

## The relationship between college students' voluntary participation motivation and social responsibility

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We explored the relationship between college students' voluntary participation motivation and social responsibility, and the mediating roles of volunteer service participation and self-worth. We tested 644 college students using the Volunteer Participation Motivation Scale, the Volunteer Service Participation Scale, the Self-Worth Scale, and the Social Responsibility Scale. The results showed that there was a significant direct predictive effect of volunteer participation motivation on sense of social responsibility. Further, volunteer service participation played a mediating role between the volunteer participation motivation and social responsibility of college students. Sense of self-worth also had a mediating effect on the link between volunteer participation motivation and social responsibility, although the chain mediating effect of volunteer service participation and sense of self-worth on the link between volunteer participation and sense of self-worth was not significant. Thus, motivation for volunteering not only directly predicted students' sense of social responsibility, but also indirectly predicted their sense of social responsibility by predicting the frequency of their volunteering participation and self-worth.

### Keywords

volunteer participation  
motivation, voluntary  
service, sense of self-worth,  
social responsibility

### Article Highlights

- Volunteer participation motivation had a direct predictive effect on college students' sense of social responsibility.
- Volunteer service participation played a mediating role between volunteer participation motivation and social responsibility.
- Sense of self-worth had a mediating effect on the link between volunteer participation motivation and social responsibility.
- The chain mediating effect of volunteer service participation and sense of self-worth on the link between volunteer participation and sense of self-worth was not significant.

*Voluntary service* refers to when individuals voluntarily devote their intelligence, time, energy, and physical strength to social development without receiving any remuneration (D. Sun, 2023). Volunteer service is an important symbol of social civilization and progress and an important channel for volunteers to contribute their own social value (Tong, 2018). Nowadays, many Chinese colleges and universities regard volunteer service as an important way of reinforcing ideological and political education for college students, and cultivating their sense of social responsibility through volunteer activities (Chen et al., 2023). A *sense of social responsibility* refers to when an individual actively assumes

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social responsibility or helps others, and pursues goals that are conducive to social development and people's happiness (Cui et al., 2023; Q. Zhang & Yin, 2023). College students' participation in various volunteer services can not only improve their social abilities, but also help them pay attention to and understand society, thus enhancing their social responsibility (L. Wang, 2022; R. Wang, 2021). In addition, *volunteer motivation*, which refers to the drive generated by volunteers based on the need for volunteer service (Chacón et al., 2007), may be an important factor affecting college students' social responsibility. Self-determination theory emphasizes the driving effect of an individual's internal motivation on their behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2002). College students' positive social motivation to participate in volunteer activities has been found to be closely related to their individual sense of social responsibility (Meng & Xu, 2022; Oh et al., 2023). Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Volunteer service participation motivation will significantly and positively predict college students' sense of social responsibility.

According to the theory of planned behavior, individual behavioral decision making is influenced by individual behavioral beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Individual voluntary motivation drives individuals to produce more voluntary behaviors (Cornelis et al., 2013; Flannery, 2017; Wei & Hao, 2022). Regardless of the type of service, college students experience a significant increase in their sense of social responsibility after volunteering, and the longer students participate in volunteer service and the richer their service experience, the more beneficial it is to shape their sense of social responsibility (X. Liu & Wei, 2016). In other words, the predictive effect of individual volunteer motivation on social responsibility may be realized through the intermediary role of volunteer service participation. Therefore, we anticipated that the motivation for volunteering may predict individuals' sense of social responsibility through their participation in volunteering. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Volunteer service participation will play a mediating role in the relationship between college students' volunteer service motivation and social responsibility.

*Sense of self-worth* refers to the positive emotional experience generated when an individual values themselves, feels that their talent and personality are valued by society, enjoys a certain status and reputation in the group, and has a good social evaluation (X. T. Huang & Yang, 1998). Scholars have found that the motivation for volunteering is related to the expression of an individual's self-worth (S. Zhang et al., 2022), and the motivation of volunteers to participate in volunteering is largely to express themselves or realize their own value (G. Huang et al., 2023). Volunteering motivation acts as a kind of prosocial motivation because it can help individuals realize their own value in the performance of prosocial behavior and thus enhance their sense of self-worth (Klein, 2017). Individuals with a higher sense of self-worth may be more likely to have a higher sense of social responsibility. When individuals carry out responsible behaviors and consider themselves capable and worthy, they assume more social responsibilities (Ağbuğa, 2014; Shen & Li, 2020; H. Sun et al., 2018). This means that feelings of self-worth may predict an individual's sense of social responsibility. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** Self-worth will mediate the relationship between college students' volunteering motivation and social responsibility.

According to motivational drive theory (Solms, 2021), individual motivation induces behavior and behavior affects individual social emotion (X. Liu & Wei, 2016). Volunteer service motivation induces individual volunteer service behavior, and volunteer service behavior affects individual emotional experience (Y. Liu, 2021). On the one hand, individuals receive support and positive evaluation from others during their participation in volunteer activities, which enhances both their confidence in completing volunteer activities and their positive self-cognition (Su et al., 2022). On the other hand, the accumulation of individual experience in volunteer service participation helps college students build positive self-cognition and enhances their self-recognition (Peng, 2022). A positive self-cognition pattern is conducive to improving an individual's sense of social responsibility (Ağbuğa, 2014; Shen & Li, 2020). Therefore, individuals' voluntary service motivation may enhance their sense of self-worth and establish a sense of social responsibility by inducing voluntary service participation. As such, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4:** Volunteer service participation and sense of self-worth will play a chain mediating role in the relationship between college students' volunteer service motivation and social responsibility.



## Method

### Participants and Procedure

We recruited college students from a university in Shaanxi, China. Teachers at this university distributed 1,012 questionnaires through their online homework platform during class time. All students signed an informed consent form before completing the questionnaire, and they received course credit for classroom practice. We excluded participants with short response times (< 180 seconds). There were 644 valid questionnaires, of which 134 were from men (21%) and 510 were from women (79%). The mean age was 20.40 years ( $SD = 1.39$ ).

### Measures

#### **Volunteer Service Motivation Scale**

We adopted the Chinese version (J. Zhang, 2022) of the Volunteer Service Motivation Scale compiled by Clary et al. (1998). The scale contains 30 items divided across six dimensions: value expression (seven items, e.g., “Volunteering is a valuable activity for me”), learning and understanding (five items, e.g., “I can learn to get along with others and enhance my interpersonal skills”), social communication (five items, e.g., “People around me want me to be a volunteer”), career (five items, e.g., “Volunteering can help me get a successful job”), self-protection (five items, e.g., “By volunteering, I rarely feel lonely”), and self-improvement (three items, e.g., “Volunteering makes me feel wanted”). Items were scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The total Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was .99, indicating the scale was reliable, and the scores for the six dimensions were as follows: .97, .93, .95, .94, .94, and .96.

#### **Volunteer Service Participation Scale**

We adopted the Volunteer Service Participation Scale compiled by Carlo et al. (2005), and asked English teachers and English major students to translate it into Chinese. It contains four items. Three items (e.g., “Are you currently volunteering?”) are dummy coded (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*), and responses to the remaining item (“Would you volunteer at the campus-based community service program if asked?”) are made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*definitely no*) to 4 (*definitely yes*). The higher the total score, the more frequent is the individual’s participation in volunteer activities.

#### **Self-Worth Scale**

We adopted the dimension of overall self-worth from the Self-Worth Scale compiled by X. T. Huang and Yang (1998). It contains six items, for example, “I am a man of value.” Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *completely inconsistent*, 5 = *completely consistent*); the higher the score, the higher the individual’s sense of self-worth. Cronbach’s alpha was .81, indicating the scale was reliable.

#### **Social Responsibility**

We adopted the Adolescent Students’ Responsibility Questionnaire (Cheng, 2002) to measure social responsibility. It consists of 23 items divided across five dimensions: collective responsibility (five items, e.g., “I can uphold the norms of the group”), family responsibility (four items, e.g., “I care about the health of my family”), peer responsibility (five items, e.g., “If a classmate has difficulties in their studies, I can take the initiative to help them”), moral responsibility (five items, e.g., “On the bus, I can offer my seat to an elderly man”), and social development responsibility (four items, e.g., “I care about China’s future development”). Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *completely inconsistent*, 5 = *completely consistent*). The higher the score, the higher the individual’s sense of social responsibility. Cronbach’s alpha was .93 for the whole scale, and the dimensions scored .91, .83, .85, .81, and .64, respectively, indicating the scale was reliable.



## Data Analysis

We used SPSS 24.0 to conduct a common method deviation test, along with descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis of the data. We used PROCESS Model 6 to test the mediating effect (Hayes, 2017).

## Results

### Common Method Bias Test

As students autonomously completed the questionnaires, common methodology bias may have occurred. We used Harman's single-factor test to check for common method bias. We found that 11 factors had an eigenvalue greater than 1, and the amount of variance explained by the first factor was 26.40%, which is less than the critical standard of 40%. This indicates that common method bias was not a significant concern in this study.

### Correlation Analysis

A correlation analysis showed that there were significant positive pairwise correlations between volunteering motivation, self-worth, and social responsibility, and that there were significant positive pairwise correlations between volunteering participation, volunteering motivation, and social responsibility, but there was no significant correlation between voluntary service participation and sense of self-worth. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Correlation Analysis of Study Variables**

|                                       | $M \pm SD$      | 1        | 2        | 3       | 4        | 5        | 6        | 7 |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|----------|----------|---------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| 1. Gender                             |                 | 1        |          |         |          |          |          |   |
| 2. Year                               |                 | .013     | 1        |         |          |          |          |   |
| 3. Age                                |                 | .182 *** | .666 *** | 1       |          |          |          |   |
| 4. Volunteer participation motivation | $5.75 \pm 0.93$ | .112 **  | .020     | .024    | 1        |          |          |   |
| 5. Volunteer service participation    | $7.48 \pm 1.27$ | .125 **  | .140 *** | .096 *  | .299 *** | 1        |          |   |
| 6. Sense of self-worth                | $4.10 \pm 0.66$ | .012     | .101 *   | .107 ** | .207 *** | .045     | 1        |   |
| 7. Social responsibility              | $4.12 \pm 0.48$ | .062     | .075     | .070    | .550 *** | .255 *** | .459 *** | 1 |

*Note.* Gender: 1 = man, 2 = woman; year: 1 = freshman, 2 = sophomore, 3 = junior, 4 = senior or above. Age was coded as a continuous variable.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### Mediating Effect Test

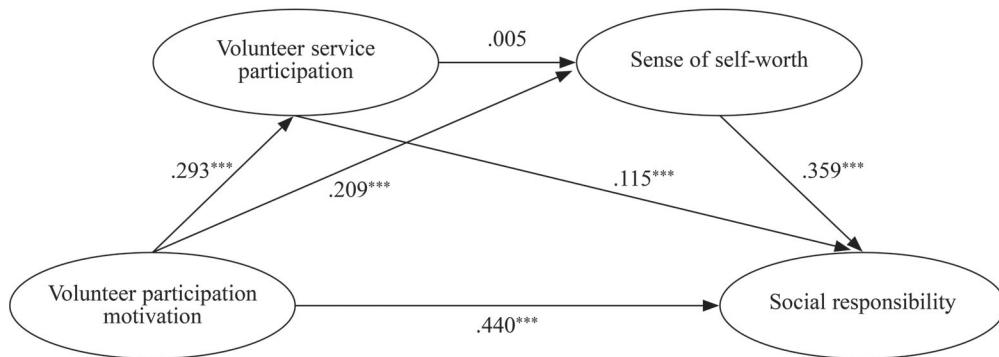
We adopted Model 6 of the SPSS PROCESS macro for the mediating test, and included the following variables in the model: volunteer motivation (independent variable), participation in volunteer service (mediating variable), sense of self-worth (mediating variable), and social responsibility (dependent variable), and we controlled for gender, year, and age. The results in Table 2 show that volunteer motivation significantly and positively predicted volunteer participation, self-worth, and social responsibility. Volunteer participation did not significantly predict sense of self-worth, but it did significantly predict sense of social responsibility. Finally, feelings of self-worth predicted social responsibility.

We used the bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples to further examine the mediating effects of volunteer participation and self-worth on the relationship between volunteer motivation and social responsibility. Figure 1 shows that two mediating paths were established: Volunteer participation had an intermediary effect between volunteer motivation and social responsibility, .034, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.013, 0.056]. Sense of self-worth had a mediating effect between volunteering motivation and social responsibility, .075, 95% CI [0.038, 0.012]. The chain mediating effect of volunteer service participation and sense of self-worth on the link between volunteer service motivation and social responsibility was not significant, 95% CI [-0.001, 0.009].

**Table 2. Analysis of Mediating Effect**

| Variable                           | Volunteer service participation |       |          | Sense of self-worth |       |          | Social responsibility |       |           |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|----------|---------------------|-------|----------|-----------------------|-------|-----------|
|                                    | $\beta$                         | SE    | <i>t</i> | $\beta$             | SE    | <i>t</i> | $\beta$               | SE    | <i>t</i>  |
| Volunteer participation motivation | .293                            | 0.038 | 7.814*** | .209                | 0.041 | 5.149*** | .440                  | 0.032 | 13.743*** |
| Volunteer service participation    |                                 |       |          | .005                | 0.041 | 0.118    | .115                  | 0.032 | 3.621**   |
| Sense of self-worth                |                                 |       |          |                     |       |          | .359                  | 0.031 | 11.733*** |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>              |                                 |       | .120     |                     |       | .056     |                       |       | .439      |
| <i>F</i>                           |                                 |       | 21.65*** |                     |       | 7.574*** |                       |       | 82.99***  |

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Figure 1. Mediating Model of Volunteer Motivation, Volunteer Participation, Sense of Self-Worth, and Social Responsibility**

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

## Discussion

We examined the relationship between college students' volunteering motivation and sense of social responsibility, as well as its specific mechanism. Our results provide a new perspective for the cultivation of volunteering activities in colleges and universities.

First, we found that volunteering motivation directly predicted college students' sense of social responsibility, thus supporting Hypothesis 1. Previous studies have shown that volunteering motivation can prompt individuals to produce more prosocial behaviors (Piatak, 2016) and enhance their sense of social responsibility in dedication (Oh et al., 2023). This means that good volunteering motivation is an important factor in enhancing individuals' sense of social responsibility. Second, we found that volunteering motivation not only directly predicted college students' sense of social responsibility, but also indirectly predicted their sense of social responsibility by predicting volunteer service participation and sense of self-worth, respectively. Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported. According to motivational drive theory (Solms, 2021), individual volunteering behavior is driven by volunteering motivation, and this positive behavior pattern cultivates individual social responsibility (X. Liu & Wei, 2016). As a kind of prosocial motivation, volunteer service motivation prompts individuals to engage in more prosocial behaviors, which help to establish an individual's sense of self-worth; this, in turn, leads to a stronger sense of social responsibility (Shen & Li, 2020; H. Sun et al., 2018).

However, we did not find a chain mediating effect of volunteer service participation and sense of self-worth in the relationship between volunteer service motivation and social responsibility. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.



Although previous studies have found that participation in volunteer service can promote individuals' sense of self-worth, most research has focused on the relationship between the specific content of volunteer service participation and self-worth. For example, studies have found that college students' participation in Western Plan projects (graduate or postgraduate students from higher learning institutions work in towns and villages of poor counties in western China for 1–3 years in education, health, agricultural technology, poverty alleviation, and other fields; Lei, 2010) and medical service (G. Zhang et al., 2023) can enhance their sense of self-worth. However, our study focused on the frequency of volunteer service participation. The above results indicate that to improve college students' sense of self-worth, we should not only focus on the quantity of volunteer activities, but also improve the quality of volunteer activities. At the same time, self-worth may be related to the purpose of college students' participation in volunteer activities. Previous studies have also shown that if participation in volunteer activities can create economic and spiritual value for society, it is conducive to improving individuals' sense of self-worth (S. Zhang et al., 2022). In other words, individual self-worth can be better realized only when individuals actively participate in volunteer activities and actively create value. However, F. Zhang (2019) found that many college students participate in voluntary activities for self-interest, that is, to accrue, for example, credit or activity rewards. Such benefit-oriented participation may not effectively improve individuals' sense of value in life. Therefore, to improve the sense of life value of college students, it is necessary to help them establish the right motivation for volunteering.

### Practical Implications

The above results indicate the significance of college students' motivation for volunteer participation. When college students hold a positive view of volunteer participation motivation, they can not only improve the frequency of participation in volunteer activities, but also help establish their sense of self-worth and cultivate their sense of social responsibility. The above results suggest that colleges and universities should guide college students to establish positive motivation for participation in volunteer activities. They should pay attention to not only the quantity (frequency) but also the quality (intention) of college students' participation in volunteer activities. Only by guiding students to establish a positive view of volunteer participation motivation can they better activate students' initiative of participation in volunteer service and enhance their sense of self-worth and social responsibility.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

First, the cross-sectional research method adopted in this study cannot reveal the causal relationships between variables. Therefore, future researchers could try to detect the relationships between different variables using longitudinal tracking data. Second, the sample of this study was limited to college students. However, volunteer service requires not only the participation of universities but also the cooperation of the entire population. Therefore, future studies could broaden the scope to explore differences in the motivation and level of volunteer participation of different groups, in order to better understand volunteer activity. Finally, this study collected only quantitative data, so that the process mechanism of the direct or indirect influence of volunteer motivation on social responsibility is not clear. This relationship could be clarified in future studies through qualitative interviews.

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