

Satisfaction With Informal Volunteering During the COVID-19 Crisis: An Empirical Study Considering a Swiss Online Volunteering Platform

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a huge wave of compassion. In particular, online volunteering platforms established channeling help for high-risk groups. It is unclear under which conditions volunteers were satisfied with their COVID-19 volunteering mediated by these platforms and whether they will continue their engagement after the crisis. Therefore, and considering personal susceptibility to COVID-19 infection, this study analyzes the effects of different platform support for volunteers and the fulfillment of volunteers' motives. The study is based on an online survey of a sample of 565 volunteers who registered at and were placed by a Swiss online platform. Fulfillment of distinct volunteer motives and platform support drive COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction. Moreover, motive fulfillment and platform-related support indirectly impact willingness to volunteer long-term via volunteering satisfaction. Finally, the empirical results show that motive fulfillment and the effect of platform support are contingent on perceived susceptibility to infection.

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Keywords

COVID-19 crisis, informal volunteering, long-term volunteering, online platform support, volunteer functions inventory, volunteer satisfaction

Introduction

This study deals with informal crisis volunteering during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland. Informal crisis volunteering is defined as one-time and short-term response to emergencies, disasters, and sociopolitical crises (Smith et al., 2016). Crisis volunteers most often react ad hoc and without organizational context or guidance. Usually, their motives are sympathy and empathy, and their actions are based on individual decision-making and their own resources (Aguirre et al., 2016).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people volunteered to support the public health system, went shopping for people in high-risk populations, or supported nonprofits in their services (e.g., Beardmore et al., 2020). Studies investigating the underlying mechanisms of this unique kind of helping behavior revealed a pronounced effect of prosocial motives on the willingness to help (Mak & Fancourt, 2020). However, previous studies have shown that untrained and inexperienced informal crisis volunteers may risk both their own health and the health of those people in need (Whittaker et al., 2015). As our data show, and as occurred in previous crises (Simsa et al., 2019), the number of informal crisis volunteers in the COVID-19 pandemic—referred to in the following as COVID-19 volunteers—far exceeded the demand for ad hoc help. Hence, the relevant question in crises is not how to recruit volunteers but how to prevent negative consequences from the oversupply and how to channel commitment in such a way that informal crisis volunteering can have positive outcomes.

This study focuses on informal, spontaneous help for strangers organized through online volunteering platforms matching helpers and people in need. Given the circumstances during the lockdown, COVID-19 volunteers were highly dependent on the matching platforms to link them with people in need and supply the volunteering tasks (Spear et al., 2020). Online platforms have been found to be an effective instrument for volunteer recruitment and for matching volunteers to tasks in crisis situations (Rotolo & Berg, 2011). Moreover, the platforms provided COVID-19 volunteers with information on how to act under the lockdown restrictions and allowed better steering and control of the unpredictable spontaneous help in crisis situations. The data sample stems from the Swiss platform Amigos.ch, which mainly offered matching services for grocery shopping.

The unique situation of a lockdown due to a potential life-threatening communicable disease raises several research questions on the nature and organization of informal crisis volunteering. This study analyzes the drivers of COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction and considers motive fulfillment as a satisfaction antecedent. Furthermore, this study investigates how the personally perceived susceptibility to infection and the related platform crisis policy affected the satisfaction with the individual volunteer activity. In addition, we investigate to what extent the COVID-19 volunteering led to

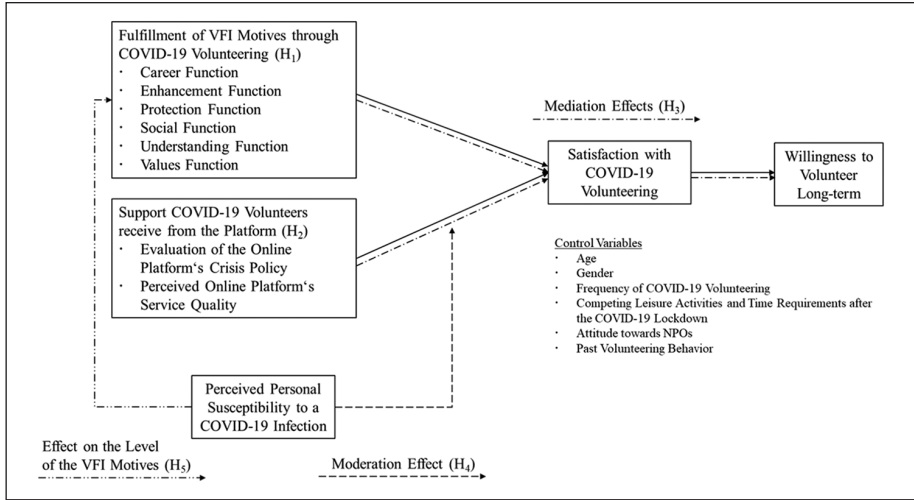


Figure 1. Conceptual model.
 Note. VFI = volunteer functions inventory; NPO = Nonprofit Organization.

a willingness to volunteer long-term, following existing studies on this matter (Hyde et al., 2016; Penner et al., 2005). Hence, our research questions are as follows:

- What effects do the perceived service quality and crisis policy measures have on the satisfaction with COVID-19 volunteering?
- What effect does the fulfillment of motives through COVID-19 volunteering have on satisfaction with the COVID-19 volunteering?
- Does satisfaction with the COVID-19 volunteering mediate the effect of the antecedent factors on the willingness to volunteer long-term after the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What effect does the volunteers' perceived susceptibility to COVID-19 infection have on the degree of volunteering motive fulfillment and volunteer satisfaction?

Conceptual Model

Figure 1 depicts the model of COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction. Work satisfaction is based on the assessment of one's own work content and working environment (Yousef, 2002). In line with Francis and Jones (2012) and Kulik et al. (2016), we assume that the fulfillment of motivational goals contributes to satisfaction with volunteer work. We consider Clary et al.'s (1998) volunteer functions inventory (VFI) approach as the basis for the conceptualization of the motive-related roots of volunteer satisfaction. Given the unique circumstances of COVID-19 volunteering (e.g., spontaneous help, everyday tasks, short-term engagement), we hypothesize that only the fulfillment of specific VFI

motives is decisive for satisfaction formation (see hypothesis delineation in Table A1, Supplemental Appendix). Therefore, Hypothesis H₁ is as follows:

Hypothesis₁ (H₁): The fulfillment of the career (H_{1a}), social (H_{1d}), and understanding (H_{1c}) functions has no effect on COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction. The fulfillment of the enhancement (H_{1b}), protection (H_{1e}), and values (H_{1f}) functions has a positive effect on COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction.

This study considers factors that capture the platforms' support to volunteers during the COVID-19 crisis. Rosychuk et al. (2008) showed that a well-designed information policy had positive effects on willingness to volunteer in an influenza pandemic. Hence, we assume that the assessment of the online platforms' crisis-policy measures (e.g., supply of health information) has a positive impact on COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction. In line with Brady and Robertson's (2001) reasoning, we consider perceived service quality as a further platform-related antecedent of COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction. We consider service quality perception as a formative construct (see Table A3, Supplemental Appendix) and Hypothesis H₂ reads as follows:

Hypothesis₂ (H₂): Platforms' COVID-19 crisis policy measures (H_{2a}) and perceived service quality (H_{2b}) have a positive effect on COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction.

Vecina et al. (2009) and Hyde et al. (2016) reveal that volunteer satisfaction strengthens the intention to volunteer long-term. Furthermore, previous research shows that consumer satisfaction acts as a mediator between expectation confirmation and repurchasing behavior (e.g., Szymanski & Henard, 2001). In line with this stream of research, authors from the field of occupational psychology, such as Yousef (2002), show that job satisfaction also acts as an intervening variable. Therefore, Hypothesis H₃ is as follows:

Hypothesis₃ (H₃): Satisfaction with COVID-19 volunteering mediates the effects of motive fulfillment, perceived platform service quality, and the assessment of platforms' crisis policy on the willingness to volunteer long-term.

We consider the perceived susceptibility to COVID-19 infection as a moderating variable. Perceived susceptibility captures the degree of the individual belief that one can be infected with, for instance, the COVID-19 virus (Masa & Chowa, 2014). Wong and Sam (2010) show that more susceptible citizens have higher information needs in pandemic situations and thus have higher expectations with regard to the quality of platforms' crisis measures. Therefore, Hypothesis H₄ is as follows:

Hypothesis₄ (H₄): The positive effect of the platforms' crisis policy is stronger (weaker) for volunteers that perceive themselves as less (more) susceptible to a COVID-19 infection.

One can classify the VFI motives into more instrumental-egoistic (e.g., the career motive) and more altruistic-ethical (e.g., the value motive) categories (Kulik et al., 2016). Susceptible persons should regard COVID-19 volunteering as more “heroic” because they judge this behavior as being riskier for them. We assume that the “heroic” nature of COVID-19 volunteering more strongly contributes to the fulfillment of the altruistic values motive. Furthermore, and in line with Dugas et al. (2016), the perception that COVID-19 volunteering is a kind of “self-sacrifice” should in particular contribute to the fulfillment of more susceptible persons’ self-enhancement motive. Hence, Hypothesis H_5 is as follows:

Hypothesis₅ (H_5): The mean value of value-motive fulfillment (H_{5a}) and enhancement-motive fulfillment (H_{5b}) is higher (lower) for persons with high (low) susceptibility perceptions.

Study Design and Measurement

We conducted an online survey among COVID-19 volunteers in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (“Deutschschweiz”) who had been placed in a volunteer position via the online platform Amigos.ch. Amigos.ch is a cross-sector collaboration of a retail company, Migros, and a nonprofit for elder people, Pro Senectute, that provides volunteer opportunities in the field of neighborhood assistance for elderly and disabled people. In the period from May 6, 2020 to June 3, 2020, a link on the Amigos.ch app directed users to an online questionnaire. Seven hundred and thirty-four responses were collected by means of the online survey. Some of these responses were discarded due to high proportions of missing answers per respondent and inconsistent answers (i.e., straight lining). Moreover, a preliminary study has shown that test persons need at least 8 min to read the introductory text as well as the intermediate information and to answer the questions carefully. Hence, all questionnaires with a response time of less than 8 min were removed. In sum, the number of questionnaires included was reduced to 565. A total of approximately 24,300 individuals had registered on the Amigos.ch platform as helpers, but only approximately 4,250 German-speaking volunteers were actually matched to provide assistance. Hence, the questionnaire response rate was 13.3%. Table A2 in the Supplemental Appendix provides information on the sample characteristics. Table A3 in the Supplemental Appendix depicts the measurement scales used in this study. Moreover, Table A3 (Supplemental Appendix) shows that all measures are reliable and valid. To assess the effect of perceived susceptibility on VFI motives’ mean values, we performed a median split of the originally continuous variable.

Results

For the analysis, we conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) using SmartPLS 3.3.2 (Ringle et al., 2015) and considered several covariates (see Figure 1). Interested readers may refer to Hair et al. (2016) for further information on the partial least

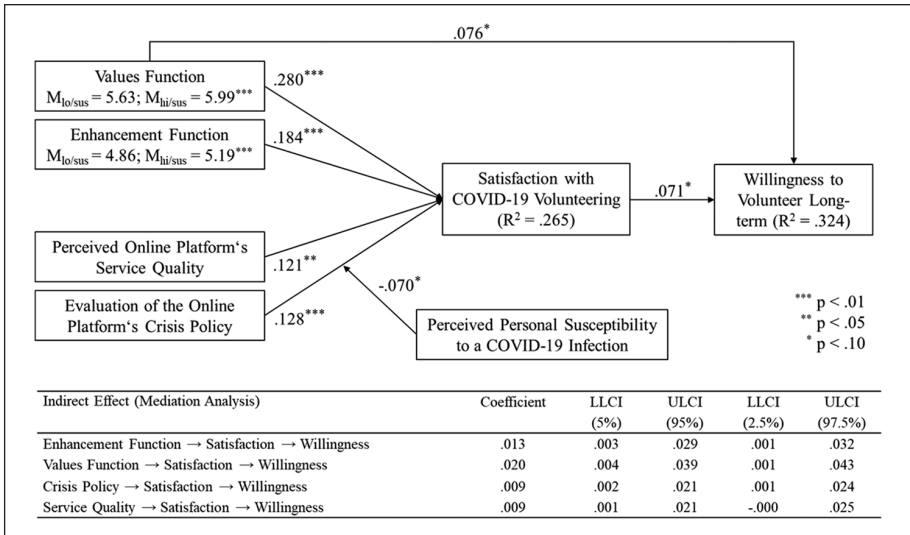


Figure 2. Significant effects.

Note. LL and UL bootstrap confidence intervals are based on 5,000 bootstrap runs. The detailed parameter estimates and further results of the empirical analyses can be provided by the corresponding author upon request. lo/sus = low susceptibility; hi/sus = high susceptibility; LLCI = lower level of confidence interval; ULCI = upper level of confidence interval.

squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method. Figure 2 depicts the R^2 values of the endogenous variables as well as the significant path coefficients. Satisfaction has a positive effect on the willingness to volunteer long-term. The fulfillment of the enhancement motive and the values motive has a positive effect on volunteer satisfaction (H_{1b} and H_{1f}). The evaluation of platforms' crisis-policy measures (H_{2a}) and the service-quality perception (H_{2b}) have positive effects on satisfaction. In addition, the analysis reveals a significant moderating effect of susceptibility on the relationship between evaluation of the crisis-policy measures and satisfaction (H_4). The moderating effect indicates that the positive effect of the crisis-policy evaluation on volunteer satisfaction is more pronounced among respondents with a low perceived COVID-19 susceptibility. Figure 2 shows that satisfaction mediates the effects of the enhancement function and the values function, as well as the effects of both platform-related constructs (H_3). In addition, Figure 2 reveals that susceptibility has a positive effect on the fulfillment of the values and enhancement motives (H_{5a} and H_{5b}).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study contributes to research on informal, spontaneous volunteering in crisis situations. First, we show that volunteer satisfaction has an important function in linking the experience of informal crisis volunteering to long-term volunteering. More precisely, and in line with the research of Vecina et al. (2009) and Hyde et al. (2016),

satisfaction with volunteering during a crisis mediates the effects of the considered antecedent factors and thereby increases the probability of long-term volunteering.

Second, and building on Francis and Jones (2012) and Kulik et al. (2016), our study offers findings on the motive-related basis of satisfaction with informal crisis volunteering. Starting from Clary et al.'s (1998) VFI approach, our empirical results show that, in particular, the fulfillment of the enhancement motive and the values motive positively affected COVID-19 volunteer satisfaction. Apparently, COVID-19 volunteering was a way to increase self-confidence and to altruistically care for people in need. Furthermore, our study shows that motive fulfillment was more pronounced for volunteers who perceived themselves to be susceptible to COVID-19 infection. Interestingly, in contrast to findings of the study by Kulik et al. (2016), the satisfaction of the protection motive had no effect on the satisfaction of COVID-19 volunteers. Accordingly, COVID-19 volunteering was not a way to reduce negative emotions or escape from the reality of the lockdown situation. In addition, the fulfillment of the career, social, and understanding function was not relevant for the formation of COVID-19 volunteering satisfaction.

Beyond individual motives and activities, our study adds to a better understanding of how to accommodate the many spontaneous volunteers in a crisis. Online platforms are an efficient means to channel the oversupply of informal crisis volunteers and to match helpers with people in need. Hence, the platforms may mitigate the negative side effects of spontaneous empathetic and sympathetic helpfulness in crisis situations that are highlighted by Whittaker et al. (2015). In line with this notion, and as a further contribution to research, our study shows that the platforms fulfill an information and support function for the volunteers and thus improve the personal perception of the individual volunteer experience. This is in line with findings from Rosychuk et al. (2008) about the relevance of well-designed information policies during pandemics. However, the present study shows that the effect of this supportive function is less pronounced for the formation of volunteer satisfaction under the condition of high perceived personal susceptibility to a COVID-19 infection.

Crises will continue to occur in the future, and accordingly, the results of this study are of interest to state agencies and nonprofits in the area of crisis reaction. Since informal crisis volunteering satisfies the values and enhancement motives, the identification and selection of potential volunteers to whom these volunteering functions are particularly important should be advantageous. In addition, advertising appeals in comparable crisis situations should communicate the possibility of self-enhancement and providing selfless and altruistic help. Furthermore, because of its positive effect on motive fulfillment with respect to volunteers' perceived susceptibility, communication campaigns should not try to downplay the risks associated with such crisis situations. Volunteer organizations should in particular meet susceptible volunteers' expectations regarding the provision of safety information and other support measures.

Every empirical study has limitations: First, it is not certain whether the sample is representative of the people who volunteered during the COVID-19 crisis. Second, the internal validity of survey studies is lower than that of experimental studies. Third, this study considers only one online platform, and thus external validity might

be limited. Future studies may try to overcome these limitations. Especially, future studies in other crisis situations could verify the relevance of the identified drivers of volunteer satisfaction. In addition, to tailor targeting strategies, it would be interesting to determine for which volunteer segment the fulfillment of the enhancement function and the values function is particularly crucial. Finally, the extent to which COVID-19 volunteers are actually engaged as volunteers after the end of the crisis should be investigated.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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