



Leveraging the Olympic volunteer legacy: From perceived benefits to sustained volunteer behavior

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Host cities have shown the intention of using the Olympic Games as a leverageable resource in achieving sustained volunteering among Olympic volunteers. I examined the relationship between the perceived benefits of Olympic volunteering and sustained volunteer behavior years after the megaevent. Participants were 353 volunteers who had been involved with the Beijing 2008, Singapore 2010, or Nanjing 2014 Games. The results of an online survey reveal that perceived benefits directly influenced sustained volunteering. A critical relationship between the development of volunteers' role identity and volunteering afterwards was confirmed. Perceived benefits were positively associated with role identity and, thus, indirectly promoted sustained volunteering behavior. Hence, perceived benefits arising from Olympic volunteering are the key to volunteer identity and sustained volunteering. For future practice, significant efforts are needed in the development of perceived benefits and role identity as a volunteer via individuals' experience of volunteering at sporting megaevents.

Keywords

Olympic Games
volunteer; Olympic
Games; perceived benefit;
role identity; sustained
volunteer behavior;
volunteering; sporting
megaevent

Article Highlights

- Perceived benefits arising from acting as a volunteer at the Olympic Games were found to be positively associated with role identity and sustained volunteer participation.
- Role identity as a volunteer mediated the relationship between perceived benefits from Olympic volunteering and sustained volunteer behavior afterwards.
- Results reveal the potential for transferring an episodic Olympic volunteer workforce to other voluntary activities/organizations and achieving increased volunteering.

Organizers of sporting events, in particular sporting megaevents, rely on the support of thousands of volunteers, who become essential stakeholders in the delivery of a successful event. Additionally, volunteering is a practical approach in allowing the general public to experience the sporting megaevent firsthand. Host cities of recent Olympic Games—including but not limited to Beijing and London—have declared a commitment to create a volunteer legacy by leveraging the event as an opportunity to benefit individual volunteers, generate further voluntary intention, and promote sustained volunteer behavior (Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, 2010; London Organizing

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Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, 2013). Therefore, sporting megaevents with a short duration are thought to be vital in benefiting society at the host location, voluntary organizations, the volunteer workforce, and also in maintaining the volunteer group far beyond the event itself (Doherty & Patil, 2019; Jiang et al., 2017; Rogerson et al., 2021). Notwithstanding these claims, in the literature to date limited knowledge has been obtained about the realization of the anticipated Olympic legacy in the years after staging the event (Doherty & Patil, 2019; Neufeind et al., 2013).

Volunteering at sporting megaevents tends to be an episodic, one-time, or short-term commitment, differing from regular volunteers for nonprofit organizations with a long commitment (Bang, 2009; Cnaan et al., 2021; Hustinx et al., 2008). Episodic volunteers may repeat volunteering for the same or other agencies (Cnaan et al., 2021). Hence, as highlighted by some researchers (Doherty & Patil, 2019; Koutrou et al., 2016), engaging in volunteer activities in the community where the event was hosted after its conclusion is considered a central measure of a *volunteer legacy*, either in terms of volunteering in a broader context (e.g., educational, hospital, environment, museum settings) or in the context of producing more volunteering hours. However, despite recent progress in exploring the intention of volunteering in the future, few studies have been conducted to examine the actual behavior of volunteering converted from voluntary intention. In addition, Doherty and Patil (2019) found that those studies that have been conducted have provided mixed results. Among others, Koutrou et al. (2016) surveyed 77 volunteers approximately 4 years after the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games and found an inspiration effect had been created toward future volunteering. By contrast, Fairley et al. (2007) observed that retaining event volunteers is challenging for organizers. Downward and Ralston (2006) indicated that the experience of being a Commonwealth Games volunteer might weaken volunteer involvement in the area of sport 1 year after the event. A paucity of research effort has been directed to further clarify which factors influence sustained volunteering behavior among volunteers for sporting megaevents, including the Olympic Games, although this information is pivotal to informing the legacy plan for future events (Bang, 2009).

Hyde et al. (2016) indicated that novice episodic volunteers at a sporting event had the potential to continue volunteering, and, as a result, volunteering could become a more sustained activity for them. Previous studies have suggested that volunteers' perceived benefit and role identity may develop following an event experience and can be an impetus for a volunteer career (Doherty, 2009; Fairley et al., 2014; van Ingen & Wilson, 2017). In their research on the XXVI Summer Universiade, Jiang et al. (2017) pointed out that, to some extent, it is the perception of volunteers about their past experiences that plays a role in explaining volunteering in the postevent period. As noted in previous studies, people are more likely to volunteer again if they perceive their previous volunteer experience as having had favorable benefits (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Omoto & Snyder, 1995). Nevertheless, it is not clear from the current available research how impactful the benefits acquired from short-term volunteer experience are in influencing future volunteering over a longer period.

Moreover, identity theory (Callero, 1985; Stryker, 1980) influences the concept of *role identity*, whereby prolonged engagement in a particular role encourages its incorporation into one's identity. It is of interest to researchers to understand how role identity as a volunteer affects the individual's subsequent volunteering and the psychological consequences that might develop from the stimulus of previous volunteer experiences (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; van Ingen & Wilson, 2017). Therefore, in this study, my aim was to discover more about the mechanism that links perceived benefits stemming from Olympic volunteering and subsequent sustained volunteer behavior, as mediated by role identity. Giannoulakis et al. (2015) suggested that for the management of sporting volunteers to be successful, the volunteers must be retained from year to year and feedback must be gained with respect to their experience. Because experienced volunteers are well-trained and have obtained skills and knowledge through their episodic event volunteer experiences, they are encouraged to continue volunteering, as this has added benefits for urban community development, which is an area to which sporting megaevents are expected to contribute (Green & Chalip, 2004; Shipway et al., 2020). Therefore, the findings of this study have both theoretical and managerial implications.



Perceived Benefits of Previous Volunteer Experience and Sustained Volunteer Behavior

The *perceived benefits of volunteering* are those obtained and seen by individuals as relevant from their previous volunteer experiences (Hallmann & Zehrer, 2019). Empirical work has identified a range of common and key benefits that individuals perceive from volunteering at different sporting events, including skill enrichment, social enrichment, and positive life experience (Doherty, 2009). Furthermore, Nichols and Ralston (2012) reported that volunteers continued to perceive the benefits from volunteering even 7 years after their experience at the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games. Hoff and Leopkey's (2021) study, which they conducted 22 years after the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games using archival materials and interviews, further supported the idea that the perceived benefits could be durable.

Researchers have suggested that volunteering offers various benefits that might promote engagement in subsequent volunteer activities (Koutrou et al., 2016; Nichols & Ralston, 2012). Several studies, in particular those in which a qualitative approach has been used, have demonstrated that individuals continue to volunteer if the previous volunteer experience as a whole was perceived to be beneficial (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Omoto & Snyder, 1995). Chinman and Wandersman (1999) suggested assessing the relationship between volunteers' perception of benefit and sustained volunteer behavior. A study by Doherty (2009), which was based on social exchange theory and experienced functional benefits in particular, revealed that in regard to volunteering at the 2001 Canada Summer Games, future volunteering intention was, to some extent, influenced by the perceived benefits from doing so. In general, research has shown that perceived benefits from event volunteering may provide the impetus for sustained volunteer behavior after the event. Thus, the first hypothesis was as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The perceived benefits of Olympic volunteering will positively influence individuals' sustained volunteer behavior.

Role Identity as a Volunteer and Volunteering

To understand subsequent volunteering and the psychological consequences of previous volunteer experiences, it is important to consider the concept of role identity (van Ingen & Wilson, 2017). Similarly, Penner (2002) indicated that when individuals have a high level of involvement as a volunteer, they develop a strong role identity, which is thought to be the direct cause of sustained volunteering. Finkelstein (2008) believed role identity drives behavior, exerting a direct causal effect on future volunteering. Researchers have suggested that the more salient the role identity, the more likely it is that individuals will behave consistently within that identity; in the case of this study, that means it is more likely they will sustain volunteer behavior (Dávila & Finkelstein, 2010). Once a volunteer role identity has formed, factors such as motivation become unimportant in sustaining volunteerism (Finkelstein, 2008). Particularly with regard to sporting events, Kristiansen et al. (2015) concluded that sustained volunteer behavior at a repeated annual event continued because of (role) identity. Thus, the second hypothesis was as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Role identity as a volunteer will positively influence individuals' sustained volunteer behavior.

Perceived Benefits and Role Identity

In addition, taking up a role such as volunteering at the Olympic Games may impel individuals to internalize the activity into their self-concept and, consequently, to form or develop a role identity as a volunteer (Fairley et al., 2016). Hence, the measurement of role identity can be made in terms of the degree of a merger of identity into a particular role (Grube & Piliavin, 2000). In their explanations of the variation and strength in volunteer role identity, most scholars have focused on the benefits of performing the role (Marta et al., 2014). As an example, Nichols and Ralston (2016) pointed out that a positive experience of relational and ideological rewards of volunteering at sporting events contributes to the development of a positive and valued self-image and self-identity as a volunteer. Fairley et al. (2014) demonstrated the existence of a

sustained volunteer role identity 12 years after the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, and found that volunteers still perceived benefits from their Olympic volunteer experience. Hence, previous experience with and benefits from event volunteering lead to role identity as a volunteer.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived benefits of Olympic volunteering will positively influence individuals' role identity as a volunteer.

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study is part of a larger research project to explore the volunteer legacy of the Olympic Games. Ethical approval for the study was secured by the author through the Research Ethics Board of Vrije Universiteit Brussel. I collected quantitative data via the Qualtrics online survey tool. Data collection took place between May and August 2018. Considering the specific international character of the selected Olympic and Youth Olympic Games, the survey was available in both the English language and in Chinese. The Chinese version of the survey was translated by two native Chinese speakers, using the back-translation process as described by Martin et al. (2007). I identified and contacted key people who were involved with organizing the Olympic volunteer program to invite volunteers in their network to complete the online survey. Thus, snowball sampling was used to recruit 353 participants, including 158 volunteers from the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, 58 from the 2010 Singapore Youth Olympic Games, and 137 from the 2014 Nanjing Youth Olympic Games. Among the respondents there were 172 women and 172 men (both comprising 48.7% of the sample) and nine (2.5%) who did not state their gender. The mean age of respondents at the time of completing the survey was 29.18 years ($SD = 6.76$, range = 22–47 years). Education levels comprised secondary school education ($n = 19$, 5.4%), undergraduate degree ($n = 196$, 55.5%), and graduate degree ($n = 138$, 39.1%). At the time of data collection, 265 of the respondents (75.1%) were in paid employment. In regard to marital status, 122 (34.6%) were married and 231 (65.4%) were not married.

After collecting the data, I performed confirmatory factor analysis to assess the construct validity and reliability of the scales in this study. I used structural equation modelling to test the relationship between perceived benefits and sustained volunteering, mediated by role identity as a volunteer. All analyses were implemented in *R* statistical software (Version 3.6.0), using the lavaan package (Version 0.6-4). The default settings of the lavaan package were employed to test the proposed theoretical model, for example, maximum likelihood estimation, and an alpha level of .05 was set for all statistical tests.

All measures in the survey were adapted from validated scales, and individual items were modified to suit the context of the Olympic Games (see Table 1). Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Study Constructs**

| Constructs and items | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Standardized loading | CR |
|---|----------|-----------|----------------------|------------|
| Perceived benefits | | | | |
| Skill enrichment (SKE) | | | | .87 |
| SKE1: My skills were needed. | 4.28 | 0.82 | .746 | |
| SKE2: I was able to use my knowledge or expertise. | 4.40 | 0.79 | .808 | |
| SKE3: I acquired or developed new skills. | 4.35 | 0.82 | .802 | |
| SKE4: I gained some practical experience. | 4.42 | 0.81 | .830 | |
| Social enrichment (SE) | | | | .83 |
| SE1: I interacted with other volunteers. | 4.56 | 0.65 | .759 | |
| SE2: I made new friends. | 4.59 | 0.64 | .775 | |
| SE3: I worked with different people. | 4.64 | 0.61 | .809 | |
| Positive life experience (PL) | | | | .70 |
| PL1: I developed greater understanding or appreciation of sports. | 4.28 | 0.81 | .508 | |
| PL2: I did something different, varied my regular activities. | 4.53 | 0.72 | .775 | |
| PL3: I broadened my horizons. | 4.67 | 0.55 | .831 | |
| Role identity (RI) | | | | .78 |
| RI1: Volunteering is something I rarely even think about. (R) | 3.99 | 1.00 | .625 | |
| RI2: I would feel a loss if I were forced to give up volunteering. | 3.83 | 1.09 | .520 | |
| RI3: I really don't have any clear feelings about volunteering. (R) | 4.13 | 0.95 | .668 | |
| RI4: For me being a volunteer means more than just to do volunteering. | 4.27 | 0.82 | .656 | |
| RI5: Volunteering is an important part of who I am. | 4.08 | 0.91 | .808 | |
| Sustained volunteer behavior (VB) | | | | .85 |
| VB1: I have volunteered in a wider range of activities/organizations since experiencing the OG. | 3.91 | 1.06 | .804 | |
| VB 2: I have done more hours as a volunteer since experiencing the OG. | 3.61 | 1.13 | .877 | |
| VB 3: I have done more hours as a sport volunteer since experiencing the OG. | 3.52 | 1.11 | .735 | |
| VB 4: I have volunteered at other major sport event(s) after experiencing the OG. | 3.20 | 1.37 | .665 | |

Note. (R) = reverse-scored items; OG = Olympic Games (Beijing 2008, Singapore 2010, or Nanjing 2014); CR = composite reliability.

Measures

Perceived Benefits of Olympic Volunteering

I used Doherty's (2009) adaption of Farrell et al.'s (1998) Sport Event Volunteer Motivation Scale, which has also been adopted in many Olympic volunteer studies (e.g., Darcy et al., 2014; Dickson et al., 2017). The scale is composed of 10 items divided across three dimensions: skills enrichment, social enrichment, and positive life experience (see Table 1).

Role Identity as a Volunteer

I measured this construct with a scale designed by Grube and Piliavin (2000), which was an adaptation of the five-item scale developed by Callero (1985) to assess blood donors' role identity. This volunteer role identity scale has been used a number of times (e.g., Chacón et al., 2007; van Ingen & Wilson, 2017) in volunteer role identity studies, and has an internal reliability index (Cronbach's α) of between .77 and .81 (e.g., Chacón et al., 2007; Grube & Piliavin, 2000). Items are set out in Table 1.

Sustained Volunteer Behavior

To operationalize sustained volunteer behavior, I adopted the measure used by Ang Ser Hui et al. (2016) and Schnitzer (2015), which has been applied twice to local young citizens. Sustained volunteer behavior was measured through context and hours of volunteering, including four items: two about context and two about hours of volunteering (see Table 1).

Results

Measurement Model

To assess the underlying structure of all measured constructs, I calculated descriptive statistics and performed a confirmatory factor analysis (see Table 1), chi square (χ^2) = 414.43, degrees of freedom (df) = 142, $p < .001$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .92, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .91, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .05. All factor loadings exceeded the recommended minimum acceptable level. Moreover, using Cronbach's alpha, I examined composite reliability, which ranged from .70 to .87. The results surpassed the recommended threshold of .70, revealing high internal consistency. Table 2 shows the correlations of the three study constructs.

Table 2. *Correlation Analysis Results for Study Constructs*

| Constructs | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|------|
| 1. Perceived benefits | 1.00 | | |
| 2. Role identity | .57** | 1.00 | |
| 3. Sustained volunteer behavior | .47** | .66** | 1.00 |

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Structural Equation Modeling

To assess the mechanism of how the perceived benefits were associated with sustained volunteer behavior and the mediating role of role identity as a volunteer, I applied structural equation modeling to analyze the theoretical model. The model showed an acceptable fit to the data according to the following goodness-of-fit diagnostics: $\chi^2 = 426.74$, $df = 146$, $p < .001$, TLI = .91, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .05.

The tested hypotheses, standardized path estimates and significance levels, and variance explained (R^2) for each path are summarized in Figure 1. In Hypothesis 1 it was postulated that there would be a positive relationship between perceived benefits and sustained volunteering in the postevent period. The results indicate that sustained volunteering was positively associated with perceived benefits. Role identity had a positive and considerable direct effect on sustained volunteering ($\beta = .57$, $p < .001$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2. Perceived benefits were positively associated with role identity as a volunteer, accounting for more than one-third of the variance ($R^2 = .32$) in volunteer role identity, thus supporting Hypothesis 3. There was a significant positive mediating role of role identity as a volunteer between perceived benefits and sustained volunteer behavior, explaining 68.08% of the variance in sustained volunteering. Specifically, for every unit increase in association between perceived benefits and role identity, there was a .32 ($.57 \times .57$) increase in sustained volunteer behavior. Together, around 44% ($R^2 = .44$) of the total variance in sustained volunteer behavior was explained according to the proposed model.

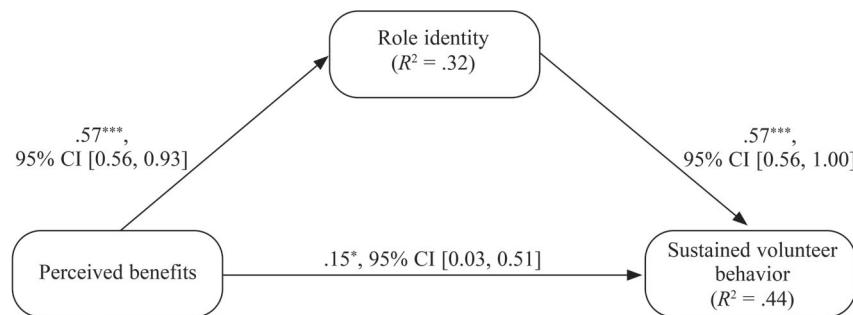


Figure 1. *Standardized Coefficients of the Structural Equation Model*

Note. R^2 = coefficient of determination (variance explained); CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

This study elucidated the relationships of perceived benefits, role identity as a volunteer, and sustained volunteer behavior years after the conclusion of a sporting megaevent. The results of structural equation modeling analysis uncovered a significant relationship between perceived benefits and sustained volunteering after the staging of the event. This is consistent with assumption in some previous studies (e.g., Doherty, 2009). In particular, in their qualitative studies, Nichols and Ralston (2012) and Wang et al. (2020) directly connected positive benefits arising from previous volunteer experience with subsequent volunteer behavior based on the rational proposition of social exchange theory. This process can be explained by the proposition of Homans (1974) that when individuals are choosing between alternative actions, they will choose the one that provides them with the greatest benefit. Thus, people engage in or refrain from engaging in a particular behavior in terms of receiving a favorable benefit from that behavior. When the anticipated benefits decrease, people are more likely to decide against the behavior, or even to withdraw from some activity (e.g., volunteering). This goes against the suggestion by Girginov (2018) that the one-off intervention of a sporting event is not sufficient to create a long-term impact in terms of positive behavior change. This phenomenon might be explained by the fact that volunteers at the Olympic Games have more and closer chances to engage in the backstage organization of the Games compared to, for example, the spectators' participation in the events (attending the stadiums to see the competitions, meeting their favorite athletes).

Furthermore, my results show that role identity as a volunteer is vital in predicting sustained volunteer behavior directly and positively both in a wider volunteer context and in regard to more volunteer hours, and, further, that perceived benefits stemming from the Olympic volunteer experience are identified as positively influencing role identity. Consistent with previous studies regarding volunteering in a context other than sport (Penner, 2002; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998), the results suggest that individuals are more likely to sustain their volunteer behavior when role identity as a volunteer is stronger, compared with when it is weaker. In addition, as indicated by Grube and Piliavin (2000) and Penner (2002), role identity can be developed if an individual volunteers for an event that is perceived as being of significance and importance in the society as a whole, such as the Olympic Games. My findings further support the idea that benefits perceived from Olympic volunteering, that is, gaining practical experience, acquiring or developing new skills, and using the knowledge or experience gained from Olympic volunteering, are critical in forming volunteer role identity and, therefore, are indirectly related to sustained volunteer behavior. Therefore, in my study a clear Olympic volunteering → perceived benefits → role identity → sustained volunteer behavior chain was confirmed, with direct and indirect effects.

By studying the link between previous Olympic volunteer experience and the volunteer behavior afterwards, I identified several practical implications for leveraging a volunteer legacy. My results reveal the potential for transferring an episodic Olympic volunteer workforce to other voluntary activities/organizations and a higher level of volunteering. More significant efforts are needed for future practice in the development of role identity and perceived benefits via the voluntary experience at sport megaevents.

I found that role identity as a volunteer was related to sustained volunteer behavior in the postevent period. Thus, I encourage event organizers to implement strategies for facilitating the cultivation of role identity as a volunteer, in particular when the sport megaevent attracts a lot of young people to engage in volunteering for the first time. Giving volunteers a particular name or a label could help them to recognize and distinguish themselves from other people, thus developing the role identity of a volunteer. After the event is staged, the volunteer identity could be further enhanced by providing recognition for the volunteering they have engaged in, opportunities to share their event volunteer experience with others, and also opportunities to continue performing the role of a volunteer. Moreover, I suggest that volunteers with skills are best utilized by, for example, providing them with opportunities to apply the knowledge or expertise they have acquired, develop new skills, and gain practical experience.

Some limitations must be highlighted. First, I ran multigroup structural equation modeling to examine whether there were significant differences across three events in two countries where the event had taken place 4, 8, and 10 years ago, respectively. However, the proposed models were a poor fit to the data among the three groups. It appeared that a small sample size was partially to blame, for example, there were only 58 respondents who had been volunteers for Singapore 2010. Second, it is important to be aware that the primary limitation of a cross-sectional study design is that a direct, causal link cannot be established between perceived benefits and behavior change (Carlson & Morrison, 2009). Third, in this study only the individual psychological perspective was taken into consideration, connecting previous volunteering at the Olympic and Youth Olympic Games with volunteering postevent. Penner (2004) suggested that “a full understanding of sustained volunteering requires consideration of situational, dispositional, and structural variables and must have a temporal and dynamic component as well” (p. 648). Volunteering is a multilevel phenomenon (Hustinx et al., 2010); thus, sustained volunteering also calls for multiple perspectives.

In recognition of these limitations, further studies are needed to uncover the full picture of volunteer behavior postevent. Determinants of sustained volunteer behavior that could be considered in future studies include collective benefits, social support, volunteer opportunities, life course of the volunteers (e.g., income, marital status), the context of different events, and previous volunteer experience.

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