seeking meaningful contribution without long-term commitments, making it prevalent among students and professionals balancing multiple responsibilities (Hyde et al. 2014; Meneghini et al. 2016; Pozzi et al. 2017; Wollebæk et al. 2014). In parallel, digital volunteering (or ‘virtual’ or ‘online’ volunteering) is defined by its spatiality, being mediated by technology (Cox et al. 2018). It encompasses solidarity initiatives conducted within organizations such as online tutoring, content creation, and platform moderation (Ihm and Shumate 2022; Tommasi, De Cordova, et al. 2025). Unlike traditional modes, it is characterized by indirect interactions with beneficiaries and the potential to reach a broader global audience (Tommasi, De Cordova, et al. 2025).

Research on traditional volunteering shows that individuals engage through a complex interplay of different motivations. Studies consistently distinguish between other-oriented and self-oriented motives, linking the former to greater well-being and satisfaction (Konrath et al. 2011; Meneghini and Colledani 2022; Stukas et al. 2014). Among young volunteers, motivations are often instrumental, driven by social interaction and personal or professional skill development (Jardim and Marques da Silva 2018), whereas older adults tend to prioritize moral duty, social responsibility, and organizational commitment (Omoto et al. 2000). Nevertheless, community service, self-enhancement, and protective motivations remain central across all age groups (Francis and Jones 2012; Okun and Schultz 2003).

Recent scholars indicate that motivations for both episodic and digital volunteering similarly combine altruistic and self-oriented drivers (Bryen and Madden 2006; Kulik 2021). Episodic volunteers are often motivated by social impact and interpersonal connection (Dunn et al. 2016), with profiles influenced by age, prior experience, and context influence (Almog-Bar et al. 2022). Interestingly, motivations in episodic volunteers vary by event type and stage of involvement (Dunn et al. 2016). Sport-based episodic volunteering seems to add physical challenge and healing motives, while cultural event settings emphasize match with lifestyle and flexibility. Furthermore, new volunteers may seek

social rewards, while regular episodic volunteers lean toward altruism (Dunn et al. 2016). In addition, research shows that retention of episodic volunteers is predicted by satisfaction and enjoyment rather than a single ‘master motive’ (Hyde et al. 2014). On the other hand, the online setting appears to highlight the role of values and understanding functions. For instance, citizen science projects and online helplines have found that activity and retention correlate strongly with these functions, while social and career motives often remain secondary (Cox et al. 2018; Wittenberg et al. 2024). Other studies showed that digital volunteers are driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, which often evolve over time based on task type and personal or collective goals (Alam and Campbell 2017; Kulik 2021).

Despite the rise of these forms, the literature on motivations remains methodologically and theoretically fragmented, characterized by a prevalence of atheoretical studies centred on English-speaking contexts (Tommasi, Meneghini, and de Cordova 2025). This study addresses these gaps by applying the functionalist model in a comparative fashion. By examining volunteers’ perceptions across these diverse formats, this research aims to identify the specific psychological drivers that influence both the choice of a particular form of engagement and the factors sustaining long-term participation.

1.3 | Current Study

While the motivational dimensions of traditional volunteering are well-established, and research into episodic and digital forms is expanding, comparative analyses across these diverse modalities remain scarce (Tommasi, Meneghini, and de Cordova 2025). Furthermore, the consistency of the VFI model when applied simultaneously to these different engagement formats has yet to be fully understood. To address these gaps, the present research explores the following questions:

- Does the functionalist approach effectively explain motivations across different forms of volunteering?
- What are the differences and similarities in initial and sustained motivations among traditional, episodic, and digital volunteers?

By comparing these engagement formats through a focus group methodology, this study aims to evaluate whether the VFI requires adaptation to better reflect contemporary volunteer profiles. In addition, the results hold significant practical implications for Non-Profit Voluntary Organizations (NPVOs). Investigating initial motivations is fundamental for recruitment, as it reveals the specific perceptions and needs that attract individuals to different types of volunteering. Conversely, examining sustained motivation is essential for engagement and retention. For example, for episodic volunteers, identifying what drives them to return allows organizations to maintain a reliable pool of individuals to mobilize as needed, while for digital volunteers, it helps overcome the challenges of low visibility that can lead to higher drop-out rates. Therefore, this study provides useful insights to design targeted management strategies tailored to the diverse needs of contemporary volunteers.

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants and Sampling

Sixty-seven volunteers affiliated with various associations and organizations operating in Italy participated in this study. They were all over the age of 18 ($M = 44$; $SD = 19.6$), with 45% identifying as female. Inclusion criteria required participants to be involved in either traditional, episodic, or digital volunteering, with preference given to individuals engaging in a single form of volunteering rather than a combination. A convenience sampling method was employed. The socio-demographics characteristics of participants can be observed in Table 1.

Participants were recruited through a network of collaborating organizations, including Centres for Services for Volunteerism—*Centri per i Servizi al Volontariato (CSV)*—which support and promote local welfare services and are active across most Italian municipalities. Researchers contacted organizations via phone or email to explain the study aims and assess interest in participation. Information about the study was disseminated through these networks, both in-person and via email, inviting interested individuals to volunteer. Before taking part, all participants received information regarding the study's objectives. They were also required to sign a consent form. Participation was voluntary and in compliance with APA Ethical Guidelines, Standard 3.10 (Informed Consent). Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Committee of Psychological Research of the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II for all aspects of the current research (protocol code 3/2024, date of approval February 29, 2024).

2.2 | Focus Groups

The focus group methodology was selected as the optimal approach for this investigation, as it facilitates the collaborative construction of meaning through the interaction of participants (Caillaud and Flick 2017; Joffe 2011). In total, nine focus groups were conducted between April and May 2024. Participants were grouped according to volunteering form: three groups involved traditional volunteers, three episodic volunteers, and three digital volunteers. Six of the groups took place in person at the Universities affiliated with the research

unit (University of di Naples Federico II, University of Verona, Sacred Heart Catholic University of Milan), while the three sessions with digital volunteers were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. Group sizes ranged from six to ten participants. Each session lasted between 1.5 and 2 h, with an average duration of 110 min.

2.3 | Procedure

The research group is organized into three research units based on geographical location: the first, second-to-last, and last authors work within the same territory; the second, fifth, and sixth authors share a second territorial location; and the third, fourth, and seventh authors operate within the same territory. The formation of the research team occurred across disparate geographical areas within Italy. Focus groups were facilitated by the first four authors and the last author, who shared the participants' ethnic profile. Age and gender varied across focus groups' moderators and participants.

All focus groups were moderated by a trained facilitator, with an observer present to provide support. The moderator's function entailed the introduction of central questions and the facilitation of discussions, while ensuring a consistent background presence. The observer's assistance was instrumental in promoting balanced participation and ensuring that all themes were adequately addressed. Audio recordings were made of each session following participant consent to allow for accurate transcription. At the commencement of each group, the facilitator elucidated the objective of the study, reiterated the voluntary nature of participation, and emphasized the right to withdraw at any time. In both in-person and online settings, time was allocated for informal exchanges and clarification of questions during the discussion. At the end of the focus group, a summary was presented, and the opportunity to raise any further questions was offered. Focus groups were organized around four thematic domains designed to elicit reflections on volunteering experiences. In the first section, participants discussed their motivations for engaging in and continuing volunteering activities. This allowed for the exploration of personal and structural drivers for volunteering. The second section focused on participants' perceptions of volunteer characteristics, prompting reflection on who is seen as a 'typical' volunteer. In the third section, participants were encouraged to discuss their representations of different forms of volunteering (traditional, episodic, digital). Finally, the fourth section invited participants to reflect on the broader meaning of volunteering at both an individual and collective level. To ensure comparability across the three volunteering types, all focus groups utilized the same thematic track. For the purpose of this study, the results will be examined exclusively in relation to the initial thematic area concerning the motivational aspect of volunteering.

2.4 | Data Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021) was adopted to explore how participants reported meaning and experiences around motivations for volunteering. The research

TABLE 1 | Participants demographics.

	Traditional (<i>n</i> = 29)	Episodic (<i>n</i> = 22)	Digital (<i>n</i> = 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)

team comprised nine White, Italian-born academics, ranging from PhD student to full professor and predominantly women, with long-standing expertise in volunteering research, particularly in its social and community psychology dimensions. The team's disciplinary background shaped our focus on volunteers' motivations as well as our methodological decisions, reading of the data, and initial coding framework.

Following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), several methodological decisions were made prior to data analysis. From all the data gathered through the focus groups, specific datasets were created to separately examine the initial and sustained motivations of traditional, episodic, and digital volunteers. Given the study's objectives, a deductive (top-down) approach was employed for the analysis, using the VFI (Clary et al. 1998) as an initial theoretical lens. Data were analysed from a realist/essentialist perspective (Braun and Clarke 2006), focusing on the semantic level to conceptualize motivations directly from the volunteers' reported experiences and reflections.

The analysis was conducted by six of the nine authors (the first five authors and the last author); the data were divided regionally, with each region analysed by a pair of researchers. These six researchers familiarized themselves with the data through transcription and repeated readings. The first pair, comprising the first and the last author, initiated the analysis and generated an initial set of codes, which other pairs drew upon while remaining open to additional codes emerging from their regional data. Involving several researchers in code generation departs from the more common single-coder approach in reflexive TA. In our study, this reflected the multi-regional structure of the data, with each pair drawing on its familiarity with its own territorial context. The codes generated were then discussed among all the members of the research group to integrate territorial insights and observations, and to deepen our reflexive engagement with the data. After refining and aligning the generated codes, the first and last authors were assigned by the entire group to develop themes, working jointly through iterative discussion in which interpretations were mutually questioned and refined. This process entailed an examination of the semantic patterns present within the codes, with particular emphasis on both convergence and divergence of themes and their relationships across different types of volunteers (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021). The final themes were then discussed within the whole research team to achieve a more complex and enriched interpretation of the results.

3 | Results

The thematic analysis distinguishes between initial motivations and the factors ensuring long-term retention across traditional, episodic, and digital volunteering. At the entry stage, several motivational dimensions identified by the VFI (Clary et al. 1998) are shared across the different forms of volunteering, although each form also presents specific motivations alongside these common dimensions. As engagement progresses, motivations tend to converge toward experiential gratification, which emerges as the only factor consistently shared across all forms in sustaining volunteer involvement. In addition, motivations underlying

long-term engagement include both VFI (Clary et al. 1998) dimensions and additional form-specific factors that vary across the different types of volunteering and extend beyond those identified by the VFI classification (Clary et al. 1998).

The following results are organized in two steps: first, initial motivations are explored, distinguishing between shared and form-specific drivers across four themes; second, sustained motivations are organized into four themes, again separating common and form-specific drivers.

3.1 | Initial Motivations

Table 2 presents the thematic structure of volunteers' initial motivations, organized by form of volunteering. For each form, the identified theme groups a set of subthemes and their underlying codes, capturing the drivers that lead people to start volunteering.

3.1.1 | The Roots of Commitment: Between Ethical Orientation and Individual Drives

The analysis highlighted four common motivational factors for the three forms of volunteering investigated: the *ethical pillar*, the *exercise of skills*, *self-serving* motivations, and *life circumstances*. The first three motivations correspond to four of the six VFI dimensions identified by Clary et al. (1998), namely *values*, *understanding*, *enhancement*, and *protective*. These factors reflect a combination of classic self- and other-oriented motivations, with the additional role of contextual conditions.

The *ethical pillar* refers to a value-based orientation characterized by an altruistic desire to help others without expectation of reward. Participants interpret prosocial action as a moral imperative aimed at disseminating principles of solidarity. This is clearly expressed by a digital volunteer: 'I do it voluntarily to help the other because for me there is more joy in giving than in receiving and seeing that the other "so to speak" makes use of me and I can also make use of the other in a good sense' (65, F, digital volunteer).¹ For some participants, volunteering is also rooted in reciprocity based on past experiences: 'Because I was a child to whom volunteering was donated [...] I then decided to re-donate this good because I was formed thanks to this good' (5, F, traditional volunteer). Others emphasize a non-utilitarian perspective: 'This thing left a mark on me, it amazed me, it made me reflect on the importance of wanting to give without having to neither pretend nor think about myself nor look at my interests and so this principally pushed me to want to do this' (42, F, episodic volunteer).

Another shared motivation is the *exercise of skills*, reflecting the opportunity to apply and transfer personal or professional abilities in a voluntary context. Volunteering is seen as a form of professional continuity or development. Some interviewees emphasize consistency with their main occupation and the desire to make their professional skills available to serve others: 'In my case, it was a push of continuity, because anyway what I go to do are more or less things that I already do in my work' (2, M, traditional volunteer). Simultaneously, it is also perceived as an opportunity for

TABLE 2 | Thematic structure of initial motivations across forms of volunteering.

Volunteering typology	Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Description
All three forms	The roots of commitment: between ethical orientation and individual drives	Ethical pillar	Helping others Unpaid work Giving something back Value of solidarity	Core values driven by the desire to help others and promote social good.
		Exercise skills	Professional continuity Learning something new	The need to apply existing professional competencies while simultaneously acquiring new ones.
		Self-serving	Relief from a negative state Curiosity Personal benefit Finding meaning in life Enhancing self-esteem Filling a professional gap	Individualistic motivations centred on the fulfilment of psychological needs.
		Life circumstances	Chance External request Convenience	External drivers, such as institutional requests, social advertisements, or family and peer influence.
Traditional	The importance of collective bonds	Activation for social change	Experiencing society differently Sense of duty Filling institutional gaps Sensitivity to the cause Recognizing the values of the Voluntary Organization (VO)	Engagement triggered by specific social causes and the desire to address institutional or socio-political injustices.
		Community focus	Belonging to the community Contributing to the local area	Emphasis on territorial belonging and prosocial behaviour aimed at supporting the local community.
Episodic	Strategic engagement and territorial impact	Strategic choice	Fitting it into the schedule Material benefits	A 'quid pro quo' approach based on practical benefits, autonomous organization, and material rewards (e.g., event access).
		Gratification	Gaining experiences	The enjoyment, fun, and personal satisfaction derived from engaging in new experiences.
		Community focus	Contributing to the local area	Emphasis on territorial belonging and prosocial behaviour aimed at supporting the local community.
Digital	Indignation as a driver for digital commitment	Indignation	Moral outrage	A powerful emotional response to injustice serves as a primary catalyst for prosocial action.

learning and growth: 'I started because I was part of, well in reality it was a music school, and I was part of it because I was a student, and when my teacher asked me "do you want to offer lessons to others?" I also saw it a bit as an opportunity to learn to teach. I learn, that is, a real opportunity for growth, I can learn more by doing in this case for others' (49, F, episodic volunteer).

Self-serving motivations stem from a self-oriented dimension focused on personal well-being and psychological fulfilment. Solidarity commitment emerges as a response to specific internal urgencies and relief from a negative emotional state (see *protective* in VFI; Clary et al. 1998): 'I approached the world of volunteering following a bad experience or a bad period of my life, in reality, I really needed to no longer stay closed between the four walls of my room just studying' (44, F, episodic volunteer). Voluntary activity allows subjects to find a new sense of utility and self-esteem, transforming aid toward others into an opportunity to strengthen the self (see *enhancement* in VFI; Clary et al. 1998): 'Perhaps my beginning was a healthy selfishness in finding something and feeling useful for others, it started almost as a personal need to find a sense to my life' (18, F, traditional volunteer).

Finally, the subtheme of *life circumstances* identifies situational and exogenous factors that favoured entry into volunteering. In these cases, the action is not predetermined by an intentional drive but is mediated by external stimuli. A decisive role is attributed to collective emergencies and institutional requests: 'I started volunteering in the full Covid year upon request of the Municipality, precisely being let us say the main Municipality of the pandemic' (56, F, digital volunteer). Social networks significantly trigger initial engagement: 'I have some friend who says "are you interested, you should try, come on try" [...] And also for the school matter, the friend told me "come on come" and so I started' (11, F, traditional volunteer); another participant reported exposure to promotional advertisement as an additional trigger to volunteering: 'I approached the volunteering I am practicing now because these advertisements had attracted me' (34, F, episodic volunteer).

3.1.2 | The Importance of Collective Bonds

In traditional volunteering, which was predominantly associated with older volunteers, the interpretation of results led to the identification of two specific subthemes: *activation for social change* and *community focus*. Together, these dimensions show how traditional volunteering is structured around a continuous focus on collective responsibilities.

The *activation for social change* outlines traditional volunteering as an active response to an ethical and social call. The commitment does not arise from an individual need but from the desire to react to injustices observed in the socio-political and institutional context: 'There are areas where the shortcomings of the institutions are lacking. That is why we volunteer' (1, M, traditional volunteer). In this view, volunteering transcends simple service to become a powerful civic tool, aimed at dismantling inequalities and driving social progress through dedication to a cause: 'If today we hear talk about violence against women one day yes and one day yes, how can you not think that if you can

do something? You must do it. This depends on your sensitivity to the cause, however, it is difficult to remain impassive' (5, F, traditional volunteer).

The *community focus* outlines the deep bond between voluntary commitment and the enhancement of one's own community and territorial context. The activity is perceived not just as a service but as a direct expression of the sense of belonging to the community: 'I also started as a kid to feel part of a community, of something bigger than me' (25, M, traditional volunteer). This translates into prosocial actions dedicated to the welfare and care of the local community: 'To employ my time in something that was not truly aimed at myself but also something that could have a sense in the community' (18, F, traditional volunteer).

3.1.3 | Strategic Engagement and Territorial Impact

Episodic volunteers, who were generally younger, identified specific motivations for initiating this form of engagement: *strategic choice*, *gratification*, and a *community focus*. These motivations suggest that perceived benefit functions as the main driver of engagement, with volunteers calibrating their participation between personal gains and contributions to the community.

Strategic choice characterizes an approach to volunteering centred on tangible benefits. Rather than being guided by ideological abstractions, commitment is driven by the value of the experience, where the decision to participate depends on what the volunteer receives in return. This orientation manifests as a response to concrete requirements, such as the need for autonomy in managing one's own organizational commitments: 'I gave it precisely because I knew my commitment was limited to the week [...] I took the opportunity to be able to do something that fits into my way of living' (33, F, episodic volunteer). A further benefit proposed by participants is obtaining direct material advantages, including facilitated access to events or other forms of practical utility: 'I do it because I like it very much and then because I see the concerts for free' (33, F, episodic volunteer).

The volunteering experience and the *gratification* deriving from it are also fundamental to episodic volunteers. Sporadic contribution to events becomes an opportunity to have new positive experiences, constituting an important drive for episodic volunteers. A participant reports: 'I wanted to move and do something, I saw the project and what it was linked to, being involved anyway in the fun activities [...] I signed up for the form. I wanted to have an experience' (35, M, episodic volunteer). Voluntary activity is interpreted here as a leisure experience and a possibility for personal experimentation, where the search for novelty acts as a drive: 'I said yes because it seemed like a fun thing, not a waste of time and because I wanted to try it because I had never done it' (39, F, episodic volunteer).

As with traditional volunteers, the *community focus* subtheme reflects a motivation rooted in territorial belonging and commitment to local initiatives, such as supporting cultural events to promote the city's goods. As specified by a participant: '[My driver] was perhaps precisely the fact of being able to do something for the city. [...] Being useful' (34, F, episodic volunteer).

3.1.4 | Indignation as a Driver for Digital Commitment

Digital volunteers are distinguished by a predominantly affective motivation. Specifically, feelings of *indignation* and anger regarding social injustices, coupled with a desire to catalyse change, serve as the primary drivers for engaging in digital volunteering initiatives. This motivation was reported by a participant describing his experience: 'A bit of anger, in the sense that it makes me a bit angry the fact that there is a need for these things [...] Almost a sense of duty from saying: "look this stuff here is not there". [...] I must at least do my part to make sure this thing gets fixed, that there is at least someone who does it' (53, M, digital volunteer).

3.2 | Sustained Motivations

Table 3 presents the thematic structure of volunteers' sustained motivations, following the same organization by form of volunteering. Here, themes, subthemes, and codes capture the drivers that lead people to continue volunteering over time.

3.2.1 | The Cross-Cutting Dimension of Experiential Reward

Across all types of engagement, *experiential gratification*, specifically the elements of fun and enjoyment, serves as the primary common denominator for sustained commitment. A traditional volunteer describes this feeling of gratification as necessary for continuing voluntary activity: 'The pleasure of doing a thing that comes naturally, to create empathy with people in a spontaneous way, so when you do things with pleasure everything is more beautiful' (27, F, traditional volunteer). Enjoyment and personal satisfaction were described as central to staying engaged over time: 'It will be an event that I personally hope to never abandon because truly you go home and say, "what a wonderful thing!" [...] if you do it, you do it because anyway you must like it' (34, F, episodic volunteer); another participant highlights the fulfilling experience of volunteering: 'And however, I must say that I do not believe it is a positive aspect only for what we offer [...] I come out very gratified as I think of all of you [...] so it is fulfilling, enriching' (54, M, digital volunteer).

3.2.2 | From Individual Growth to Social Impact

Within traditional volunteering, several distinct factors contribute to long-term retention. While some motivations align with the initial reasons for engagement, such as the *exercise of existing and new skills* (see *understanding* in VFI; Clary et al. 1998), and the *ethical pillar* (see *values* in VFI; Clary et al. 1998), others emerge specifically as drivers of continuity. These include the quality of the *organizational experience* and a commitment to *promote social change*. Overall, these factors indicate that sustained engagement in traditional volunteering is maintained through the integration of different dimensions, namely personal, organizational, and external.

Consistent with initial motivations, traditional volunteers again highlight the *exercise of existing and new skills*, as the opportunity to apply their professional competencies or develop new

ones through volunteering, as key incentives for sustained engagement: 'And then even more recently I thought that I do this, that I continued to do volunteering activity also for the acquisition of skills' (25, M, traditional volunteer).

The *ethical pillar* also proves important for maintaining motivation. One participant describes a sense of vocation in helping others that matures through active service: 'Then it transformed into a vocation because anyway later you understand the need is there, it is something that must be liked, that can give disappointments but also satisfactions and however it is something that once you enter it, you hardly leave because you realize the possibility to give a hand to the neighbor is very high' (9, M, traditional volunteer).

Organizational experience also acts as a key motivator. Developing a strong identification with the organization leads volunteers to internalize a sense of duty toward their role: 'One of the things that pushes me, besides this wonderful family, is the fact, how they ask for it. And so perhaps inside there can also be, I do not say guilt, but anyway the sense of duty' (4, F, traditional volunteer). Simultaneously, engagement within an organization fosters significant interpersonal relationships and a sense of internal community. According to multiple participants, this group cohesion is essential for overcoming challenges and sustaining long-term motivation: 'That is, beyond the relationship of the volunteer with the external community, an internal community is born and it becomes a family so you can imagine a young group all kids from 14 to 30/32 years old it becomes a group. The idea of abandoning that group I was never able to do it' (18, F, traditional volunteer). Volunteering is also experienced as a relational space, in which the bonds with fellow volunteers became a reward that sustains motivation: 'In many years, my colleagues are friends. The group does a lot, so you share difficult moments with those who have then also become your friends. So, you give in the sense of giving to those in need, you receive from them, but you also receive a lot from colleagues' (12, F, traditional volunteer).

Finally, the desire to *promote social change* remains a central motivation, reinforcing the collective dimension as a fundamental catalyst for long-term commitment. A participant reports: 'What perhaps pushes me to continue is that anyway, I mean what I see is that at the society level [...] there are significant shortcomings [...] it seems useful to me to put at their service this privilege that in a just society should not be there' (3, F, traditional volunteer). Additionally, volunteering is recognized for its generative potential and its capacity to produce a positive, broad-scale impact on society, as highlighted by another participant: 'When it comes to doing active citizenship and thus also seeing a commitment concretized that then transforms into a benefit for everyone then this can also be a stimulus and from animosity create animosity in the person who is young, who sees himself committed and thus translated his commitment also something concrete can be useful to feed volunteering as an ordinary tool' (43, M, traditional volunteer).

3.2.3 | The Effectiveness of Small Gestures and the Return to the Self

The long-term commitment of episodic volunteers is driven by the dual presence of individualistic motivations such as

TABLE 3 | Codes and themes of sustained motivations.

Volunteering typology	Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Description
All three forms	The cross-cutting dimension of experiential reward	Experiential gratification	Experiential gratification New friendships	Focuses on the enjoyment and personal satisfaction derived directly from the volunteering experience.
Traditional	From individual growth to social impact	Exercising of existing and new skills Ethical pillar	Acquiring competencies Professional continuity Joy of discovery new things Helping others Giving something back	The need to apply existing professional competencies while simultaneously acquiring new ones. Core values shared across all volunteering forms, driven by the desire to help others and promote social good.
		Organizational experience	Sense of duty toward the VO Alignment with VO values Group belonging Maintaining relationships	Relates to group cohesion and belonging within the organization, fostering a sense of duty and alignment with VO' values.
		Promotion of social change	Filling institutional gaps Global issues awareness Self-expression and activism Fostering active participation in others	Awareness of actions taken to combat global issues and the generative impact of voluntary work.
Episodic	The effectiveness of small gestures and the return to the Self	Personal gains Self-serving	Free exit Material benefits Personal gain Relief from a negative state	Fulfillment of concrete needs, such as gaining material benefits or accessing specific events through volunteering. Individualistic motivations centred on the fulfilment of psychological needs.
		Impact of small gestures	Making a difference through small gestures	Recognition that even minor actions significantly contribute to solidarity and local community support.
Digital	Growing ethically in the digital dimension	Growth	Human and professional growth	Personal and professional development that transcends skill-building to include human and personal evolution.
		Ethical pillar	Giving something back Equity and equality	Core values driven by the desire to help others and promote social good.
		Strategic choice	Self-management Professional continuity	Pragmatic engagement focused on autonomous organization and logistical convenience, such as fitting volunteering into a busy personal schedule.

personal gains and *self-serving* motivations and a focus on social impact, specifically through the perceived *impact of small gestures*. Similarly to the initial motivations, these elements suggest that episodic volunteering is sustained through a dynamic balance between self-oriented benefits and the perceived social value.

The sporadic nature of this engagement form provides significant *personal gains*, as it grants volunteers autonomy to balance their commitment with personal rest and other responsibilities. This balance is clearly reflected in the participants' accounts: 'The main motivation to continue is that [...] it does not require constant participation, I mean I have not done anything for a year. I decide: an email arrives tomorrow and I decide that perhaps I like it and I try to sign up' (33, F, episodic volunteer). Lastly, tangible benefits derived from involvement in local events continue to play a relevant role in motivating episodic volunteers: 'My thought was simply that I wanted to continue to see, live the cultural heritage' (50, M, episodic volunteer).

Another subtheme refers to *self-serving* motivation, responding to volunteers' psychological needs corresponding to the *enhancement* and *protective* dimensions in VFI (Clary et al. 1998). Episodic volunteering provides relief from emotional states: 'It distracted me and gave me a way to distance for a moment my problems and make my time useful' (45, F, episodic volunteer). Simultaneously, volunteering is an opportunity to challenge oneself and meet new people: 'I met new people and I put myself out there with positive people who live in Bergamo and I did it again' (32, F, episodic volunteer).

Finally, a key motivator for sustained episodic engagement is the emerging awareness that temporal limitations do not diminish the significance or territorial impact of the volunteers' contribution. This is centred on the perceived *impact of small gestures*. As one participant reports: 'Surely the fact that I think every single resource a person possesses, so in reality that a society possesses, can make a difference, so even in the small, saying "I am available only that day a year", it is still one more day. So even that difference that can be made, it is made' (49, F, episodic volunteer).

3.2.4 | Growing Ethically in the Digital Dimension

For digital volunteers, commitment is sustained by a combination of opportunities for personal and professional *growth* and value-based motivations (i.e., *ethical pillar*). Furthermore, participants identify *strategic choice* as a fundamental dimension for maintaining their engagement. Overall, these dimensions suggest that digital volunteering reflects a hybrid mix shaped by a forward-looking orientation.

The theme of *growth* is central, specifically referring to technical professional skills and human skills gained through interaction with beneficiaries reflecting a factor that stands between *enhancement* and *understanding* dimensions of VFI (Clary et al. 1998). Multiple participants report this aspect: "I continue to also have personal and professional growth, both from a human point of view but also technical skills" (54, M, digital

volunteer); 'With digital volunteering a world truly opened up for me, because not only, let us say, did I learn something even more about my trade but I put many things into practice. So I grew not only at a professional level, but especially at a personal level' (57, F, digital volunteer).

Similar to the initial motivations, the *ethical pillar* subtheme continues to drive digital engagement and corresponds to the *values* dimension in VFI (Clary et al. 1998). The capacity of technological tools to transcend physical boundaries allows for a more accessible form of altruism: 'Let us say I am interested in the fact that they are collaborative projects they are free projects they are projects that allow let us say access to information without barriers' (60, F, digital volunteer).

Finally, the sustained commitment of digital volunteers is primarily shaped by practical factors that underline the motivation of *strategic choice*. Digital engagement facilitates greater autonomy and self-management, allowing volunteers to calibrate their involvement according to their personal needs and professions rather than external organizational demands. A participant reports: 'While through digital content I managed, let us say, to also pace my time well, to organize myself better, thus also my hours, without putting aside let us say my social life, free time, friends, family (57, F, digital volunteer).

4 | Discussion

The present study examined the motivations driving individuals to initiate and sustain engagement across traditional, episodic, and digital volunteering. Our findings reveal a motivational landscape where the transition from initial to sustained commitment is marked by a shift from shared drivers to more specialized motivations, where VFI dimensions (Clary et al. 1998) only partially account for the motivational patterns observed across the specific forms of volunteering. Traditional and digital volunteers share an initial phase of interest in social change; though, over time, the former emphasize organizational belonging, while the latter prioritizes autonomy and growth. Episodic volunteers balance material benefits and community interest, reflecting a more 'individualized' commitment. This complexity is immediately apparent when crossing motivational trajectories with the sociodemographic profiles of our sample. In line with ISTAT data (2025), a clear generational divide emerges: episodic volunteers are generally younger and favour occasional, flexible engagement, consistent with prior literature highlighting the role of enjoyment, satisfaction, and flexibility in episodic participation (Hyde et al. 2014; Meneghini et al. 2016), whereas older volunteers (45–64) tend to prefer structured forms of volunteering, motivated by continuous commitment to a specific cause and opportunities for personal and professional development, as widely documented in traditional volunteering research (Omoto et al. 2000).

The initial motivations of volunteering confirm the relevance of the functionalist approach (Omoto and Snyder 1995). Four out of the six VFI dimensions (Clary et al. 1998)—*values*, *understanding*, *enhancement*, and *protective*—are shared across all three forms in line with previous literature (Francis and Jones 2012; Okun and Schultz 2003). Notably, contrary to the

findings of Chacón et al. (2017), the *protective* function emerged as a significant driver regardless of the volunteering form, indicating that the need to alleviate negative feelings remains a universal gateway to prosocial action. Overall, our findings show that these functions do not fully capture contemporary drivers. Specifically, *life circumstances* emerged as a common factor for initiation. This is consistent with evidence that open-ended approaches often capture facilitating life conditions, which remain excluded from structured tools such as the VFI, as they cannot be properly conceptualized as motivations per se (Vecina and Marzana 2019).

Beyond these common roots, distinct initial drivers emerge across different forms. While traditional volunteers are driven by *activation for social change* where they react to injustices observed in the socio-political and institutional context, they also uniquely highlight a *community focus* which evokes the concept of 'community concern' (Vecina and Marzana 2019), reflecting a commitment to supporting specific local communities. Interestingly, episodic volunteers share this community concern but pair it with a more pragmatic blend of experiential *gratification*—akin to the 'enjoyment' dimension proposed by Vecina and Marzana (2019)—and practical considerations such as time management and material benefits (Dunn et al. 2016). Digital volunteers bypass localized community concerns altogether, exhibiting an affective motivation driven by *indignation* toward social injustices. This aligns with research on 'net-activists' (Fondazione Terzjusz ETS 2025), which shows that digital activists are driven by ethical impulses, a sense of justice, indignation toward social inequality, and responsiveness to current issues where the digital medium amplifies and accelerates emotional reactions.

As engagement transitions into sustained volunteerism, *experiential gratification* remains the primary driver of retention across all groups, highlighting the central role of enjoyment and positive experiences across volunteering forms. However, sociodemographic characteristics of our sample should be considered when interpreting patterns of continued engagement. Differences emerge both in seniority and in fields of activity: traditional volunteers are primarily engaged in healthcare and social support sectors and report higher average years of volunteering experience, whereas episodic and digital volunteers engage more dynamically in event-based and online initiatives and show comparatively lower time investment. These differences are also reflected in the diversity of motivations sustaining engagement across forms and should be considered in their interpretation (Alam and Campbell 2017; Hyde et al. 2014; Kulik 2021).

For traditional volunteers, long-term commitment remains anchored to institutional and collective stability; the *ethical pillar* (values in VFI; Clary et al. 1998) and the *exercise of existing and new skills* (understanding in VFI; Clary et al. 1998) remain stable drivers over time (Chacón et al. 2017), while retention is heavily mediated by the *organizational experience*, where a sense of belonging becomes central. This aligns with the 'organizational commitment' driver proposed by Chacón et al. (2010), reinforcing the idea that such commitment encompasses both institutional bonds and group identification. Moreover, a shift from *activation* to *promotion of social change* emerges, resembling

'transformative volunteering', where volunteer activity is understood as a vehicle for systemic change and social impact (Ortega Carpio et al. 2017).

Conversely, newer forms of volunteering sustain retention by accommodating practical needs rather than fostering institutional ties. Episodic volunteers sustain their commitment through a balance between *self-serving* motivation (resembling the *enhancement* and *protective* dimensions of the VFI; Clary et al. 1998) and the structural possibility of alternating periods of engagement and rest. At the same time, by witnessing the tangible impact of their actions on local heritage, they develop an awareness that even temporary contributions can significantly support local development—a pattern particularly evident in our sample of event volunteers and consistent with evidence from sport event volunteering (Lachance et al. 2022). On the other hand, digital volunteers present multifaceted motivational factors. They are sustained by both *growth* and an *ethical pillar*, which aligns with current literature demonstrating that the *understanding* and *values* functions of the VFI (Clary et al. 1998) are key drivers in digital volunteering (Cox et al. 2018; Wittenberg et al. 2024). Interestingly, the *ethical pillar* factor proposed by digital volunteers can be associated with 'connective action' (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), referring to individuals' capacity to align with social causes and contribute to collective goals beyond organizational boundaries through digital tools. At the same time, digital volunteers stressed that their long-term commitment is also shaped by a *strategic choice* in terms of self-management and continuity with their career, highlighting their need to go beyond institutional ties and demands. This reflects the emerging concept of 'occupation-related volunteering', which enables individuals to apply professional expertise in diverse volunteering contexts while bridging career development and civic engagement (Biermann et al. 2024). The association of episodic and digital volunteering with self-focused motivations such as 'personal gains' and 'strategic choice' raises questions about their social legitimacy. Following (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003; Hustinx 2010), this reflects a reconfiguration of solidarity rather than reduced social value. The legitimacy of these contemporary forms should be evaluated based on tangible social impact and the broader action they generate. Acknowledging the pragmatic needs of contemporary volunteers is essential for organizations to remain relevant and to foster an inclusive definition of civic engagement.

This study presents some limitations. First, digital volunteers are underrepresented within the sample. This imbalance is partly due to the relative novelty of digital volunteering, which poses challenges in identifying and recruiting participants engaged in such form. Second, the analysis focused on individual-level motivations without incorporating the organizational or relational dynamics that may also shape volunteer commitment (Mannarini et al. 2018). A further limitation concerns the fluidity of participants' previous experiences. Despite efforts to categorize participants into a single volunteering form, several participants reported prior experience in traditional volunteering. While the focus group moderator instructed these participants to reflect exclusively on their current roles, such backgrounds, combined with the lack of a strict operational definition for 'permanence' or 'continuity' among episodic volunteers, may have subtly influenced their perceptions and observations. The

prevalence of diverse past experiences suggests that future research should adopt longitudinal perspectives to examine the evolving nature of volunteering careers and the hybridization of volunteering experiences.

5 | Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the need to move beyond a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to volunteerism. Theoretically, while the VFI (Clary et al. 1998) remains a cornerstone, it should be expanded to include emotional and pragmatic drivers of emerging forms to better theorize the transition from initial to sustained commitment. On a practical level, organizations should tailor recruitment by leveraging shared values while differentiating the 'call to action': emphasizing concrete social intervention for traditional volunteers, emotional appeals for digital volunteers, and flexibility or gratification for episodic participants. Regarding retention, traditional volunteers require strong organizational identification and recognition of social impact, whereas episodic volunteers are sustained by flexibility and feedback on the value of 'small gestures'. For digital volunteers, retention is best achieved by highlighting personal and professional growth and maintaining an autonomous, non-vertical management style. Ultimately, recognizing these specificities allows for reflexive management practices aligned with the individualized and fluid nature of contemporary civic engagement.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ For each quotation, the information in parentheses indicates, in order, the participant's reference number within the focus group, their gender, and the specific type of volunteering in which they are involved.

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