



# Volunteers' satisfaction with the voluntary association: exploring the role of service climate, organizational identification, and understanding motivation

Ferdinando Toscano<sup>1</sup> · Salvatore Zappalà<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This study employs the Attraction-Selection-Attrition model and Social Identity Theory to examine if organizational identification mediates the relationship between volunteers' perception of service climate and satisfaction with the voluntary association they belong to. The study also investigates if understanding motivation, a component of motivation to volunteer, moderates the relationship between volunteers' organizational identification and satisfaction with the voluntary association. A cross-sectional study was conducted using an online questionnaire completed by 166 participants serving as volunteers in a Red Cross local committee in an Italian city. Results suggest that there is a significant positive relationship between service climate and satisfaction with the voluntary association. Additionally, it was observed that organizational identification partially and positively mediates the relationship between service climate and satisfaction with the voluntary association. Contrary to what expected, the moderation effect was negative instead of positive. Specifically, the findings suggest that understanding motivation improves the satisfaction with the voluntary association when volunteers have low level of organizational identification but decreases the satisfaction with the voluntary association when volunteers have high level of organizational identification. In the discussion, it is emphasized the importance of volunteers' satisfaction with the association for organizational functioning and discussed the moderation results in the context of known theories. Finally, the paper presents the practical and research implications of the findings.

**Keywords** Volunteering · Motivation to volunteer · Organizational service climate · Organizational identification · Satisfaction with the volunteer association

## Introduction

Volunteering is a worthwhile activity in which individuals engage in during their leisure time. In the European Union (EU), more than 20% of individuals over 15 years old participate in formal volunteering activities (GHK, 2010). In Italy, this percentage is slightly lower at about 8%, which translates to approximately 4.2 million individuals who serve other people or the community (ISTAT, 2014). According to recent estimates focused on the U.S. market, every hour worked by a volunteer is worth about

\$25 saved in wages to pay a paid worker to do the same job (Independent Sector, 2019). Considering that the hours of service provided by approximately one billion volunteers worldwide are equivalent to those of 125 million full-time workers, the economic benefits brought by this activity to society as a whole are substantial (United Nations Volunteers, 2018). Given its capacity to generate both economic and social value, it becomes imperative to delve into the psychological factors that drive volunteering. Recognizing and valuing the satisfaction of volunteers not only acknowledges their invaluable contributions but also provides a framework for optimizing volunteer outcomes, ultimately amplifying the positive impact on society as a whole (Einolf, 2018).

Volunteerism mirrors the provision of services in the profit sector and involves individuals dedicating their time and effort to benefit the community. In profit-driven organizations, like banks, hotels, retail stores, and restaurants, a

✉ Salvatore Zappalà  
salvatore.zappala@unibo.it

<sup>1</sup> Present Address: Department of Psychology, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

distinct organizational climate has been identified as a key factor influencing both customer satisfaction and loyalty, as well as employee job satisfaction (Bowen & Schneider, 2014; Hong et al., 2013; Salanova et al., 2005). This particular climate, called service climate (SC), constitutes a distinctive facet of organizational climate, and refers to employees' collective perceptions of the policies, procedures, and practices endorsed, valued, and rewarded by the organization to ensure excellent customer service (Schneider et al., 1998). While numerous studies examined the concept of organizational climate in voluntary organizations (Li et al., 2020; Licciardello et al., 2013; Nencini et al., 2016), there has been limited examination of service climate in this same context. To our knowledge, no prior research has assessed the relationship of service climate with vital dimensions of volunteers' well-being, namely their organizational identification (OI) and satisfaction with the association (SWA). Identification with the goals, values, and overall mission of the organization plays a pivotal role in the decision to join and remain committed to a voluntary organization. Although recent reviews and meta-analyses have demonstrated a link between organizational identification and job satisfaction (He & Brown, 2013; Lee et al., 2015), the relationship between organizational identification and satisfaction with the voluntary association to which volunteers belong is much less investigated and, indeed, deserves further exploration.

The present cross-sectional study is based on the Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) model (Schneider et al., 1995), Social Identity Theory (SIT, Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and Self-Determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In our study, following the ASA approach, we argue that organizations tend to attract, select and retain individuals that share the same values and behaviors. Consequently, when individuals embody the service-oriented behaviors, implementing such behaviors reinforces the perception of a positive service climate. This, in turn, increases the satisfaction of being part of an organization where all members not only appreciate but also actively incorporate those values which are integral to the organization's core mission. Following the SIT approach, we argue that the relationship just described between service climate and volunteers' satisfaction is partially mediated by organizational identification, because a shared service climate enhances the perception of communalities between individuals which ultimately contributes to their satisfaction with the association.

Additionally, we incorporated Self-Determination Theory into our analysis, investigating whether the relationship between identification with the voluntary association and satisfaction is influenced by a motivational factor, known as understanding motivation (UM). Volunteering is known to bring personal benefits to those who engage in it, such as the development of valuable skills, heightened

self-esteem, or deeper connections with others (Wilson, 2000; Worker et al., 2020), thus studying understanding motivation (UM), which refers to volunteers' drive to gain new knowledge, develop new skills, and meet new people when interacting with volunteers and customers, is of fundamental importance.

This study makes several important contributions to the literature. To our knowledge, no previous studies examined the relationship between service climate and satisfaction of volunteers with their association. Yet, we posit that volunteers' perception of service climate is related to their experience as volunteers, helps organizations to understand the volunteer mindset, and improves organizational outcomes. Thus, in this study, we attempt to fill these gaps by assessing the service climate in a voluntary organization in Italy and testing whether volunteers who perceive that their association provides good service are more satisfied with the voluntary association itself.

In pursuit of its ultimate goal of testing service climate as an antecedent of volunteer satisfaction with their association, on a theoretical side, this study, firstly, both expands the existing service climate literature (Schneider et al., 1998) to voluntary associations and also investigates the relationship between service climate and the less investigated dimension of (volunteer) satisfaction with the organization. Secondly, it proposes organizational identification as a mechanism that may mediate the relationship between service climate and satisfaction with the voluntary association. Thirdly, the study examines whether satisfaction with the voluntary association is increased when organizational identification is combined with volunteers' understanding motivation themselves and the world around them. By considering volunteering as an opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth, this study offers a unique perspective in which sense of belonging and motivation are related to volunteer satisfaction.

The study also provides practical insights for managers of voluntary associations. Nurturing the positive experience of volunteering may promote volunteers' satisfaction and, in the long term, increase organization's effectiveness and success. Satisfied volunteers significantly enhance the value they bring to the organizations, in stark contrast to their dissatisfied fellows (Einolf, 2018), and exhibit a stronger commitment to the organization (Benevene et al., 2018; De Clerck et al., 2022; Jiménez et al., 2009). Volunteer satisfaction also translates into a greater sense of accomplishment and pride in their contributions, fortifying social bonds and nurturing a robust sense of community (Lachance et al., 2021; Pozzi et al., 2014). Therefore, comprehending the reasons for volunteer satisfaction and actively promoting satisfaction with the voluntary association are crucial managerial aspects, with relevant consequences also in terms of organizational outcomes.

Furthermore, taking into account the multiple indicators of satisfaction (e.g. internal procedures, activity coordinators, budget allocation, etc.) can uncover potential areas for organizational improvement, enhancing overall effectiveness and efficiency. Thus, in the end, this paper offers first-hand suggestions for enhancing volunteer satisfaction and, thus, improving organizational effectiveness.

## Literature review and hypotheses

### Service climate and volunteers' satisfaction with the association

Volunteers' satisfaction with their association encompasses volunteers' overall sense of contentment and fulfillment with the voluntary organization they belong to. This satisfaction promotes volunteer retention (Benevene et al., 2018; De Clerck et al., 2022; Jiménez et al., 2009), facilitates the achievement of organizational goals (Judge et al., 2001), fostering positive relationships among members (Lachance et al., 2021; Pozzi et al., 2014), and enhancing the association's reputation (Sarstedt & Schloderer, 2010). Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to volunteers' satisfaction.

Traditionally, whereas “organizational” climate refers to perceptions of the organizational environment that are shared within teams, departments or branches (Schneider et al., 1998), “psychological” climate refers to how the organizational environment is perceived and interpreted by the individual members of that organization (Yoon et al., 2001). Employees' perception of their organizational environment represents a cognitive map of the organizational functioning and helps them to determine their behavior in relation to organizational goals. In this study we refer to psychological service climate and we propose that service climate perceived by volunteers is positively related to their satisfaction with the association. Service climate refers to the “employees' shared sense of the service quality - focused policies, practices and procedures they experience and the service quality emphasis they observe in behaviors that are rewarded, supported, and expected” (Bowen & Schneider, 2014, p. 5). In other words, service climate refers to employees' perception that organizational policies, practices, and procedures are all geared towards providing excellent service. In the context of volunteering, we argue that policies, practices, and procedures oriented towards providing good service to citizens can play a role in shaping the perception of an organization oriented to service. For example, by clarifying expectations regarding when, where, how, and with what effort and positive emotion volunteers should serve citizens, the association sets

clear expectations for volunteers' behaviors. Additionally, by promoting positive and supportive behaviors, the association encourages a positive and supportive environment towards internal staff and external actors which, we argue, can lead to a positive volunteering experience.

The Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) model proposed by Schneider et al. (1995) helps to explain why service climate may be related to volunteers' satisfaction. According to the attraction phase of the model, individuals are drawn to organizations that align with their own values and beliefs. According to the selection phase of the model, once individuals become volunteers, they assess whether they fit well with the organization and vice versa. This assessment includes evaluating whether the psychological climate aligns with their own values. According to the attrition phase, if there is a misalignment between the volunteers' values and the organization's climate, volunteers may choose to leave. This could happen if they feel that the organization's policies, practices, and procedures do not resonate with their own values.

Volunteers who find a good match with the organization are more likely to stay and to be satisfied with it. This self-selection process leads to a pool of members who share similar perceptions about the organization, reinforcing the service climate. As volunteers who resonate with the organization's values and climate continue to engage with the association and its activities, they not only validate their initial attraction but also actively contribute to the positive service climate. This positive feedback loop creates a thriving environment where members reinforce and amplify each other's dedication to the organization's mission. This shared sense of purpose and belonging cultivates satisfaction among volunteers, as they feel aligned with the organization's overarching goals, value what they do and have the sense of being in the right place for them.

Previous studies conducted in different types of organizations endorse such reasoning demonstrating, for example, that service climate is related to employees' job satisfaction and performance (Chadwick & Stamper, 2004; Salanova et al., 2005). Furthermore, Wu and Li (2019) indicated that a supportive work climate helps to determine the quality of volunteer motivation, which also supports satisfaction. In this study, we aim to extend the knowledge on service climate by testing the relationship between volunteers' perception of service climate and volunteers' satisfaction with the voluntary association. Based on the above, we propose that:

**H1.** There is a positive association between the perception of service climate (SC) and satisfaction with the voluntary association (SWA).

### The mediating role of organizational identification in the relationship between volunteer service climate and satisfaction with the association

The concept of organizational identification is critical to our investigation of the relationship between service climate and satisfaction with the voluntary association. Organizational identification refers to an individual's perception of belongingness or oneness with an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1974) posits that individuals define their identity based on the groups to which they belong. Social categorization processes highlight similarities within the group and differences with other groups, strengthening the sense of identification with one's group. This identification creates a bond between the individual and the group, shaping behavior according to the expectations of group members.

In this paper, we argue that service climate contributes to strengthening volunteers' organizational identification, due to the processes of social categorization described by the SIT. Through the service climate, volunteers recognize the importance placed by the organization on quality service. Consequently, the match between the quality of service they provide and the quality of service that they acknowledge to be provided by other members reinforce their identification with the organization. As a result, in cases of good service climate, volunteers align themselves more closely with the organization, enhancing their sense of identification with the group. In contrast, a voluntary association with limited attention to serving citizens discourages volunteers from feeling identified with the association because of the discrepancy between what is considered important by the individual volunteer and the organization. Hence, also based on previous research on the relationship between service climate and organizational identification (He et al., 2015; Solnet & Paulsen, 2006), we propose that service climate is related to volunteers' organizational identification.

The identification processes described, however, are not for their own sake. Conversely, we claim they also lead to outcomes in terms of volunteer's overall satisfaction with the organization they are a part of. As suggested by the ASA theory (Schneider et al., 1995), organizations attract and retain individuals that positively estimate the congruence between their personal characteristics and the organization's attributes. We believe that the perception of a service climate consistent with the values and mission of a voluntary organization is a source of satisfaction with one's association arising precisely from the match between the perception of the personal service provided by the volunteer and the organizational service just mentioned. In fact, individuals with a strong organizational identity tend to take pride in their organizational membership (Jones, 2010), and their emotional involvement in the organization predisposes them

to evaluate the organization positively (Boroş et al., 2011; Loi et al., 2014).

Therefore, when volunteers perceive that providing an excellent service is shared, and their identification with the organization thus increases, also satisfaction with their association increases. Conversely, when volunteers perceive a negative service climate because the perception of providing an excellent service is not shared, they may distance themselves from the association, leading to lower levels of both identification and satisfaction with their association. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

**H2.** There is a direct positive association between the perception of service climate (SC) and organizational identification (OI).

**H3.** There is a direct positive association between volunteer organizational identification (OI) and satisfaction with the association (SWA)

**H4.** There is a positive indirect effect of perception of service climate (SC) on satisfaction with the association (SWA) through organizational identification (OI).

### The moderating role of understanding motivation in the relationship between organizational identification and volunteers' satisfaction with the association

Finally, in this study, we explored how personal motivations shape the relationship between organizational identification and volunteer satisfaction with the association. Since volunteers, unlike paid workers, freely choose to join and continue their presence in the association, it is worth considering if reasons to serve in a volunteer association are related to satisfaction with it.

The alignment between personal values and the values of the association is a critical basis for the choice to volunteer. However, previous literature has expressed skepticism about value congruence as the only explanatory mechanism, calling for other reasons (Wilson, 2012), such as for instance extrinsic and intrinsic motivations or functional motivation (Clary et al., 1998). Extrinsic motivations associated with volunteerism include factors such as increasing the number of friends or opportunities for social recognition. Intrinsic motivations include the desire to help others, or other ideal motivations (Degli Antoni, 2009). Following a functionalist approach, Clary and colleagues (1998) argued that one of the reasons to get involved in volunteer activities is understanding motivation. According to these scholars, volunteerism allows new learning experiences and the opportunity to exercise knowledge, skills, and abilities that might otherwise go unpracticed. In accordance with Clary and colleagues' conceptualization, we specify that in this study, we adopted the label "understanding motivation" to be consistent with previous literature. On the other hand, we observe that, since

the original authors described this motivation as involving “benefits related to self-development, learning, and variety in life through their volunteer service” (Clary et al., 1998, p. 1518), labels such as “learning motivation” might be more readily understood by the reader although it does not fully encompass the breadth of the original description of the concept.

Anyway, in this study, the consideration of this motivation is deemed particularly valuable for a thorough investigation of the relationship between identification and satisfaction of volunteers, for two primary reasons. Firstly, from a purely theoretical perspective, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that one of the three basic human needs is the need for competence, that is, the desire to feel competent and effective in what individuals do. Understanding motivation fulfills this basic human need because it allows individuals to exercise knowledge and skills, learn new information, and gain insights into oneself and others. By actively seeking out opportunities to learn and grow, volunteers can enhance their sense of competence and effectiveness, which can in turn increase their overall satisfaction with voluntary work. Thus, understanding motivation is a critical component of volunteerism that can help to drive both personal and organizational success. Secondly, prior research has placed significant emphasis on this specific motivation in the context of health-related volunteer work, as it is frequently observed among volunteers in health institutions who report experiencing self-development, learning, and task variety (Clary et al., 1998; Gidron, 1978). Therefore, we can conclude that understanding motivation is a crucial factor in a volunteer association that offers multiple type of services, including health ones.

In this study, we delve into the impact of understanding motivation on the mechanisms that link volunteers’ organizational identification with their satisfaction towards their association. Specifically, we investigated if this particular motivation amplifies or mitigates this relationship.

By adopting the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), we contend that organizational identification serves as the process through which volunteers actually fulfill their need for relatedness. In particular, we emphasize that developing organizational identification implies a genuine belonging to a consciously chosen group, with a profound personal value attached to being part of that specific organization. Experiencing organizational identification thus means fully satisfying the personal need for relationship, which provides a solid basis for anticipating the development of satisfaction with the organization to which one belongs.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, the functionalist approach suggests that considering specific types of motivation can enhance our understanding of the processes underlying volunteerism. In particular, as mentioned earlier,

understanding motivation (e.g., comprehend other individuals, the tasks at hand, the procedural aspects of the voluntary organization, etc.) aligns with the fundamental human need posited by Self-Determination Theory - the need for competence.

According to Self-Determination Theory, simultaneously meeting multiple psychological needs leads to heightened individual satisfaction. Therefore, we posit that the simultaneous occurrence of organizational identification (fulfilling the need for relatedness) and understanding motivation (fulfilling the need for competence) leads volunteers to experience greater satisfaction with their association. Consequently, we argue that volunteers who demonstrate strong organizational identification and view volunteering as an opportunity for personal growth (e.g., acquiring new skills, taking on new challenges, or experimenting with new activities) experience higher satisfaction with the voluntary association that provides the platform for such growth, in comparison to volunteers with high organizational identification but lower understanding motivation. This could be because fulfilling two needs simultaneously results in higher satisfaction than fulfilling only one need. Hence, we propose the following final hypothesis:

**H5.** There is a positive interaction between volunteer organizational identification (OI) and understanding motivation (UM) on satisfaction with the volunteer association, so that individuals that are more identified with the association and more motivated to understand will also be more satisfied with the voluntary association.

## Methods

### Participants and procedure

This study involved 166 volunteers of a local Red Cross committee in a medium-sized city in Northern Italy. The Red Cross in Italy, like in other countries, receives funding from government grants and private donations to provide medical assistance, both in routine and emergency situations. They are organized as non-profit associations, and the volunteers are typically not paid for their services.

In December 2020, an online questionnaire was proposed to the volunteers of this organization as part of an organizational climate survey. The volunteers accessed the questionnaire via a link to the Qualtrics platform that was provided to them by the administration staff via email. Participation in the study was open to all volunteers and stimulated by the local board members as part of a wider initiative to measure the well-being of volunteers. Participation in this study was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants. No incentive was provided for participation and



there was no consequence for volunteers not participating in the study, which was moreover anonymous.

The mean age of the 166 volunteers was 43.78 (SD = 15.32; Min = 18; Max = 76). The sample was equally distributed by gender, with 52.1% men and 47.9% women. About half of the participants (49.1%) had a high school diploma as their highest educational degree, while approximately one-third (32.7%) had a university degree. The remaining part of the sample (18.2%) had a middle school education as their highest degree, mainly due to the presence of younger individuals in the sample. The number of years of participation in the association was varied but equally distributed, with less than 3 years of participation accounting for 31.9% of the sample, 3–6 years accounting for 22.3%, 7–10 years accounting for 17.5%, and 10 or more years accounting for 28.3%.

## Measures

Besides socio-demographic variables (namely, age, gender, and education), the following constructs were measured.

*Service climate* (SC) was assessed using the Italian version of the Global Service Climate 4-item subscale by Carrasco et al. (2012), based on the original version by Schneider et al. (1998), and validated in the Italian language by Zappalà and colleagues (2018). Participants answered these items using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Completely disagree*; 7 = *Completely agree*). An example of an item is: “The overall quality of service provided by our organization is excellent”. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale in this study was 0.82.

*Organizational identification* (OI) was investigated through the single visual item developed by Bergami and Bagozzi (2000). This measure was chosen because it is brief, uncomplicated, and provides participants with a concrete representation of their identification with the organization. Participants were asked to rate the degree of closeness between themselves and the association, which was represented by two circles. The circles were positioned at varying distances, with the maximum distance indicating no identification (1 = *No identification at all*; 7 = *Completely identified with the organization*). Although the use of single-item scales has been discussed over time, we emphasize that this scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in the past when compared with verbal scales of OI in different samples (Shamir & Kark, 2004). Furthermore, recent studies have demonstrated the goodness-of-fit of the single-item measure in exhibiting concurrent and predictive validity to an extent comparable to multiple-item measures (Matthews et al., 2022; Song et al., 2022).

*Satisfaction with the association* (SWA) was investigated using six items created for this study to respond accurately to the specific research interests of the local Red Cross

committee. These items result from preliminary discussions with association leaders, in which the most important aspects of the experience of members of that local committee were outlined. Participants had to agree with the items describing satisfaction with: the acknowledgment of individual performances, training and learning opportunities, relationships with the area coordinator, relationships with the other volunteers, the clarity of tasks and responsibilities, and the activities in which they were involved. Participants expressed their satisfaction with each aspect, adopting a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Completely disagree*; 7 = *Completely agree*). Before utilizing the new, non-validated scale in the study, preliminary analyses were conducted. The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using maximum likelihood yielded promising results (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin for sampling adequacy = 0.85, Bartlett’s test of Sphericity Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) = 420.52 with 21 degrees of freedom (df) and  $p < .001$ ). The goodness-of-fit was also excellent ( $\chi^2 = 35.44$  with 14 degrees of freedom and  $p = .001$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.53$ ). Only one factor was extracted, explaining 52.9% of the variance with a minimum item saturation of 0.46. Based on these results, the scale was deemed suitable for the study and included in subsequent analyses. In this sample Cronbach’s alpha was 0.85.

*Understanding motivation* (UM) was assessed using three items of the subscale of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al., 1998). Participants answered by adopting a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Completely disagree*; 7 = *Completely agree*). An example of an item is: “When volunteering I can learn how to deal with a variety of persons”. In this sample, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.67.

For the four study variables, out of 664 potential observations (resulting from number of participants  $\times$  4 measured variables), there were 19 missing data, homogeneously distributed among the scales. The missing rate was 2.9%, and the listwise method was applied for missing values when computing the model.

*Control variable* Previous studies found that age affects the relationship between volunteer motivation and satisfaction (Aranda et al., 2019; Chacón et al., 2017). Therefore, we introduced volunteer age as a control variable in the model.

## Data analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, we assessed the effect of a Common Method Bias through the Harman test. Thus, we assessed the measurement model, the structural validity and reliability of our measures by running four confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) and computing, for each multi-item construct, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and McDonald’s omega ( $\omega$ ) values. This last measure was computed because, in the last years, it has been preferred by many scholars to Cronbach’s alpha (Hayes & Coutts, 2020; Peters, 2014). We then computed

descriptive statistics and correlations; finally, we tested our hypotheses using Model 14 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS. All analyses were performed using Jamovi and SPSS 27.

## Results

### Validity and reliability of the measures

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to conduct a single-factor Harman test to verify the absence of common method bias in our data. The single-factor Harman test, which forced the extraction of a single factor, suggests the probable absence of common method bias, because the extracted single factor explained 40.14% of the variance, a percentage below the threshold of 50% commonly adopted in other studies (e.g., Dupuis et al., 2017; Zappalà et al., 2022).

To test the structural independence of the four measures of our model and the absence of a common latent factor, we conducted four CFAs, comparing a 1-factor model with a 3-factor model, and two 4-factor models, respectively with and without correlated item errors (see Table 1). The 1-factor model fit, in which all items were grouped in a single factor, was not good ( $\chi^2=293.13$ ;  $df=77$ ;  $\chi^2/df=3.81$ ;  $CFI=0.77$ ;  $TLI=0.73$ ;  $SRMR=0.09$ ;  $RMSEA=0.13$ ). The fit improved, but to a not satisfactory extent, testing a 3-factor model in which items of SC and SWA were put together, and OI and UM were tested as separate factors ( $\chi^2=220.50$ ;  $df=75$ ;  $\chi^2/df=2.94$ ;  $CFI=0.85$ ;  $TLI=0.82$ ;  $SRMR=0.07$ ;  $RMSEA=0.10$ ). The 4-factor model fit, in which all scales were considered as separate factors, had a better fit, demonstrating that, as expected, the items clustered best in the four expected factors ( $\chi^2=175.61$ ;  $df=72$ ;  $\chi^2/df=2.44$ ;  $CFI=0.89$ ;  $TLI=0.86$ ;  $SRMR=0.06$ ;  $RMSEA=0.09$ ). However, since some fit values were slightly below the cut-offs, we correlated two pairs of semantically related items within the SWA construct, obtaining values fully meeting the thresholds suggested by the scientific literature ( $\chi^2=147.15$ ;  $df=70$ ;  $\chi^2/df=2.17$ ;  $CFI=0.92$ ;  $TLI=0.90$ ;  $SRMR=0.06$ ;

$RMSEA=0.08$ ). In this model, all items saturated in their respective factor with values above 0.40, confirming the validity of the measurement model.

Even the Composite Reliability values of the multi-item measures were good ( $CR_{SC}=0.82$ ;  $CR_{SWA}=0.87$ ;  $CR_{UM}=0.69$ ), and superior to their respective Average Variance Extracted values ( $AVE_{SC}=0.54$ ;  $AVE_{SWA}=0.52$ ;  $AVE_{UM}=0.44$ ). All this, coupled with the fact that McDonald's omegas were above 0.70 for all the multi-item study constructs ( $\omega_{SC}=0.82$ ;  $\omega_{SWA}=0.85$ ;  $\omega_{UM}=0.73$ ), led to the conclusion that the study measures can be considered valid and reliable.

### Descriptive statistics

Once the validity and reliability of the study measures were assessed, we computed the descriptive statistics and correlation between variables. These results are presented in Table 2.

Descriptive statistics show that all the averages of the model variables exceeded the scale's mid-point value (four on a 1–7 Likert scale). In particular, descriptive analyses showed moderately high perceptions of service climate and understanding motivation. Correlations showed significant relationships between the four study variables. Specifically, satisfaction with the association was highly related to organizational identification ( $r=.61$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and service climate ( $r=.68$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and showed a significant association also with understanding motivation ( $r=.25$ ;  $p<.05$ ). On the other hand, older volunteers perceived lower levels of service climate ( $r=-.22$ ;  $p<.05$ ) and were less satisfied with the association ( $r=-.18$ ;  $p<.05$ ). In contrast, no relationship was observed between age and organizational identification and understanding motivation.

### Model testing

Finally, we tested our five study hypotheses using the PROCESS macro. The first model included age as a control variable. We found no significant association between age and organizational identification ( $r=.00$ ;  $p=.80$ ). Despite the previously reported significant correlation, this regression

**Table 1** Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) results

Considered model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
1-factor model (all items grouped in one factor)	293.13	77	3.81	0.77	0.73	0.09	0.13
3-factor model (SC and SWA coupled, OI and UM as separated factors)	220.50	75	2.94	0.85	0.82	0.07	0.10
4-factor model (all scales separated, no couple of items related)	175.61	72	2.44	0.89	0.86	0.06	0.09
4-factor model (all scales separated, two couples of items of the SWA scale were related)	147.15	70	2.17	0.92	0.90	0.06	0.08

$\chi^2$  chi-square,  $df$  degrees of freedom,  $\chi^2/df$  chi square/df ratio,  $CFI$  Comparative Fit index,  $TLI$  Tucker-Lewis Index,  $SRMR$  Standardized Root Mean Square Residual,  $RMSEA$  Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

**Table 2** Averages, standard deviations, and correlations among variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Service climate	5.24	1.15						
2. Organizational identification	4.41	1.64	0.52**					
3. Satisfaction with the association	4.70	1.25	0.68**	0.61**				
4. Understanding motivation	5.20	1.19	0.22**	0.33**	0.25**			
5. Age	43.78	15.32	-0.20*	-0.13	-0.19*	-0.13		
6. Gender (1=M, 2=F)	1.48	0.50	-0.09	-0.03	0.02	0.03	-0.16	
7. Education (1–4)	2.38	1.03	-0.01	0.07	-0.06	-0.14	-0.07	0.12

*n* = 147; \* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01

**Table 3** Tested model results

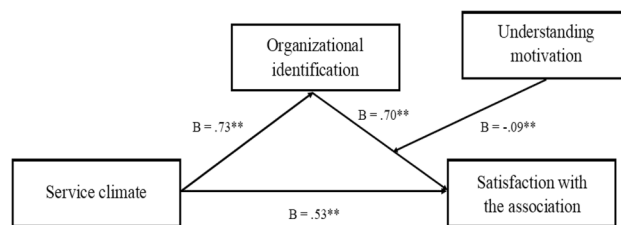
Independent variables	Dependent variables					
	Organizational identification			Satisfaction with association		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Service climate	0.73	0.10	7.08**			
	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.26; F (1,145) = 50.07**					
Service climate				0.53	0.07	7.67**
Organizational identification				0.70	0.18	3.86**
Understanding motivation				0.38	0.14	2.69*
OI x UM				-0.09	0.03	-2.56*
	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.57; F (4,142) = 46.19**					

*n* = 147; \* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01, *OI* Organizational Identification, *UM* Understanding motivation, *SWA* satisfaction with the association

model showed no significant association between age and satisfaction with the association (*r* = .00; *p* = .41). For this reason and ascertained that the relationships between the other variables remained essentially the same, we report in Table 3 and in the text the results of a model that does not include the nonsignificant control variable of age.

The tested model confirmed hypothesis 1, according to which the perception of service climate was associated with volunteer satisfaction with the association (*B* = 0.53; *p* < .01). Second, service climate was positively and significantly associated with organizational identification. (*B* = 0.73; *p* < .01; H2 supported). Third, the relationship between organizational identification and satisfaction with the association was positive and significant (*B* = 0.70; *p* < .01; H3 supported). Fourth, the indirect effect between SC and SWA through OI was tested considering that UM was expected to moderate the relationship between OI and SWA. The conditional indirect effects test of SC on SWA revealed positive indirect effects for all the values assumed by the moderating variable (when UM was at its average, *B* = 0.18; CI [0.10; 0.28]; at +1SD: *B* = 0.11; CI [0.02; 0.22]; and at -1SD: *B* = 0.25; CI [0.15; 0.37]). Hypothesis 4 was then fully supported.

Finally, analyzing the moderating effect of the UM on the relationship between SC and SWA, although hypothesis 5 postulated a positive effect, results revealed a negative but

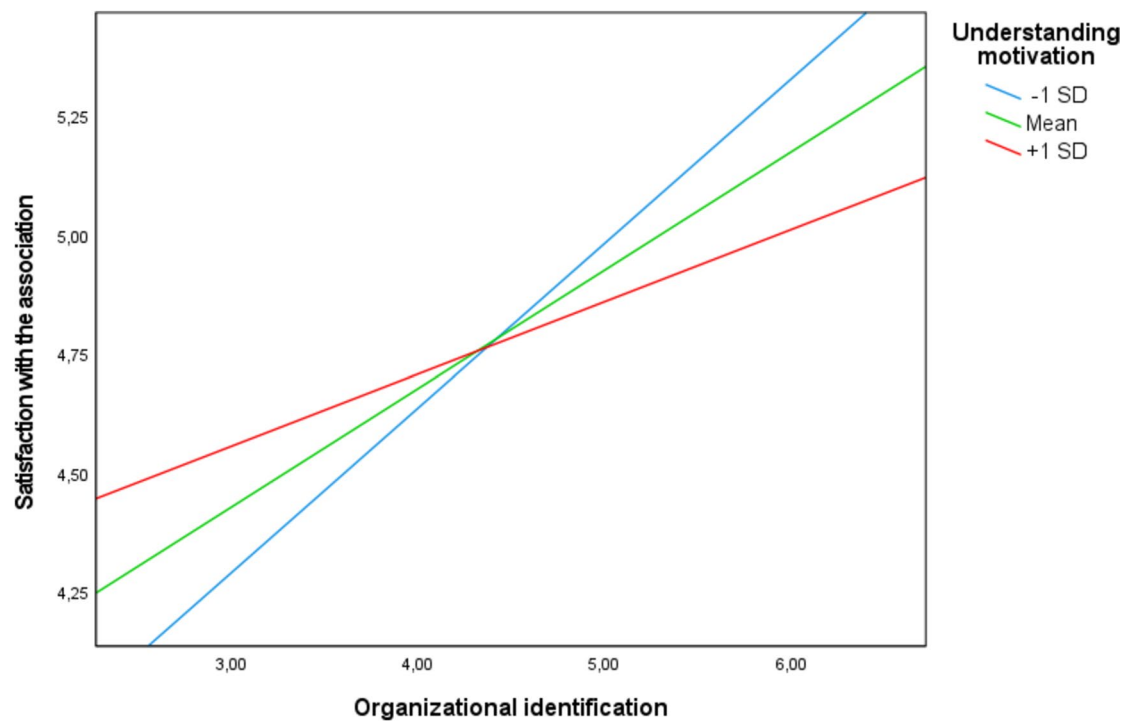


**Fig. 1** Results of the tested model

significant moderating effect (*B* = -0.09; *p* = .01; hypothesis 4 partially supported). According to the Johnson-Neyman test, this effect was significant for *p* < .05 and positive for all values of UM lower than 6.56 (on a scale of 1–7). Figure 1 shows graphically the main model results.

Results also revealed that understanding motivation was directly and positively related to volunteer satisfaction with the association (*B* = 0.38; *p* = .01). Even the indirect effects from SC to SWA through OI were positive (point estimate = 0.25; CI [0.23; 0.47] at UM = 4.25; point estimate = 0.18 CI [0.15; 0.35] at UM = 5.24; point estimate = 0.11 CI [0.02; 0.28] at UM = 6.38). The moderated mediation effect was significant (*B* = -0.06; CI [-0.12; -0.01]), therefore significant differences resulted when comparing indirect effects at different UM values. Figure 2





**Fig. 2** Moderation effect of UM on the relationship between OI and SWA

shows the moderating effect and suggests that less identified volunteers are more satisfied with the organization when they are highly motivated to understand, while more identified volunteers are more satisfied when they have a lower understanding motivation.

## Discussion

In this study, which involved the participation of 166 volunteers from a local Red Cross committee in a medium-sized city in Northern Italy, we found a significant correlation between the perception of service climate and volunteer satisfaction with the voluntary association. We also discovered that this relationship is partially mediated by volunteer organizational identification. Additionally, our findings suggest that understanding motivation, which involves volunteering for the purpose of learning and self-development (Clary & Snyder, 1999), moderates the relationship between volunteer organizational identification and satisfaction with the association.

The findings of this study, which were primarily based on the Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) model (Schneider et al., 1995) and Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1974), strongly support the hypotheses proposed. Specifically, the results show that, in a volunteer organization, the perception of a positive service climate is closely related to organizational identification. This outcome

contributes to the existing literature in several ways: (a) it aligns with previous research that has established a positive relationship between these two variables, (b) it extends this relationship to a non-profit context in which there is non-paid work, and (c) it confirms that the positive perceptions of the practices and procedures oriented to provide a collective service progressively extend to the bonds that connects volunteers to the organization they belong. In other words, when volunteers perceive that a voluntary association, whose primary aim is to meet the needs of individuals, groups, or communities, is committed to delivering rewarding good service, they become proud of their association and satisfied with its functioning. This result underscores the importance of service climate not only in shaping service behaviors but also other individual attitudes (Hong et al., 2013), such as organizational identification and satisfaction with the organization.

Finally, this study found that the motivation of volunteers to understand has a moderating effect on the relationship between organizational identification (OI) and satisfaction with the association (SWA). Specifically, the positive relationship between OI and SWA suggests that, at low levels of OI, the SWA experienced by volunteers is also low. However, when understanding motivation (UM) was considered as a moderator, low levels of OI combined with higher UM were related to higher SWA. Conversely, volunteers with high OI levels were more satisfied with the association when they experienced lower UM, which is an unexpected result.

This finding suggests that understanding motivation does not always act as a booster in the relationship between volunteer organizational identification and satisfaction. In the case of low OI, understanding motivation seems to act as leverage for volunteers who benefit from the learning and social opportunities that volunteering provides, which might be a reason for them to be satisfied with the association. However, in volunteers with a deep and sincere cognitive and affective bond with their association, understanding motivation seems to be detrimental to their perceived satisfaction with the association.

Social Exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) explains the first case of the low OI condition. According to this theory, a cost-benefit analysis guides all human actions involving a relationship with others. Under this condition, volunteers with lower OI may justify their time and effort in volunteer activities mainly because they derive some gain in learning, honing skills, and hanging out with individuals of interest, more than the gain resulting from the identification with the association or its values. The direct positive relationship that UM has with SWA, and the non-significant relationship between OI and SWA at highest UM values, as shown by the Johnson Neyman test, also support this explanation. On the other hand, more identified volunteers may deliberately avoid considering their participation in volunteer activities in terms of the advantages they get from their participation. They might be so identified with the intrinsic values and principles of the organization that understanding motivation would provide an instrumental reason rendering volunteering not an act of giving to others, but a bargaining chip to obtain some personal advantage that would undermine their intentions of gratuitousness and giving. This may stress the volunteers who expect nothing in return and deteriorate their satisfaction with the voluntary organization.

Furthermore, it is possible that specific personal characteristics might explain the unexpected negative interaction here observed. For instance, highly-expert volunteers, e.g. firefighters, engineers, physicians or nurses, might be less interested to learn (as they already have high skills that make available to the voluntary association) and derive their satisfaction mostly from their identification with the voluntary association. In this case, it is also possible that these high-status volunteers, usually preferred and valued by volunteer organizations, receive more attention and rewards compared to other volunteers (Hustinx et al., 2022), which might, in turn, strengthen their organizational identification and satisfaction with the association.

The results of the studied interaction show that deepening the reasons behind this whole mechanism might be of particular interest to the volunteering context, but also capable of better explaining human behavior in the context of pro bono work for others. In particular, the need for investigating

the potential correlation between understanding motivation and personal characteristics, such as age or personal skills and job, appears to be a promising research field and to require further attention in future studies.

### Study limitations

This study has several limitations that may impact the generalizability of its findings. Firstly, the sample size was limited, and the participants were exclusively members of a single volunteer organization. Thus, the results may not accurately represent other volunteer associations involved in different activities. Additionally, the participation of this organization to a study on organizational climate may reflect their willingness to monitor and enhance an already positive climate and environment, or to examine the reasons behind an internal conflicting climate. However, organizational climate and satisfaction did not show extreme scores which suggests that the examined local committee is not an outlier situation. Furthermore, as this study used a cross-sectional design, it is challenging to infer causality in the described phenomena, although this is supported by the proposed theoretical arguments. Reverse causality could suggest that volunteers satisfied with the association experience higher identification with it, and highly identified volunteers behave according to organizational values and expectations thus increasing the perception of higher service climate. Future studies should utilize a longitudinal design and a larger sample size to validate the results of this study.

Despite these limitations, we took measures to ensure the quality and generalizability of our research findings. Specifically, we thoroughly assessed the reliability and validity of the measures used in our model before testing it. Additionally, we implemented measures to limit the common method bias, such as placing the scales of the model in different sections of the questionnaire, using guiding headings before administering the items, and using a graphical measure to assess the OI construct, which required a different response mode than the Likert scale, as well as testing for the potential existence of this bias by Harman's test once the data were collected.

### Research and practical implications

This study has important implications for research and practice in the area of voluntary associations. Firstly, it contributes to the existing literature on service climate by demonstrating its relevance to volunteer satisfaction with the organization. Secondly, by identifying organizational identification as a mediator, the study sheds light on why service climate is related to satisfaction. Hence, this study underlines the importance of service climate not only in influencing service behaviors but also in shaping important

organizational attitudes, such as organizational identification and satisfaction with the organization. Thirdly, the study highlights the significant role of understanding motivation that, when combined with organizational identification, shapes volunteer satisfaction with the organization. However, considering this result, that suggests that the relationship between organizational identification and satisfaction varies depending on the level of motivation, future research should explore other potential mediators and the effects of different kinds of motivations on satisfaction.

Beyond the research implications, this study also has practical implications for voluntary associations. As shown by this study and previous research, a positive environment and a healthy organizational climate motivate people to volunteer (Kao et al., 2023; Nencini et al., 2016). Thus, the most critical practical implication of this study is that improving service climate is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of voluntary organizations. This can be achieved by defining policies, practices, and concrete service behaviors expected from volunteers, providing training on how to provide excellent service, conflict resolution, and leadership that emphasizes a service orientation.

The study also emphasizes that individuals have different motivations for volunteering, even within the same organization. Therefore, leaders of voluntary associations need to recognize these differences and tailor their approach to each volunteer or group of volunteers. This may involve providing volunteers with tools or companionship, nurturing their sense of purpose as servants of others, or protecting them from potential vulnerabilities. By focusing on these multifaceted aspects, leaders can help volunteers become more engaged in the activities carried out and ultimately satisfied with their involvement in the organization.

## Conclusion

Based on the Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) model and Social Identity Theory (SIT), this study emphasized the mediating role of organizational identification in the relationship between service climate perceived by members of a volunteer association and their satisfaction with the organization. Moreover, the study revealed that understanding motivation (UM) has a moderating effect on the satisfaction with the association (SWA) of volunteers with high and low levels of organizational identification (OI). Specifically, UM improves the SWA of volunteers with low OI but worsens the SWA of volunteers with high OI. The study underscores the significance of volunteer satisfaction with the association as a crucial component that might affect organizational effectiveness and provides practical implications for organizations to enhance volunteer satisfaction.

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**Data availability** The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Ethical statement** This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, but it was not subject to evaluation by the Ethics Committee of our university.

**Consent to participate** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Conflict interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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