

Recognition, Social Connection, and Volunteer Role Identity Among American Red Cross Youth Volunteers

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ABSTRACT

Among the several factors that contribute to long-term engagement in volunteerism, volunteer role identity is critical for volunteer-dependent public health organizations that require sustained commitment. However, this theory has not been widely explored among youth volunteers, leaving the factors influencing their long-term engagement relatively unexplored. To address this gap, a survey was administered ($n = 53$) to high school volunteers of the American Red Cross across the Greater New York region. Of 909 invited participants, 53 responded (response rate: 5.8%). Several factors influencing engagement were identified and tested for correlations. The results revealed that recognition of contributions ($r = 0.580$; $p < .001$) and opportunities for social connection ($r = 0.701$; $p < .001$) are positively associated with identity centrality and sense of purpose. Recognition and social connection jointly explained 54.3% of the variance in identity centrality, $F(2, 50) = 29.76$, $p < .001$. Both recognition ($\beta = .278$, 95% CI [.044, .511], $p = .021$) and social connection ($\beta = .654$, 95% CI [.378, .930], $p < .001$) were independently associated with identity centrality. Limitations include the low response rate, small regional sample, single-item outcome, non-normal regression residuals, and common-method bias. In conclusion, public health organizations that seek to increase the engagement of youth volunteers may consider incorporating recognition, social events, and meaningful events.

Keywords: Social and Behavioral Science; Public Health; Volunteer Role Identity; Youth Volunteer Engagement; American Red Cross

INTRODUCTION

The efforts of volunteers are critical to maximizing the aid of public health organizations, which must take into consideration the factors that influence volunteer engagement as that volunteer force grows. In the past, altruism was identified as the primary motivator sustaining levels of volunteering (1). However, several

recent studies have indicated that traditional explanations for volunteerism may be insufficient to understand why individuals volunteer long-term. Rather, volunteer role identity, defined as the extent to which volunteering is central to one's self-concept, is imperative in sustained engagement, and individuals with stronger role identities are more likely to continue civic service (2, 3). Supporting this idea, volunteer role identity has been shown to strengthen community identification, foster engagement, and even improve well-being over time (2, 4, 5). In addition, in public health crises like COVID-19, individuals with stronger role identities showed sustained volunteerism even during this stressful period, reflecting its importance in long-term engagement (2). In light

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Accepted August 18, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.70251/HYJR2348.4411781190>

of the importance of volunteer role identity, several studies were conducted exploring developmental factors, identifying important components such as recognition, meaningful volunteerism that aligns with personal values or experiences, and organizational and social structure, including role clarity, training, and opportunities for bonding (2, 3, 5-16). Thus, prior literature suggests that organizations can support volunteer engagement by fostering the development of volunteer role identity, which can be especially relevant in the context of public health.

However, while volunteer role identity provides an initial foundation for understanding engagement, there remain gaps in research regarding its application to youth volunteers, an understudied population in health-oriented organizations. An important example of such an organization is the American Red Cross, responsible primarily for disaster relief, blood donations, and humanitarian aid, which is mainly carried out by the efforts of its volunteer force. Among this group, youth volunteers are a significant demographic that contribute meaningfully by participating in or leading school clubs and chapters, donating their blood, or otherwise participating in several opportunities provided through the American Red Cross. Despite their meaningful involvement, however, the factors that influence their long-term engagement remain relatively unexplored. In addition, there exists a lack of scholarship specifically examining primary motivations and barriers to youth volunteerism, a disparity that should be addressed.

To address these gaps, the present study combines identity-based theory with organizational perspectives to examine how volunteer role identity relates to continued engagement among American Red Cross youth volunteers. Central to this investigation is an original survey designed to capture the experiences and perspectives of youth volunteers across the Greater New York region. The primary outcome of this study is volunteer role identity, which is measured through identity centrality and sense of purpose. The primary predictors include perceived recognition and opportunities for social connection, as well as meaningful volunteer experiences and organizational structure. This study examines volunteer experiences that are associated with stronger volunteer role identity among youth volunteers, and proposes several respondent-informed design strategies to the American Red Cross in light of the findings. Based on previous literature, perceived recognition, stronger social connection, and opportunities for meaningful volunteerism are hypothesized to be positively associated with volunteer role identity.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Study Design and Procedure

The survey was designed to examine associations between volunteer role identity and organizational experiences among youth volunteers of the American Red Cross. To achieve this, the survey included quantitative items, utilizing Likert scales, that measured the extent of volunteer role identity, how volunteers experienced organizational support, and self-reported levels of engagement. In addition, a qualitative item allowed respondents to describe their specific motivations and barriers, offering suggestions to improve the volunteer experience.

Participants were recruited through 29 school-based American Red Cross clubs across the Greater New York region using a voluntary sampling approach, totaling 909 potential respondents who were invited to participate via email. Over March 2026, responses were collected using Google Forms, with a reminder email being distributed in April two weeks after the initial invitation. Of the 909 invited volunteers, 53 completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 5.8%. Participation was voluntary, and responses did not collect personally identifiable information to keep the study anonymous and minimize risk. Due to this, respondents were not asked to identify their school affiliation. Therefore, school-level data, including how many responses came from each school or whether any schools had no respondents, could not be determined. This study received approval from the American Red Cross Biomedical Services Institutional Review Board prior to participant recruitment and data collection. The study was reviewed under an expedited review and determined to involve minimal risk. Informed consent was waived in accordance with 45 CFR 46.116(d).

Survey Instrument and Measures

The survey was developed to assess volunteer role identity, recognition, social connection, meaningfulness, organizational structure, social structure, engagement, and volunteer motivations among youth volunteers of the American Red Cross. The complete survey is provided in Appendix A. Quantitative items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Survey items assessing volunteer motivation, meaningfulness, and education were adapted from the Volunteer Functions Inventory and modified to reflect the context of youth volunteerism in the American

Red Cross (17). Items assessing volunteer role identity and social connection were adapted from previously published measures (2). Additional items assessing recognition, organizational structure, perceived support, and engagement were investigator-developed to better capture experiences unique to youth volunteers of the American Red Cross. Composite scores for multi-item constructs were calculated by averaging Likert-scale responses corresponding to each construct. Higher scores indicated greater agreement with the measured construct. Internal consistency of each multi-item construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Composite scores for single-item constructs were analyzed individually. Volunteer engagement was further measured using self-reported behaviors including duration of volunteering, frequency of participation, and leadership involvement. The table of survey items, constructs, and modifications from validated sources is provided in Appendix B.

Finally, the survey included one open-ended question: "In your opinion, what would improve the volunteer experience for the youth?" This allowed respondents to describe any motivations, barriers, or suggestions that may not be fully captured through fixed quantitative items.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey responses were analyzed, and visual descriptions of data were generated in Google Sheets. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine associations between key variables related to volunteer role identity, recognition, social connection, meaningful contribution, and personal growth. Statistical significance of correlations was evaluated using two-tailed t-tests with degrees of freedom equal to $n - 2$ ($df = 51$). To account for the ordinal nature of Likert-scale data and the small sample size ($n = 53$), Spearman rank correlations were also conducted in case of non-normal distributions. Cronbach's alpha was calculated only for multi-item measures such as volunteer motivation, social connection, meaningfulness and organizational structure, and composite scores were calculated for each construct.

Additionally, a multiple linear regression model was estimated to examine whether recognition and social connection were independently associated with volunteer role identity. Demographics, volunteer history, and patterns of engagement were summarized using descriptive statistics. Further, tables and figures were created to visualize the dataset.

Qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic

analysis. Two researchers reviewed the data to cross-check for biases. The researchers first read all responses to become familiar with the data, then assigned initial descriptive codes to each response. Similar codes were grouped inductively into broader themes. A preliminary codebook containing theme definitions and inclusion criteria was then applied to all responses during a second coding pass. Responses could receive more than one code when they contained multiple ideas. Because coding was completed by one researcher, intercoder reliability was not calculated.

RESULTS

Internal consistency was tested for multi-item constructs: social connection ($\alpha = 0.876$), meaningfulness ($\alpha = 0.670$), volunteer motivation ($\alpha = 0.595$) and organizational structure ($\alpha = 0.667$) (Table 1). The results revealed that organizational structure, meaningfulness, and volunteer motivation should therefore be interpreted cautiously, whereas social connectedness demonstrated good internal consistency (Table 1).

In terms of ethnicity (Table 2), most respondents identified as Asian/Asian American (49.1%), White (26.4%), and Hispanic (15.1%). By grade level (Table 3), 39.6% were in the 11th grade, 32.1% in 10th, 20.8% in 12th, and 7.5% in 9th.

Further in Table 4, 41.5% of respondents had volunteered for the American Red Cross for six months

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Scores Report ($n = 53$). Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess internal consistency of multi-item constructs. Composite scores were calculated by averaging Likert-scale responses, with higher scores indicating greater agreement and values presented as mean (M) and standard deviation (SD).

	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Composite Score
Volunteer Motivation	0.595	$M=4.29$, $SD=0.56$
Social Connection	0.876	$M=3.98$, $SD=0.96$
Meaningfulness	0.670	$M=4.24$, $SD=0.78$
Organizational Structure	0.667	$M=4.00$, $SD=0.88$
Volunteer Role Identity	—	$M=3.68$, $SD=1.14$
Recognition	—	$M=3.87$, $SD=1.13$
Engagement	—	$M=4.21$, $SD=0.86$
Education	—	$M=4.02$, $SD=1.03$

or less. Only about 15.1% had volunteered for more than two years. In addition, about 56.6% of respondents volunteer once a month or less, and 17.0% volunteer once a week or more.

In terms of the leadership involvement (Table

Table 2. *Ethnicity of Youth Volunteers (n = 53). Distribution of respondents by self-reported ethnicity. Most respondents identified as Asian/Asian American. Respondents identifying as Pacific Islander and Indigenous/Native American were not represented in the sample.*

Ethnicity	n	%
Asian/Asian American	26	49.1
Black/African American	3	5.7
Hispanic/Latino	8	15.1
White	14	26.4
Middle Eastern	1	1.9
Pacific Islander	0	0.0
Indigenous/ Native American	0	0.0
Prefer not to say	1	1.9

5), 73.6% of respondents indicated that they held no leadership positions within the American Red Cross. That said, 17.0% indicated that they did. In case a respondent did not know whether their situation qualified as holding a leadership role, 9.4% indicated that they were not sure or held an informal role. Of the respondents who held positions, a separate open-ended item found that 4 participants were solely president or vice president of their club, 3 were club officers, 1 person was both a club president and a member of the IHL Youth Action Campaign, and 1 person was both a club officer and a member of the IHL Youth Action Campaign.

Table 3. *Grade Level of Youth Volunteers (n = 53). Distribution of respondents by grade level. Most respondents were in 11th grade, while the fewest were in 9th grade.*

Grade Level	n	%
9th	4	7.5
10th	17	32.1
11th	21	39.6
12th	11	20.8

Table 4. *Duration and Frequency of Volunteering for Youth Volunteers (n = 53). Distribution of respondents by length of volunteer service and volunteer frequency. Most respondents had volunteered for less than 3 months at the time of the survey and volunteer about once per month.*

Duration of Volunteering	n	%	Frequency of Volunteering	n	%
Less than 3 months	13	24.5	Less than once per month	13	24.5
3 - 6 months	9	17.0	About once per month	17	32.1
6 months - 1 year	11	20.8	2 - 3 times per month	14	26.4
1 - 2 years	12	22.6	About once per week	6	11.3
More than 2 years	8	15.1	More than once per week	3	5.7

Table 5. *Leadership Involvement among Youth Volunteers (n = 53). Distribution of respondents by leadership status and role. Most respondents did not hold leadership positions. Dual Roles include either Club President or Club Officer and the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Campaign. The role most reported was President/Vice President.*

Leadership Status	n	%	Leadership Positions	n	%
Yes	9	17.0	President/Vice President	4	44.4
			Club Officer	3	33.3
			Dual Role (Club President and IHL Campaign)	1	11.1
			Dual Role (Club Officer and IHL Campaign)	1	11.1
No	39	73.6	—	—	—
Not sure/informal role	5	9.4	—	—	—

Figure 1 shows the primary motivation of youth volunteers. Given that this item featured fixed responses, the qualitative open-ended measure was also included to thematically assess other potential motivations not included in this item. Required hours for school were not indicated as a motivation in the sample.

Figure 2 shows the primary barrier to volunteering. As is the case for Figure 1, the qualitative item was thematically analyzed to identify other potential barriers to volunteering.

The social-connection composite demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.876$). The two-item meaningfulness ($\alpha = 0.670$) and organizational-structure ($\alpha = 0.667$) composites demonstrated moderate internal

consistency and should be interpreted cautiously. Alpha was not calculated for single-item constructs. Also as shown in Table 6, identity centrality was associated with recognition (Pearson $r = .580$, $p < .001$; Spearman $\rho = .622$, $p < .001$), social connection ($r = .701$, $p < .001$; $\rho = .736$, $p < .001$), meaningfulness ($r = .569$, $p < .001$; $\rho = .611$, $p < .001$), and organizational structure ($r = .346$, $p = 0.011$; $\rho = .374$, $p < .001$).

To further examine the independent contributions of key predictors, a multiple linear regression model ($F(2, 50) = 29.76$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.543$) was estimated with volunteer role identity as the outcome variable and recognition and social connection as predictors. Approximately 54.3% of the variance in volunteer role

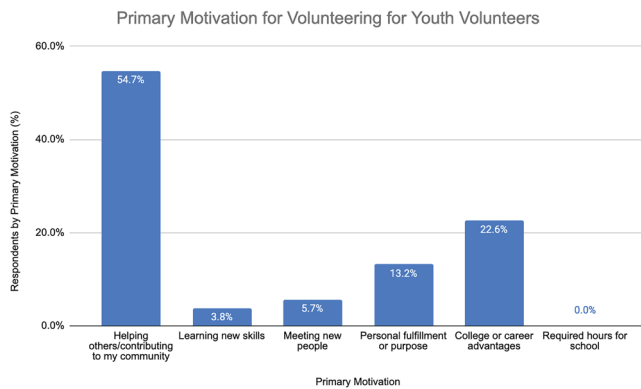


Figure 1. Primary Motivation for Volunteering among Youth Volunteers ($n = 53$). Percentage of respondents selecting their primary motivation for volunteering. Helping others/contributing to one's community was the most frequently reported motivation, while acquiring new skills was the least frequently reported, not inclusive of required hours for school.

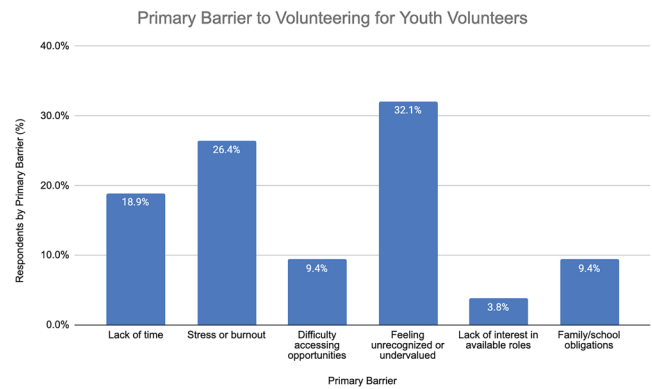


Figure 2. Primary Barrier to Volunteering among Youth Volunteers ($n = 53$). Percentage of respondents selecting their primary barrier to volunteering. Feeling unrecognized or undervalued was the most frequently reported barrier to volunteering, while lack of interest was the least frequently reported.

Table 6. Bivariate Correlation Analysis Among Volunteer Role Identity Constructs ($n = 53$). Pearson correlation coefficients (r) between variables. Pearson's r and associated t -test p -values are reported alongside Spearman rank correlation and its p -value as a robustness check for non-normal data. Friendships & Identity demonstrated the highest correlation ($r = 0.762$) while Organizational Structure & Identity demonstrated the lowest ($r = 0.346$).

Relationship	r	t	p	Spearman Ranked (ρ)	Spearman Rank p -value
Recognition & Identity	.580	5.09	< .001	.622	< .001
Social Connection & Identity	.701	7.01	< .001	.736	< .001
Meaningfulness & Identity	.569	4.94	< .001	.611	< .001
Organizational Structure & Identity	.346	2.63	0.011	.374	< .001
Friendships & Identity	.762	8.40	< .001	.759	< .001

identity could be explained by the model. The model confirmed that social connection ($\beta = 0.654$, $t = 4.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.378, .930]) and recognition ($\beta = 0.278$, $t = 2.39$, 95% CI [.044, .511], $p = .021$) are strong predictors of identity internalization.

Volunteers highlighted the importance of engaging in personally meaningful events. One respondent stated that “volunteer experiences would align with the youth better if they personally felt an event or had a family member affected by an event,” citing the American Red Cross’s role in disaster relief. Further, several volunteers felt their opportunities were limited in terms of hands-on experience, illustrated by suggestions such as “providing more hands-on, meaningful responsibilities that allow them to feel genuinely involved.” Others wished for “real tasks rather than just observing” to “feel more motivated, confident, and connected to the work.” Responses also indicated that the breadth of events offered by the American Red Cross did not fully capture volunteer interests, with individuals desiring the implementation of activities that “appeal more to younger people” and even for opportunities that the youth themselves can have a say in organizing. Combined with wishes for “testimonials about volunteering” to glean a sense of purpose from engaged volunteers, these insights suggest that the alignment of volunteer activities with personal experiences, interests, or values can strengthen volunteer role identity.

Recognition was a relevant theme among the open-ended responses. Many respondents emphasized the need for greater acknowledgment of their efforts, with quotes such as “Making sure that each person feels included and valued for the work that they do” and “More recognition for youth” reflecting this sentiment. These recurring desires for public recognition and “shoutouts” for contributions reflect previous studies’ claims that volunteers feel more motivated when visibly appreciated.

Organizational and social structure also emerged as relevant themes. Organizational structure was indicated by responses wishing for increased frequency of communication to promote volunteer events, such as “Monthly emails of opportunities” and “more communication between Youth Board/ARC with the youth volunteers.” Similarly, accessibility of volunteer opportunities and resources was highlighted with responses like “making it more accessible to volunteer” and “it’s hard to reach out to people from the Red Cross for resources.” Training of youth volunteers was also indicated as an interest. In addition, improved social structure was indicated by recommendations

like “Getting to know the other volunteers better” and “Volunteer socials.”

DISCUSSION

This study applies identity-based theory to public health contexts, focusing on youth volunteers as an understudied population to examine critical factors affecting their engagement. By integrating the survey’s quantitative results with qualitative responses and existing literature, the findings highlight several factors associated with the internalization of volunteer role identity among youth volunteers. The discussion will specify how understanding these factors may relate to the American Red Cross’s youth volunteer engagement, which may be relevant for public health organizations that depend on long-term commitment. Respondent-informed suggestions are then proposed to describe potential improvements and create a theoretical model for the benefit of the American Red Cross and its youth volunteers. Finally, the study proposes directions for future research.

Volunteers would benefit from improved social structure. This is separate from communication and training but concerns opportunities for socialization and bonding. It has been shown that personal satisfaction in volunteering, including social connection, renders the volunteer role more readily internalized and valuable (4). Supporting this interpretation, “I have formed meaningful friendships or social connections through volunteering” demonstrated the strongest correlation (Table 6) with identity centrality ($r = 0.762$, $p < .001$). Finally, the multiple linear regression test (Table 7) demonstrated that social connection ($\beta = 0.654$, CI [.378, .930], $p < .001$; Table 7) is a strong predictor of identity internalization.

Meaningful and targeted volunteerism may improve engagement as personal connection to an initiative increases. Volunteers who perceive their contributions as meaningful are more likely to remain engaged (9). Among the perceived motivations for volunteering, the item “Helping others/contributing to my community,” a motivation that is likely a significant component of meaningful volunteerism, was the most frequently reported motivator (54.7%). In addition, the qualitative item expands the depth of this theme, with nine individual responses indicating that volunteers feel a lack of personal engagement in their volunteering (Table 8). This finding is somewhat unexpected considering the American Red Cross’s role in disaster relief, the

Table 7. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Volunteer Role Identity from Recognition and Social Connection ($n = 53$). Results of a multiple linear regression analysis examining recognition and social connection as predictors of volunteer role identity. Reported values include the standardized regression coefficient (β), t -statistic (t), p -value (p), proportion of variance (R^2), and the F -statistic for overall model fit (F) with degrees of freedom (df). Social connection was a stronger independent predictor of volunteer role identity than recognition.

Predictor / Model	β	t	p	R^2	F (df)
Model Summary	—	—	< .001	0.543	29.76 (2,50)
Recognition	0.278	2.39	.021	—	—
Social Connection	0.654	4.76	< .001	—	—

Table 8. Quotes from the Qualitative Survey Item. Themes identified through thematic analysis of the open-ended responses ($n = 53$). Thematic analysis revealed four themes: Recognition, Meaningful and Targeted Volunteerism, Organizational Structure, and Social Structure.

Recognition	“Making sure that each person feels included and valued for the work that they do.” “More recognition for youth” “More recognition would be beneficial to volunteering more personally” “shoutouts to highest contributing volunteers?”
Meaningful and Targeted Volunteerism	“I think volunteer experiences would align with the youth better if they personally felt an event or had a family member affected by an event.” “Implementing activities which appeal more to younger people.” “providing more hands-on, meaningful responsibilities that allow them to feel genuinely involved.” “When young volunteers are trusted with real tasks rather than just observing they feel more motivated, confident, and connected to the work they’re doing.” “More hands on experience” “More opportunities that the kids can have a say in organizing” “Having a direct voice in planning” “testimonials about volunteering” “Events where the youth can do more activities and learn more life skills”
Organizational Structure	“Send out more opportunities in our google classroom.” “Easier volunteer opportunities and it’s hard to reach out to people from the Red Cross for resources.” “Monthly emails of opportunities” “One thing that would do so is making it more accessible to volunteer.” “more communication between Youth Board/ARC with the youth volunteers” “better promotion of volunteering events” “Better onboarding process” “Have representatives from the American Red Cross be more connected with the schools chapter” “training so that everyone is clear with what they should be doing.” “I think we can improve the accessibility, because I know so much of the youth including myself would love to volunteer but we don’t know the opportunities in which we can.” “More accessible programming” “Easier access to volunteer opportunities and making the process of application easier overall” “As someone who only has Sundays free, it’s the only time I can volunteer for the Red Cross”
Social Structure	“Getting to know the other volunteers better” “Volunteer socials” “Social gatherings” “More inclusive” “Meeting more people”

consequences of such disasters potentially affecting the lives of volunteers themselves or those they know; however, this may be due to the geographical context of the Greater New York region, where disasters such as hurricanes or floods occur less frequently.

Recognition can reinforce involvement, suggesting it may play a role in strengthening the connection to an organization by validating volunteers' efforts. This recognition could be either material, public, or symbolic, such as a certificate of achievement, a shout-out in a newsletter, or even a digital badge, and, though not directly examined, may benefit the individual volunteer. The thematic analysis (Table 8) revealed that youth volunteers do indeed exhibit a desire for recognition, and among the perceived barriers to volunteering (Figure 2), the item "Feeling unrecognized or undervalued" was a significant inhibitor among youth volunteers (18.9%). Quantitative analysis further supported this finding, as the item "I feel recognized and valued for the work I do as a volunteer" was strongly correlated (Table 6) with "Being a Red Cross volunteer feels like an important part of who I am" ($r = 0.580$, $p < 0.001$). This contributes to the understanding of the role of recognition in the internalization of the volunteer role. In addition, recognition, or lack thereof, was a recurring theme in the qualitative item, with four individual responses noting a desire for organizational acknowledgment of their contributions (Table 8). These findings align with previous studies, which have shown that recognition can facilitate the internalization of volunteerism into a person's identity, fostering a sense of fulfillment, self-actualization, and long-term engagement (14). While the American Red Cross does recognize many long-term volunteers, the responses from the quantitative and qualitative items indicate that the contributions of the youth population may go unnoticed.

Youth volunteers also expressed interest in improvements to organizational structure. It is important to note that while organizational structure emerged in qualitative responses as a prevalent theme, analysis of the quantitative items showed weaker correlations (Table 6) with measures of volunteer role identity and engagement. However, given the high number of open-ended responses referencing organizational structure (Table 8), this theme remains a meaningful factor in shaping volunteer experiences but should be interpreted with circumspection. Organizational design has been addressed in previous studies, with the survey of disaster volunteers in China finding that organizational identification is positively associated with willingness

to participate in disaster preparedness (10). This can reasonably be extended to volunteering among the youth, who may participate in events ranging from community outreach to donating blood.

These findings are relevant to consider. The majority (56.6%) of respondents report volunteering just once per month or less (Table 4), which emphasizes the importance of recognizing contributions, providing social bonding opportunities, and offering meaningful initiatives. The study's aim is to identify the factors associated with a more positive volunteer experience, which may be relevant to future efforts to support volunteer engagement. To support this goal, the study proposes several respondent-informed design strategies in the following section.

Based on quantitative associations and qualitative responses, preliminary and respondent-informed design strategies can be considered by the American Red Cross to support youth volunteers. These specific interventions were not evaluated as definitive improvers of volunteer role identity or humanitarian outcomes.

Recognition of youth volunteers may support volunteer engagement. Potential approaches suggested by respondents include acknowledging contributions of volunteers through regional emails, virtual or physical certificates, and newsletters. Among established programs in the American Red Cross, the Volunteer and Club Spotlight program, managed by the National Youth Council, can fill this role. However, the survey responses indicate that the youth are generally unaware that such a program is available to them, and thus may only be effective if properly advertised. Further, maximizing volunteer engagement may be improved by *fostering a community of volunteers*. Social organization can be improved by hosting virtual or in-person volunteer events, which may be achieved by reinstating the role of the Youth Executive Board in promoting youth-led bonding opportunities. Another strategy could be implementing a community feature on Volunteer Connection, the primary online volunteer management system for the American Red Cross, where volunteers could communicate, build relationships, and share experiences and opportunities. Further, the American Red Cross could capitalize on the intrinsic engagement stemming from *meaningful and targeted events*. To understand the nebulous nature of finding meaning, the American Red Cross could conduct its own regional survey to identify themes and tailor their volunteer opportunities accordingly. In addition, the qualitative responses recommended that the American Red Cross

give testimonials from successful volunteers, as well as provide more hands-on responsibilities that teach practical humanitarian skills. In addition, respondents recommend *increasing the frequency of communication*. While this would require consistent maintenance from the American Red Cross, communication from the administration to the youth, either from regional managers or from the state, may directly inform volunteers of opportunities or otherwise clarify role expectations. The latter can further be improved by *offering training*. Virtual or in-person sessions could inform the youth of Volunteer Connection, such as how to create an account, access opportunities, and log hours. The American Red Cross could also educate volunteers on emergency preparedness or regarding fire safety and fire alarms, as per the Sound the Alarm initiative. Although these strategies are informed by volunteer perspectives, their effectiveness in improving engagement remains untested. Future research should evaluate these proposed strategies through longitudinal studies to determine their ability to produce measurable improvements.

CONCLUSION

This study applies the growing concept of volunteer role identity to youth volunteers in public health organizations. The findings suggest that several factors, including opportunities for social bonding, recognition, meaningful tasks, and organizational clarity, are associated with stronger internalization of the volunteer role and volunteer engagement in the American Red Cross. These factors may represent opportunities for future organizational consideration as well as areas requiring further study.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Primarily, the small sample size makes it difficult to generalize these findings to all American Red Cross youth volunteers. The low response rate (5.8%) introduces the possibility of nonresponse bias, as volunteers who were more engaged, satisfied, or interested in the survey may have been more likely to participate. In addition, this survey was limited to high schools within the Greater New York region, decreasing geographical diversity and putting the study at risk of undercoverage bias. Due to the fact that school-level participation data were not collected, it was not possible to assess whether certain schools were overrepresented. Further, no demographic or engagement data were available for invited volunteers who did not participate in the survey. Therefore, potential

differences in characteristics between respondents and the invited population could not be determined. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were also somewhat limited, with most identifying as Asian/Asian American or White, and it is thus difficult to generalize across differing populations. Self-reported behaviors, as relied upon by the survey, also pose the risk of introducing response bias. Given this information, future research should strive to examine larger and more geographically diverse samples. All primary variables were measured through self-report in a single survey administered at one point in time. The observed associations may therefore be affected by common-method variance, social-desirability bias, and similarity in item wording. Future studies should combine self-report measures with behavioral indicators, organizational records, supervisor evaluations, or longitudinal measurements.

These findings contribute to a growing understanding of the importance of volunteer role identity in sustaining volunteerism and identify social connection and recognition as the constructs most strongly associated with volunteer role identity, which organizations may wish to consider to maximize engagement of youth volunteers. This may be important to consider for public health organizations like the American Red Cross that continue to require sustained engagement to operate.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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APPENDIX A. Red Cross Youth Volunteer Experience Survey

1. What is your current grade level?
 - a. 9th
 - b. 10th
 - c. 11th
 - d. 12th
 - e. Other:
 2. What is your ethnic or cultural background? (Please select all that apply)
 - a. Asian/Asian American
 - b. Black/African American
 - c. Hispanic/Latino
 - d. White
 - e. Middle Eastern
 - f. Pacific Islander
 - g. Indigenous/Native American
 - h. Prefer not to say
 - i. Other:
 3. What organization(s) do you volunteer for? (Select all that apply)
 - a. American Red Cross
 - b. Hospital/healthcare facility
 - c. Community service center
 - d. School-based service club
 - e. Religious organization
 - f. Local government/emergency management
 - g. Other:
 4. Which Red Cross volunteer roles have you participated in before? (Select all that apply)
 - a. Blood drive volunteer
 - b. Disaster preparedness/emergency services
 - c. School-based club
 - d. Fundraising/events
 - e. Community outreach or education
 - f. Administrative or logistics support
 - g. I have not volunteered for the Red Cross before
 - h. Other:
 5. How long have you been volunteering in general (not just for the Red Cross?)
 - a. Less than 6 months
 - b. 6 months - 1 year
 - c. 1 - 2 years
 - d. 2 - 4 years
 - e. More than 4 years
 6. How long have you been volunteering for the Red Cross specifically?
 - a. Less than 3 months
 - b. 3 - 6 months
 - c. 6 months - 1 year
 - d. 1 - 2 years
 - e. More than 2 years
 7. How often do you volunteer?
 - a. Less than once per month
 - b. About once per month
 - c. 2 - 3 times per month
 - d. About once per week
 - e. More than once per week
 8. Currently, do you hold any leadership position within Red Cross youth volunteering?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not sure/informal role
 9. If yes, what leadership role do you currently hold?
- Items 10–24. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree.**
10. I volunteer for the American Red Cross because I enjoy helping others.
 11. Volunteering for the American Red Cross helps me grow personally or develop new skills.
 12. I volunteer for the American Red Cross because its mission aligns with my values or beliefs.
 13. I volunteer for the American Red Cross because it may benefit my college, career, or future opportunities.
 14. Being a Red Cross volunteer is an important part of who I am.
 15. I feel recognized and valued for my work as an American Red Cross volunteer.
 16. Volunteering for the American Red Cross gives me a sense of purpose or direction.
 17. I clearly understand my role as a Red Cross volunteer.
 18. Volunteering for the American Red Cross has helped me feel more connected to my school or local community.
 19. I have formed meaningful friendships or social connections through volunteering for the American Red Cross.
 20. I feel supported by other youth and adult volunteers.
 21. I can easily access volunteer opportunities through the American Red Cross.
 22. School, work, or family responsibilities limit how much I can volunteer.

23. Volunteering for the American Red Cross has increased my understanding of public health or emergency preparedness.
24. I feel that my volunteer work makes a meaningful contribution to my community.
25. Which of the following motivates you the most?
- Helping others/contributing to my community
 - Learning new skills
 - Meeting new people
 - Personal fulfillment or purpose
 - College or career advantages
 - Required hours for school
 - Other:
26. Which of the following most hinders your volunteering?
- Lack of time
 - Stress or burnout
 - Difficulty accessing opportunities
 - Feeling unrecognized or undervalued
 - Lack of interest in available roles
 - Family/school obligations
 - Other:
27. In your opinion, what is one thing that would make the volunteer experience better for the youth?

APPENDIX B. Survey Items, Constructs, and Modifications from Validated Sources

Survey item	Construct	Original Scale	Modification
I volunteer for the American Red Cross because I enjoy helping others.	Volunteer Motivation	Clary <i>et al.</i> (1998), Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)	Adapted for the American Red Cross context
Volunteering for the American Red Cross helps me feel like I am growing personally or gaining skills.	Volunteer Motivation	Clary <i>et al.</i> (1998), Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)	Adapted for the American Red Cross context; combined learning and personal growth into one item
I volunteer for the American Red Cross because it aligns with my values or beliefs.	Volunteer Motivation	Clary <i>et al.</i> (1998), Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)	Adapted for the American Red Cross context
I volunteer for the American Red Cross because it improves my college, career, or future opportunities.	Volunteer Motivation	Clary <i>et al.</i> (1998), Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)	Adapted for youth volunteers by including college opportunities
Being a Red Cross volunteer feels like an important part of who I am.	Volunteer Role Identity	Wakefield <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Adapted for the American Red Cross context
I feel recognized and valued for the work I do as a volunteer for the American Red Cross.	Recognition	Investigator-developed	Developed to assess perceived recognition within the American Red Cross
Volunteering for the American Red Cross gives me a sense of purpose or direction.	Meaningfulness	Clary <i>et al.</i> (1998), Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)	Modified to assess purpose derived from volunteering
I understand my role as a Red Cross volunteer.	Organizational structure	Investigator-developed	Developed to assess perceptions of organization structure
Volunteering for the American Red Cross has helped me feel more connected to my school or local community.	Social connection	Wakefield <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Adapted to include school community for youth volunteers
I have formed meaningful friendships or social connections through volunteering for the American Red Cross.	Social connection	Wakefield <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Adapted for the American Red Cross context

CONTINUED APPENDIX B. Survey Items, Constructs, and Modifications from Validated Sources

Survey item	Construct	Original Scale	Modification
I feel supported by other youth volunteers and/or adult volunteers.	Social connection	Investigator-developed	Developed to assess perceived support from fellow volunteers
It is easy for me to access volunteer opportunities through the Red Cross.	Organizational structure	Investigator-developed	Developed to assess accessibility of volunteer opportunities
I sometimes feel limited in how much I can volunteer because of school, work, or family responsibilities.	Engagement	Investigator-developed	Developed to assess perceived barriers to volunteering
Volunteering for the American Red Cross has increased my understanding of public health or emergency preparedness.	Education	Clary <i>et al.</i> (1998), Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)	Modified to reflect the educational goals of the American Red Cross
I feel like my volunteer work makes a meaningful contribution to my community.	Meaningfulness	Clary <i>et al.</i> (1998), Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)	Modified to emphasize perceived community impact