

Volunteering during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Investigation of the Motivations, Benefits, Challenges, and Concerns

Associated with Volunteering during a Global Health Crisis

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been limited research on why people choose to volunteer or what the benefits and challenges of volunteering are, has been conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to investigate the motivations, benefits, challenges, and concerns associated with volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. A cross-sectional design assessed the motivations, benefits, challenges, and concerns associated with volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling was used, gathering 254 valid participants. Descriptive statistics, inferential statistics and content analysis were employed to analyse the data. Altruistic motivations, social benefits, and concerns about COVID-19 infection were among the most highly rated motivations, benefits, and concerns. Positive and negative aspects of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic were also identified. This study is

the first of its kind to explore motivations, benefits, and challenges associated with volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland.

Keywords: COVID-19; volunteering; student volunteer; cross-sectional survey

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1.Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unemployment rates to spiral. In Ireland, the national COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment had a total of 835,503 recipients between March 2020 and January 2021 (Central Statistics Office; CSO, 2021). This indicates that close to one million people were unemployed due to the pandemic at some point during this period. In addition to the loss of jobs, lockdown restrictions meant that many people faced disruption to their daily routines. While rates of unemployment have increased since the beginning of the pandemic, so too have the number of volunteers in Ireland. A recent report from Volunteer Ireland states that over 20,000 people registered on Ireland's volunteering database I-VOL, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Volunteer Ireland, 2020). The coinciding increase in the number of unemployed people and increase in the number of volunteers may be explained by suggestions in the literature that volunteering can provide an opportunity to replace work roles (Black & Living, 2004; Omoto, Snyder & Martino, 2000), and may bring a sense of structure into people's lives where routine has been disrupted (Bradley, 1999; Kirby, 2016). Although this may explain one potential motivation to volunteer, other volunteering motives in the context of previous pandemics have been identified in the literature. Studies by Akintola (2010), Kironde and Klaasen (2002), and Kpanake et al. (2019) highlighted that people were motivated to volunteer during the HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis (TB) and Ebola pandemics, to help those in need in their communities, to learn more about specific diseases, and to be with friends. Some studies have also researched people's willingness to volunteer during a pandemic (Shi et al., 2018; Yonge et al., 2010). However, depending on the circumstances of the pandemic and risks to the volunteers, the number of actual volunteers may not equate to the number of willing volunteers (Rosychuk et al., 2008); i.e., someone who states they would be willing to volunteer if there was a pandemic, is not guaranteed to translate this willingness into action.

The most commonly reported motivation to volunteer during a pandemic was personal development. The main areas of personal development that were discussed were participants' desire to learn more about specific diseases (Akintola, 2010; Reeder et al., 2001; Simon, Stürmer & Steffens, 2000; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997; Thomas et al., 2007; Topp et al., 2015; Brescia, 2020), their hope to develop clinical and professional skills through their volunteering experience (AlOmar et al., 2021; Gabard, 1995; Herrick & Brooks, 2019; Kpanake et al., 2019; Lopez, Glick & Berthold, 1998; Reeder et al., 2001; Simon, Stürmer & Steffens, 2000; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997), and to improve their employability prospects (Akintola, 2010; AlOmar et al., 2021; Kironde & Klaasen, 2002; Shi et al., 2021; Tempski et al., 2020; Topp et al., 2015). There are also altruistic motivators described in previous research – e.g. volunteers in various TB and HIV/AIDS organisations emphasised their desire to help other people (Kironde & Klaasen, 2002; Simon, Stürmer & Steffens, 2000), particularly those who are sick (Akintola, 2010), to give back to others (Topp et al., 2015) and to make a difference in someone's life (Christensen et al., 1999). A sense of moral responsibility to help those in need was deemed the most important motivation by Ebola volunteers in Guinea and AIDS volunteers in the USA (Kpanake et al., 2019; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997). Similar feelings of obligation to help those in need were also discussed by HIV/AIDS volunteers in Germany (Simon, Stürmer & Steffens, 2000), while feelings of moral and professional responsibility to help others were reported by medical students volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tempski et al., 2020).

Research over the years has shown that volunteering also has many benefits including mental and physical health benefits (Fegan & Cook, 2012; Yeung, Zhang & Kim, 2017), increased life satisfaction and well-being (Piliavin & Siegl, 2007; Russell et al., 2018; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), and even a decreased risk of depression and mortality (Anderson et al., 2014; Kim & Pai, 2009; Okun, Yeung & Brown, 2013). However, while volunteering has its benefits, it can also come at a cost to those who offer their time and services (Handy & Mook, 2010; MacNeela, 2008).

There are risks, challenges, and concerns associated with volunteering, particularly when this volunteering is carried out during a global health crisis. Participants in studies by Gershon et al. (2016) and Thomas et al. (2007) highlighted the risks of becoming infected with Ebola and TB, as a result of volunteering during pandemic circumstances. Concern for the well-being of volunteers and lack of support from family members due to HIV or TB-related stigma was also a challenge for several volunteers (Christensen et al., 1999; Kangethe, 2010; Lopez, Glick & Berthold, 1998; Thomas et al., 2007). In some cases, volunteers were advised by family members not to put themselves at risk by volunteering (Thomas et al., 2007).

Although the motivations, benefits and challenges of volunteering have been researched in the past, little research on volunteering has been carried out in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. New research is beginning to emerge on the topic of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, and studies have been published on the experiences of medical student volunteers in Poland, China, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil (AlOmar et al., 2021; Bazan, Nowicki & Rzymiski, 2021; Chawłowska et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2021; Tempski et al., 2020), on the impact of virtual volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lachance, 2020; Trautwein et al., 2020). Findings from these studies show that 7-22% of medical volunteers in Poland had insufficient access to personal protective equipment (PPE), putting their health and safety at risk (Bazan, Nowicki & Rzymiski, 2021; Chawłowska et al., 2021). Professional development was a common motivation to volunteer reported by medical students in studies by AlOmar et al. (2021), Shi et al. (2021), and Tempski et al. (2020). Studies focused on virtual volunteering found that volunteering online, enabled people to engage in a meaningful leisure activity (Lachance, 2020) and that online volunteer platforms were effective in recruiting volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Trautwein et al., 2020).

Despite the recent advances in the novel area of COVID-19 volunteering, research has yet to be carried out on the implications of volunteering during a pandemic in an Irish context. Therefore,

this study aimed to provide insight into people's motivation to volunteer in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic and to investigate the benefits, challenges and concerns that were associated with volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also looked at whether the loss of structure in people's lives was a motivator to help out during the COVID-19 crisis in Ireland and whether volunteering had a positive impact on people's structure and routines, which were disrupted for many during this period. The primary aim of this study was to explore people's motivation to volunteer during the COVID-19 pandemic. The secondary aims were to explore the benefits, challenges, concerns associated with volunteering.

2.Methodology

2.1Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design allowing the researcher to gather information efficiently from a large cohort of people (O'Cathain & Thomas, 2004). This design is also used to quantify the attitudes and opinions of a certain population (Sukamolson, 2007). Although cross-sectional studies cannot determine causal relationships between datasets (Van der Stede, 2014), this type of research design was deemed most appropriate, based on the aims of the study.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by CMNHS Research Ethics Committee at the University of Galway.

2.2 Measurement Device/Instrumentation

A researcher-developed, cross-sectional survey was used to collect data. No instrument that assesses the motivations, benefits and challenges of pandemic volunteering was identified. The survey was developed based on the findings of the literature review to increase its content validity (Rattray & Jones, 2007). The survey consisted of four main sections: 1) demographic and background data, 2) people's motivation to volunteer during the COVID-19

pandemic, 3) the self-perceived benefits of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 4) the challenges and concerns associated with volunteering during this time. Closed-ended questions can reduce the depth of responses in surveys (Rattray & Jones, 2007). Thus, one open-ended ‘any additional comments’ question was placed at the end of the survey to enhance the data gathered from the closed-ended questions and to allow participants to provide richer, more in-depth responses (LaDonna, Taylor & Lingard, 2018; O’Cathain & Thomas, 2004; Smyth et al., 2009).

A pilot of the survey was completed to determine the clarity of the questions, to highlight any issues with the design, to estimate the completion time, and to allow pilot participants the opportunity to provide constructive feedback and comments, as recommended in the literature (Hassan, Schattner & Mazza, 2006; Tsang, Royse & Terkawi, 2017). Ten participants who had volunteered during the COVID-19 pandemic, completed the pilot survey. This ensured that participants were familiar with the topic of volunteering and that the pilot sample was similar to the intended survey sample. Face validity was determined by asking pilot participants to consider the clarity and relevance of the questions, and whether any important questions had been omitted (Rattray & Jones, 2007). Data collected in the pilot survey was not included in the final analysis.

The survey was hosted on Microsoft Forms. The Microsoft Forms application also allows for immersive reading. This includes text-to-speech options, and adjustability of the speed of speech, size of text, style of text, spacing of text, and background colour. This ensured that the survey was more accessible to the public, including people with possible low vision or dyslexia. Furthermore, the web-based survey design enabled the researcher to enforce a required completion of answers, thus reducing non-response bias (Evans & Mathur, 2005).

2.3 Participants

Participants were recruited using non-probability sampling methods, including purposive, snowball, and self-selection sampling. Participants were recruited by sharing the survey across several social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn), and through mail lists of Irish universities and volunteering organisations.

People over the age of 18 were eligible to participate if they volunteered within the Republic of Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. People were excluded from participating if they were paid for their volunteering role.

Power calculation for the study was based on a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, the number of people over the age of 18 in Ireland (n=3,510,069; CSO, 2016) and the percentage of people in Ireland who volunteer (28.4%) (CSO, 2013). Based on the above figures, a minimum sample size of 313 participants was deemed necessary to ensure that the study had adequate power.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis was completed using Microsoft Excel and Statistical Packaging for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v.27. The data was screened, checked for errors, and data from the three open-text responses and ‘other’ options were grouped appropriately into categories. Descriptive statistics are used to summarise and describe data (Thompson, 2009). Frequency distributions were used to describe all nominal and dichotomous data. Measures of central tendency and dispersion were calculated. Chi-square tests were used to determine relationship between pre-determined variables. Data gathered from the open-ended ‘additional comments’ questions at the end of the survey was analysed using the content analysis process outlined by Bengtsson (2016).

3. Results

A total of 376 people submitted responses to the survey. Of these 376 people, six did not consent to continue, 102 had not volunteered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 14 received payment for their volunteer work. Therefore, a total of 122 people (32.45%) did not meet the eligibility criteria and were automatically directed to the end of the survey. This yielded a total of 254 valid participants. Unclear responses were regarded as missing data and were omitted when conducting the inferential statistical analysis.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 70, with a mean age of 33.9 (standard deviation: 14.6). A total of 162 students and staff members of universities or institutes of technologies completed the survey. 90.7% of these students and staff were from NUIG. 115 people (45.3%) volunteered in person, 81 (31.9%) volunteered online, 57 (22.4%) did both, while it was unclear from 1 participant what form their volunteering took. A summary of participant demographic and background data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Data

	Participants	%
Age (n=254)		
18-25	117	46.1%
26-35	31	12.2%
36-45	38	15%
46-55	42	16.5%
56-65	23	9.1%
66-70	2	0.8%
Prefer not to say	1	0.4%
Gender (n=254)		
Female	187	73.6%
Male	61	24%
Non-binary	3	1.2%
Prefer not to say	3	1.2%
Employment status (n=254)		
Employed	127	50%
Unemployed	108	42.5%
Unclear	18	7.1%
Are you a student or staff member of any university/institute of technology? (n=254)		
Yes	162	63.8%
No	92	36.2%

If yes, are you a: (n=162)		
Student	121	74.7%
Staff member	41	25.3%
How often did you volunteer? (n=254)		
Once (on 1 occasion)	12	4.7%
2 or 3 times	47	18.5%
Once monthly	3	1.2%
Once weekly	78	30.7%
Twice weekly	40	15.7%
Three times a week or more	61	24%
Irregular intervals	8	3.1%
Unclear	5	2%
For how long did you volunteer? (n=254)		
Less than 1 month	34	13.4%
1-3 months	63	24.8%
4-6 months	50	19.7%
7-9 months	23	9.1%
10-12 months	51	20.1%
Unclear	33	13%
Do you feel that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted your daily routine? (n=254)		
Yes	234	92.1%
No	20	7.9%

Table 2: Employment status

	Participants	%
Employed (n=127)		
Employed (place of work not specified)	4	1.6%
Working as essential personnel (frontline worker)	43	16.9%
Working from home	77	30.3%
Mixture of working from home and working as essential personnel	2	0.8%
Self employed	1	0.4%
Unemployed (n=108)		
Retired	10	3.9%
Unemployed or temporarily unemployed	94	37%
Home maker	2	0.8%
Carer for family member	2	0.8%
Unclear (n=19)		
Total	254	100%

Significant differences were observed between employment status and those who were motivated to volunteer to structure their days/weeks, $\chi^2 (1, n=188) = 21.117, p < .001, \phi = -.346$. People who were unemployed were more likely to agree that they volunteered to structure their days/weeks than those who were employed and were more likely to agree that volunteering provided structure to their days/weeks than those who were employed [$\chi^2 (1, n=189) = 26.222, p < .001, \phi = -.384$].

Although the types of volunteering that people engaged in during the COVID-19 pandemic was not explored in this survey, 33 participants mentioned the nature of their volunteer work in the 'additional comments' question. Fifteen of the 33 people volunteered within different community organisations, ten people participated in COVID-19-related volunteering, three people were involved in university-related volunteering, three people volunteered informally, and two people volunteered with animals.

3.1 Motivation to Volunteer

Motivations for people to volunteer during the COVID-19 pandemic were grouped into five different categories; altruistic motivations, personal development motivations, egoistic motivations, social motivation, and religious motivation, and are depicted in Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7, respectively. Altruistic motivations (Figure 1) were most highly rated among participants, with over 50% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with each of the altruistic motivation statements, except for one stating that 'I felt obliged to continue volunteering', which only 73 (28.7%) participants agreed with. The highest-rated motivation was 'to give something back to others', a statement which 242 (95.3%) participants agreed with. This was followed by 'because I wanted to use my skills for a collective good' (n=231 (90.9%) agreed) and 'because I have an interest and belief in the organisation' (n=223 (87.8%) agreed).

Sixty-six of 121 (54.5%) students agreed that they volunteered to improve their future employment opportunities, compared to 13.53% of the non-student population. Ninety-four

(77.7%) students agreed that they volunteered because they were seeking personal growth or self-development, compared to 37.6% of the non-student population. One hundred and two (84.3%) students agreed that volunteering provided them with an opportunity to learn about themselves, compared to 48.1% of the non-student population. Seventy-seven (63.6%) students agreed that volunteering was beneficial to their career, compared to 17.3% of the non-student population.

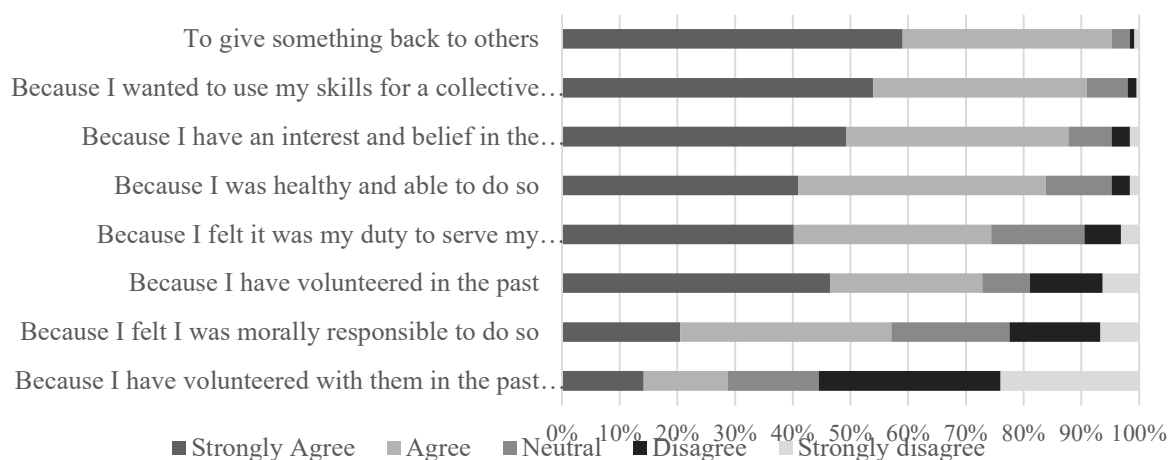


Figure 1: Altruistic Motivations to Volunteer

Altruistic volunteering motives were discussed 12 times in response to the open-ended question. These motives included the desire to contribute to their community and their society (=6), particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown.

“I felt it was important to continue to offer club members some sense of community during the lockdown” [P148]

Others felt morally responsible to volunteer and to help other people.

“I felt [that volunteering] was the right thing to do” [P243]

“I believe in my civic duty...to assist” [P185]

Forty-three (16.9%) participants agreed that they volunteered to provide them with an opportunity to compensate for unemployment or loss of a work role (Figure 2). This personal development motivation was also mentioned in three open-ended responses.

“I wanted to do something to help while I was temporarily out of work” [P206]

One participant highlighted that the opposite to this statement was true for them; their loss of employment provided them with an opportunity to volunteer.

“I had always wanted to volunteer but never had enough time to commit to it... When I was laid off it gave me time to volunteer” [P178]

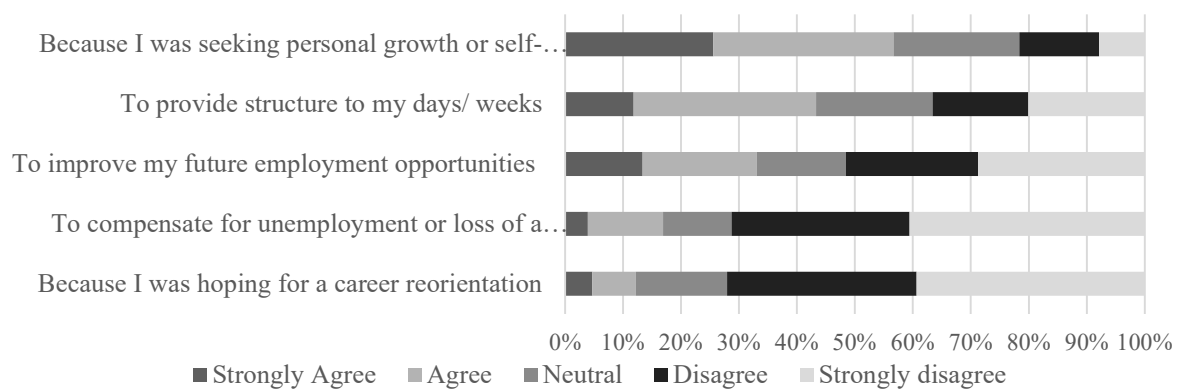


Figure 2: Personal Development Motivations to Volunteer

Exactly half of the participants agreed that they were motivated to volunteer ‘to do something outside the house’. The remaining statements relating to egoistic motivations to volunteer (Figure 3) were not rated highly among participants.

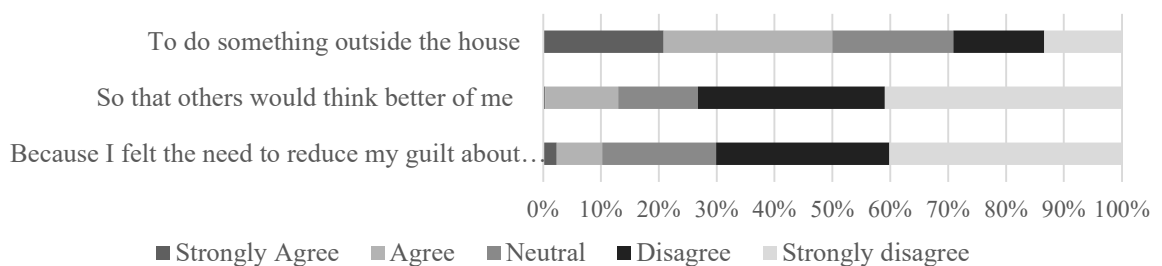


Figure 3: Egoistic Motivations to Volunteer

Social motivation to volunteer was expressed by 57.9% of participants, while only 4.3% of participants agreed that they were motivated to volunteer for religious reasons.

3.2 Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteering benefits were grouped into three categories; social, personal, and professional benefits. Providing people with a sense of community involvement (n=229; 90.2% agreed) was the most highly rated benefit of volunteering during COVID-19. This was followed by providing people with a sense of achievement (n=226; 89.0% agreed), and an enhanced mood (n=209; 82.3% agreed), see Figure 4.

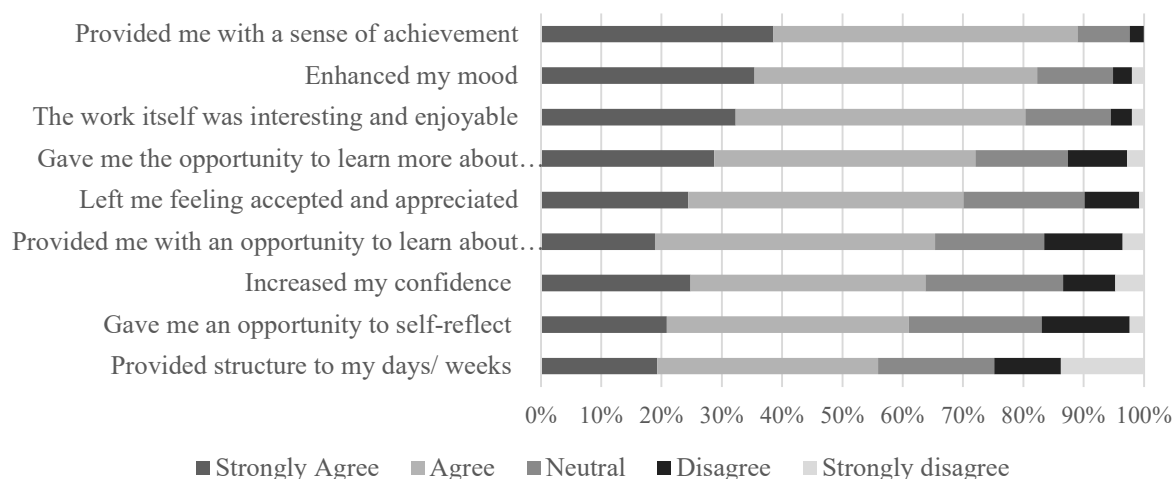


Figure 4: Personal Benefits

Professional benefits were the least rated benefits of volunteering among participants, with only 40% rating them as important (e.g. agree/strongly agree). Though some benefits were noted:

“It...helped my self-esteem which had taken a knock when I lost my job” [P178]

Volunteering benefits were also mentioned 36 times in response to the open-ended question, with mental health benefits most frequently reported (n=21). Examples of the mental health

benefits reported, included feeling a sense of purpose (n=5), usefulness (n=2), self-worth (n= 1), achievement (n=1), productivity (n=1) and normality (n=1).

“Volunteering...gave me a sense of purpose and productivity that otherwise wouldn't have been possible due to the pandemic” [P34]

“Highly beneficial for my mental health, provided a sense of normality” [P4]

Responses to the open-ended question at the end of the survey emphasised extremely positive aspects of participants’ volunteering experience. Participants highlighted that volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic had been an amazing, enjoyable, and rewarding experience.

“Volunteering is a wonderful experience...It has made a huge difference to my life and it has made me a better person” [P39]

“It has been one of the best experiences I have ever had” [P188]

Participants also reported a positive experience regarding COVID-19-related precautions that were put in place for volunteers.

“[There was] no risk was to me, my family or community. The place I volunteer had all PPE gear supplied to us and regular check-ins with us to ensure we were all ok physically and mentally” [P130]

“...I cannot see many risks there as the [place of volunteering] was meticulously stocked with disinfectants, all surfaces were being wiped in front of me and people were kept as socially distanced as possible” [P205]

3.3 Challenges of Volunteering

The biggest concerns for participants who volunteered during the COVID-19 pandemic, was putting the health of the people they lived with at risk (n=109; 55.9% agreed) and concern about the increased risk of catching COVID-19 (n=106; 52.7% agreed). The biggest personal challenge

for participants was the time commitment associated with volunteering (n=71; 29.0% agreed)- see Figure 5.

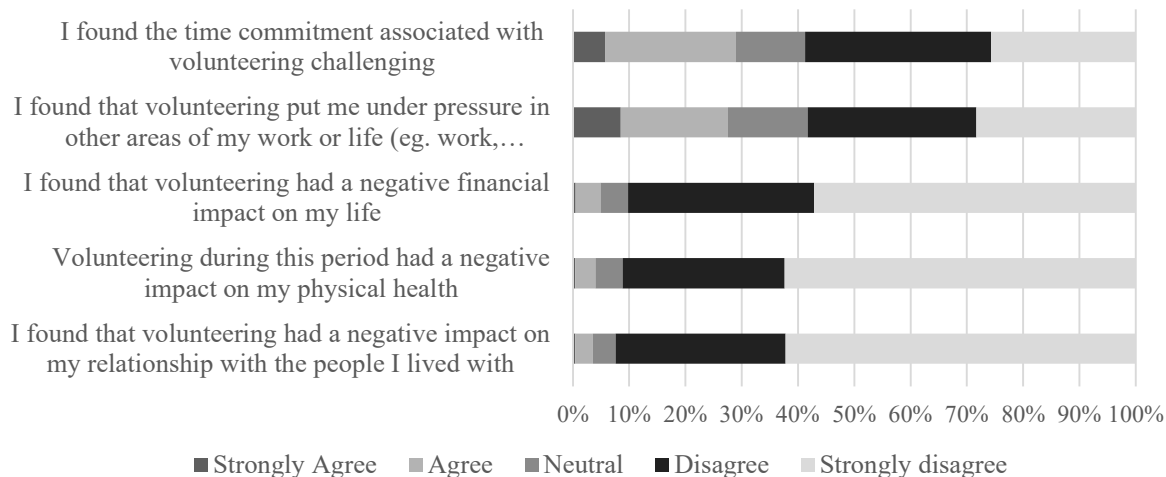


Figure 5: Personal Challenges and Concerns

Challenges associated with volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic were also mentioned in response to the open-ended question (n=14). These included organisational challenges, such as funding issues, poorly organised volunteer training, a lack of recognition or value for volunteers, and difficulties leaving the organisation (n=9). Negative experiences regarding COVID-19-related risks were also reported by three people. These included stresses associated with the risk of COVID-19 infection, inadequate social distancing, and inadequate air circulation.

A cross-tabulation between the types of volunteering and those who were worried about the increased risk of COVID-19 was completed (Figure 6). People who volunteered face-to-face or in-person, and both in-person and remotely, were found to be significantly ($p < .001$) more worried about the increased risk of COVID-19 than those who volunteered online or remotely.

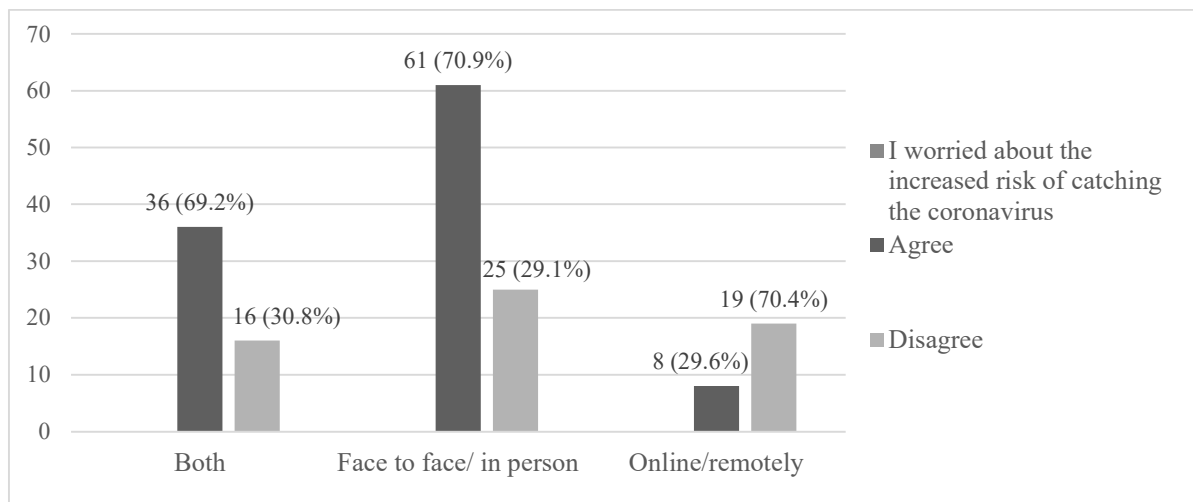


Figure 6: Type of Volunteering * I Worried about the Increased Risk of COVID-19

4. Discussion

Altruistic motivations were rated most highly among participants, with six of the eight statements related to altruistic motivation ranking higher than any other statement related to personal development, social, religious, or egoistic motivations. Providing people with a sense of community involvement was the highest-rated benefit of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, while putting the health of the people they lived with at risk was the biggest concern among participants.

Altruistic motivations, rated highly here, were also among the most highly rated motivations of medical students who volunteered during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to recent studies completed by Chawłowska et al. (2021), Adejimi et al. (2021), and Bellomo et al. (2020). This may reflect a potential social desirability bias, whereby participants may have felt a desire to provide a more socially acceptable response (Bergen & Labonté, 2019), thus, possibly increasing the strength of altruistic motivation responses (Shye, 2010). However, the anonymity of participants was ensured to reduce the risk of social desirability response bias (Larson, 2018).

Wanting to use one's skills for a collective good was the second-highest reason in this study for volunteering. This was also reflected in the literature, with studies by Christensen et al. (1999),

Kpanake et al. (2019), and Herrick and Brooks (2019) reporting that participants volunteered because they wanted to use their professional skills to help others. Other altruistic motives frequently mentioned in the literature include the desire to help one's community or country (Akintola, 2010; Kironde & Klaasen, 2002; Kpanake et al., 2019; Reeder et al., 2001; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997; Thomas et al., 2007; Topp et al., 2015), and a sense of moral responsibility to help those in need (Kpanake et al., 2019; Simon, Stürmer & Steffens, 2000; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997; Tempski et al., 2020). In this study, over half of the participants agreed that it was their duty to serve their community and country and that they were morally responsible to volunteer. Altruistic motivations were also discussed in the open-ended question, with participants highlighting a moral responsibility to volunteer and a desire to contribute to the community.

Studies assessing student motivation to volunteer during the COVID-19 pandemic (AlOmar et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2021, Tempski et al., 2020), reflect findings from this research emphasising the desire to improve future employment opportunities as a motivation for students to volunteer. Those who were unemployed were significantly more likely to agree that they volunteered to provide structure to their days and to improve their future employment opportunities, than those who were employed. A study by Pavlova and Silbereisen (2014) also found that people aged 16-29 who were facing occupational uncertainty, had an increased likelihood of volunteering. This may explain the large proportion of student volunteers and volunteers who were unemployed in this study, as students and unemployed people are likely to experience occupational uncertainties (Lechner, Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2016; Mantler et al., 2005). Furthermore, occupational uncertainty among participants may have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdowns (Mimoun, Ari & Margalit, 2020) and high unemployment rates in Ireland (CSO, 2021), providing students and unemployed people with an increased motivation to volunteer.

Providing people with a sense of community involvement was the most highly rated benefit of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was followed by providing people with a sense of achievement and an enhanced mood. Similar volunteering benefits were also frequently mentioned in response to the open-ended question, including feeling a sense of purpose, usefulness, self-worth, achievement, productivity, normality, reduced COVID-related stress, enhanced self-esteem, social benefits, and professional development benefits. Volunteering during a pandemic is reported to provide participants with a sense of internal satisfaction and accomplishment (Christensen et al., 1999; Herrick & Brooks, 2019; Lopez, Glick & Berthold, 1998; Shi et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2007), feeling useful and appreciated (Chawłowska et al., 2021), improved self-confidence (Ramirez-Valles & Brown, 2003; Thomas et al., 2007; Trautwein et al., 2020), and social benefits (Herrick & Brooks, 2019; Lopez, Glick & Berthold, 1998; Ramirez-Valles & Brown, 2003).

Putting the health of the people they lived with at risk was the biggest concern for participants who volunteered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concern regarding the risk of exposure to COVID-19 was mirrored in other studies focused on pandemic volunteering (AlOmar et al., 2021; Bazan, Nowicki & Rzymiski, 2021; Lopez, Glick & Berthold, 1998; Tempski et al., 2020), reporting that participants felt anxious, fearful, and stressed about contracting HIV, hepatitis, or COVID-19. Findings from this study show that over half of the participants volunteered online or remotely, suggesting that virtual volunteering was a popular option for volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that virtual volunteering is inclusive of, and accessible to people with disabilities (Lachance, 2020), and reduces risks associated with pandemic, this could be an option for those worried about health and risks associated with in-person volunteering.

4.1 Limitations

Although this study provides insights into the motivations, benefits, challenges, and concerns associated with volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, several limitations

exist. While the online nature of the survey enabled a wide geographical range of people to participate (Faleiros et al., 2016) and was also inclusive of people with disabilities (e.g., low vision, dyslexia), people with limited internet access may have been restricted from completing the survey (Taherdoost, 2016). Furthermore, the survey was primarily promoted and distributed via social media. Given that only 25% of those with internet access in Ireland over the age of 70 (TILDA, 2020) use social media, this survey may not have been sufficiently advertised among older adults and may reflect the small percentage of older adults who completed the survey. People under the age of 18 were also excluded, while those with an inadequate level of English to complete the survey may have been restricted.

While 376 survey responses were submitted, only 254 people met the inclusion criteria. As no definition of volunteering or examples of what qualified as volunteering was provided for participants, some people may not have considered the work they did, volunteering. This may have reduced the overall sample size and may explain why 102 people who submitted a response did not agree that they had volunteered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The minimum sample size of 313 participants was not achieved, which may impact the power of the study (Bujang, 2016). Furthermore, as this study used self-selection sampling, potential volunteer bias may exist (Sedgwick, 2015).

The large number of volunteers from NUI Galway indicates a potentially disproportionate geographical representation of the Irish volunteering population. This is likely due to the extensive advertisement of the survey among the students and staff of NUI Galway. However, given that the university campus was closed for the duration of the survey, it is difficult to determine the geographical spread of the participants in this study.

4.2 Implications for Future Research

Findings from this study show that over half of the participants volunteered online or remotely, suggesting that virtual volunteering was a popular option for volunteers during the COVID-19

pandemic. However, this study did not address the specific benefits and challenges associated with volunteering remotely. Given that virtual volunteering is inclusive of, and accessible to people with disabilities (Lachance, 2020), and those from rural settings with restricted access to transportation, future research should continue to expand on the limited virtual volunteering research.

Results from this study may inform volunteering organisations, particularly those who continue to recruit volunteers during this COVID-19 pandemic or those who seek to recruit during potential future pandemics. By understanding what motivates people to volunteer and what the self-perceived benefits of volunteering are, volunteering organisations may be able to tailor their recruitment campaigns to appeal to volunteers, based on the results of this study (e.g., highlighting the opportunity to give back to others or to experience a sense of community involvement). The results of this study may also inform volunteering organisations of the challenges and concerns raised by volunteers (e.g., COVID-19 related concerns, organisational issues, lack of volunteer recognition), enabling them to address and overcome these challenges and concerns in the future.

Finally, given the benefits outlined for unemployed people in this study, further research should be conducted to explore these benefits. A comparison between those who are unemployed and volunteering, and those who are unemployed and not volunteering may provide more insight into these benefits.

5. Conclusion

Results from this study suggest that volunteering provided people experiencing occupational uncertainty with an opportunity for personal growth and self-development, and may help establish occupational identity (Van Ingen & Wilson, 2016). Providing people with a sense of community involvement was the highest-rated benefit, while putting the health of the people

they lived with at risk was the biggest concern among participants in this study. As this study was, to the researcher's best knowledge, the first to explore the motivations, benefits, challenges, and concerns associated with volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, its findings provide a valuable addition to the current body of research regarding COVID-19 pandemic volunteering.

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