

Qualitative Exploration of
Volunteering and Psychological
Well-Being

A qualitative exploration of volunteering behaviours and psychological well-being among young
adults in the Gauteng Province

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Abstract

Volunteering has been widely associated with positive psychological outcomes; however, less is known about how young adults in the South African context subjectively experience volunteering and its relationship to psychological well-being. This qualitative study explored how young adult volunteers in Gauteng Province perceive the psychological impact of their volunteering experiences. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Meaning-Making Theory (MMT), and Ecological Systems Theory (EST), the study sought to understand how personal growth, social connection, autonomy, meaning, and coping processes emerge through volunteer engagement.

A purposive sample of young adults aged 18–30 who were actively involved in volunteer activities participated in semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach, combining inductive and deductive coding to ensure both data-driven insights and theoretical alignment. Rigour was enhanced through strategies addressing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Five main themes emerged from the analysis: **(1)** personal growth and self-discovery, **(2)** social connection and belonging, **(3)** autonomy and values alignment, **(4)** psychological benefits, and **(5)** challenges and coping strategies. Participants described volunteering as a context that fostered confidence, skill development, and a sense of purpose, while also strengthening social bonds and emotional well-being. Autonomy and alignment with personal values were central to sustained engagement. Despite experiencing challenges such as time constraints and emotional strain, participants employed adaptive coping strategies, including cognitive reframing and peer support.

The findings suggest that volunteering can serve as a meaningful psychosocial resource for young adults when supported by autonomy, relatedness, and opportunities for meaning-making. Implications for volunteer organisations and mental health promotion initiatives are discussed.

List of Abbreviations:

- COVID-19 - Coronavirus Disease 2019
- EST - Ecological Systems Theory
- IIE MSA - Independent Institute of Education, MSA
- MMT - Meaning-Making Theory
- NPO - Non-Profit Organisation
- POPIA - Protection of Personal Information Act
- SADAG - South African Depression and Anxiety Group
- SAFMH - South African Federation for Mental Health
- SDT - Self-Determination Theory

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Many individuals are socialised into prosocial values such as kindness, generosity, and helping others through family, schools, and community institutions. Early socialisation into these values has been shown to be associated with later volunteering behaviour (Nesbit, 2012). Voluntary action encompasses a wide range of activities, including organised and formal initiatives (e.g., school food drives and institutional mentoring programmes) as well as informal forms of helping (e.g., assisting classmates, supporting neighbours, and helping with household tasks). Both formal and informal forms of volunteering are well documented within the volunteerism literature (Wilson & Musick, 2024).

Importantly, motivations for volunteering are heterogeneous. Functional approaches to volunteerism demonstrate that individuals are driven by multiple motives, including values, understanding, social connection, career development, enhancement, and protective functions. As a result, similar volunteering behaviours may be undertaken for markedly different reasons across individuals (Clary et al., 1998; Chen et al., 2022). These theoretical and empirical insights underscore the importance of examining not only whether individuals volunteer, but also how and why they engage in different forms of volunteer activity when considering outcomes related to psychological well-being.

Volunteerism is commonly defined as freely chosen and deliberate helping behaviour that is sustained over time, performed without expectation of financial reward, and often conducted through formal organisations or on behalf of individuals or causes in need of assistance (Mourya, 2021). Volunteering represents a meaningful expression of human compassion and altruism, as individuals willingly dedicate time and effort to support others and contribute to societal well-being. Grounded in empathy and a sense of social responsibility,

volunteer activities encompass diverse practices aimed at addressing community needs and fostering social cohesion (Kang & Kahar, 2022).

Building on this literature, the present study aims to explore how volunteering shapes psychological well-being by examining diverse volunteer experiences in detail. Specifically, the study focuses on understanding the perceived psychological benefits associated with volunteering and prosocial behaviour, variations in the duration and nature of volunteer commitment, and the motivations that underpin sustained engagement in volunteer activities.

1.2 Background to the Study

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct that reflects individuals' evaluations of their emotional, psychological, and social functioning. Rather than referring solely to the absence of mental distress, psychological well-being encompasses positive psychological functioning, including life satisfaction, purpose in life, emotional regulation, personal growth, and meaningful social relationships (Ryff, 1989; Keyes, 2002). Importantly, psychological well-being is not static; it develops and fluctuates across the lifespan in response to personal, social, and contextual factors. This dynamic nature makes psychological well-being particularly salient during young adulthood, a developmental period typically defined as spanning approximately 18 to 35 years of age (Arnett, 2015).

Young adulthood is characterised by significant transitions, including increased independence, identity exploration, educational and career decision-making, and the formation of long-term social and intimate relationships. These transitions can create both opportunities for growth and vulnerabilities to psychological strain (Tanhaye Reshvanloo et al., 2024). Engagement in meaningful and socially embedded activities during this stage has been shown to support psychological well-being by fostering a sense of purpose, competence, and

belonging. Volunteering, in particular, has been identified as a potentially valuable context for promoting positive psychological outcomes among young adults (Zana et al., 2020; Geng et al., 2022).

Volunteerism is commonly conceptualised as freely chosen, sustained helping behaviour performed without financial compensation, often within organised or community-based contexts, and aimed at benefiting individuals, groups, or broader social causes (Mourya, 2021; Bowe et al., 2020). While volunteerism is frequently discussed in relation to altruism, contemporary research recognises it as a multifaceted activity shaped by social, cultural, and structural conditions. In young adulthood, volunteering can serve multiple functions, including social connection, skills development, identity formation, and career exploration (Azunna et al., 2021).

A substantial body of research conducted in Western contexts, particularly in the United States and Europe, demonstrates a positive association between volunteering and psychological well-being. Studies in these settings have linked volunteering to higher life satisfaction, improved mental health, and enhanced social integration (Piliavin & Siegl, 2007; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Binder & Freytag, 2013). However, these findings are largely derived from socio-economic and cultural environments that differ considerably from those found in South Africa. Consequently, the extent to which such outcomes generalise to young adults in non-Western or Global South contexts remains insufficiently explored.

Gauteng Province provides a distinctive and important context in which to examine volunteering and psychological well-being among young adults. As South Africa's most densely populated province and primary economic hub, Gauteng is characterised by marked social inequality, high youth unemployment, and significant mental health challenges, alongside a concentration of universities, non-governmental organisations, and community-based initiatives.

These conditions create both opportunities for volunteer engagement and structural barriers that may shape how volunteering is experienced and sustained (Joseph & Carolissen, 2022). Unlike many European and North American contexts, volunteering in Gauteng often occurs within communities facing persistent resource constraints, which may influence both motivations for volunteering and its psychological impact.

Existing research suggests that volunteering is associated with psychological benefits such as increased life satisfaction, reduced stress, enhanced self-esteem, and stronger social connectedness. These outcomes are typically measured using self-report indicators of subjective well-being, emotional functioning, and perceived meaning or purpose in life (Furtak & Barnard, 2021). A study conducted in other regions, including multi-country and cross-cultural contexts, found that volunteering can promote emotional resilience and a sense of social belonging among young adults (An et al., 2023). However, it remains unclear how these benefits manifest within the specific socio-cultural and economic conditions of Gauteng Province.

Beyond individual benefits, volunteerism plays a critical role in addressing societal needs, particularly in contexts where public resources are limited. Volunteers contribute to service delivery, community development, and social cohesion, making volunteerism an essential component of civil society. Understanding why young adults choose to volunteer, what sustains their involvement, and what challenges they encounter is therefore vital for organisations that rely on volunteer labour to function effectively. Motivations for volunteering vary widely and may include altruistic values, personal growth, career advancement, and social connection (Gordon, 2022). At the same time, barriers such as financial constraints, academic and work commitments, limited access to opportunities, and negative volunteering experiences can hinder sustained engagement (Sibisi & Makka, 2021; Pillay & Kramers-Olen, 2021).

Given these complexities, there is a need for contextually grounded research that examines young adults' lived experiences of volunteering in Gauteng Province. The present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how young adults understand and experience volunteering, and how these experiences relate to their psychological well-being. By examining motivations, forms of engagement, perceived benefits, and challenges, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of volunteerism within a South African context and to inform strategies for promoting youth well-being and sustained volunteer participation.

1.3 Research problem

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional functioning, psychological resilience, social integration, and a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Ryff, 1989; Keyes, 2002). For young adults, psychological well-being is particularly important, as it influences their capacity to navigate academic demands, employment transitions, identity formation, and emerging adult responsibilities. In South Africa, young people face substantial challenges that threaten psychological well-being, including high youth unemployment, socio-economic inequality, and limited access to mental health resources (Miller et al., 2020; Mak et al., 2022). These structural and contextual stressors heighten vulnerability to psychological distress and underscore the need to identify protective and promotive factors that support well-being during young adulthood (Zhu et al., 2023).

Volunteering has been identified as one such potential factor, as it is associated with opportunities for social connection, personal development, and meaning-making. Existing research suggests that volunteering may enhance psychological well-being by fostering positive affect, social belonging, and a sense of contribution (Tan et al., 2020). However, much of this evidence is derived from Western contexts, limiting its applicability to socio-economically

diverse settings such as South Africa. While Joshi et al. (2024) report positive emotional and psychological outcomes associated with volunteer engagement, other studies indicate that volunteering may also be linked to adverse outcomes, including stress, burnout, and role overload particularly in contexts characterised by limited organisational support and high community need (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Hyde et al., 2016; Pillay & Kramers-Olen, 2021). These mixed findings highlight the need to examine the conditions under which volunteering supports psychological well-being and the circumstances in which it may undermine it.

In addition, motivations for volunteering vary widely among young adults and may include altruistic values, social connection, skill development, career advancement, or external expectations (Lindsay & Ahmed, 2021). These motivations are not neutral; they may shape how volunteering is experienced and how it influences psychological well-being. Despite this, limited research has examined how different motivational orientations relate to psychological outcomes within the South African context. Furthermore, volunteering is often treated as a broad and undifferentiated activity in the literature. Distinctions between types of volunteerism such as caregiving, mentoring, environmental conservation, educational support, or community service are rarely explored, despite evidence suggesting that different forms of engagement may carry distinct emotional demands and psychological consequences (Grinshteyn & Sugar, 2021).

Available national data indicate that volunteer participation in South Africa increased from approximately 3.7% in 2010 to 6.7% in 2018, as measured through self-reported engagement in unpaid volunteer activities (South African Government, 2020). While these figures suggest growing involvement, they provide limited insight into the nature, intensity, and lived experiences of volunteering, particularly among young adults. Moreover, there remains a lack of empirical evidence examining how factors such as motivation, type of volunteer activity, and duration of involvement interact to shape psychological well-being outcomes. Without this

nuanced understanding, it is difficult to determine whether volunteering consistently functions as a protective factor or whether certain patterns of engagement may contribute to psychological strain and emotional exhaustion.

Taken together, these gaps point to a need for contextually grounded research that explores how young adults in Gauteng Province experience volunteering and how these experiences relate to their psychological well-being. There is a particular need to move beyond broad conceptualisations of volunteerism and to examine the meanings, motivations, and emotional consequences associated with different forms of volunteer engagement. Addressing these gaps is essential for informing theory, guiding future research, and supporting organisations and policymakers in designing volunteer initiatives that promote well-being while minimising potential risks.

1.4 Aim of study

The aim of this study was to explore how young adults in the Gauteng Province perceive their volunteering experiences in relation to their psychological well-being.

1.4.1 Objectives of the study

1.4.1.1 Main Objective:

The main objective of this study was to explore young adults' perceptions and experiences of volunteering and how these are understood in relation to their psychological well-being.

1.4.1.2 Specific Objectives:

This study sought to:

- Explore young adults' experiences of different forms of volunteer engagement, including mentorship, community service, environmental conservation, caregiving,

and social support, and the perceived effects of these activities on psychological well-being.

- Examine how young adults perceive the role of commitment duration and level of involvement in shaping their psychological well-being through volunteering.
- Explore the motivations underlying young adults' engagement in volunteering and how these motivations are understood in relation to their psychological well-being.

1.5 Research Questions

For the purposes of this study, *young adults* are defined as individuals aged **18–30 years** residing in the Gauteng Province.

1.5.1 Main Research Question:

- How do young individuals perceive the impact of volunteer activities on their psychological well-being?

1.5.2 Sub-Research Questions:

- How do young adults describe their motivations for volunteering, and how are these motivations understood in relation to their psychological well-being?
- How do young adults describe their experiences of different forms of volunteering (such as mentorship, community service, environmental conservation, caregiving, and social support) in relation to their psychological well-being?
- How do young adults from diverse demographic backgrounds describe their volunteering experiences and perceived psychological well-being?

1.6 Scope of study

The purpose of this research was to explore qualitatively how young adults' psychological health and volunteering practices related to one another in the Gauteng Province.

Individuals who had participated in or had experience with volunteer work between the ages of 18 and 26 were the focus of the study.

The study sought to uncover the pertinent psychological benefits of volunteering, including personal growth, social relationships, and instilling a sense of purpose in volunteers. The researcher explored specific volunteering activities, including mentorship, community service, environmental conservation, caregiving, and social support. These behaviours were anticipated to positively impact psychological well-being by fostering greater social connections, facilitating personal growth, and enhancing one's sense of purpose.

Qualitative techniques, such as in-depth in-person interviews with individuals who gave their informed consent, were used to gather data. The interviews investigated the individuals' motives for volunteering, how they regarded volunteer work, and how long they had been involved. Additionally, the study explored how demographic characteristics (including age, gender, and socioeconomic position) and various volunteer activities impacted the psychological advantages of volunteering.

A thematic analysis of the data provided important trends and insights about how various volunteer actions affected or contributed to the psychological health of young people in Gauteng. Furthermore, the research examined whether certain elements, including the quantity or length of volunteer work, mediated or mitigated the association between volunteering and psychological well-being.

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological benefits associated with volunteering and inform recommendations for initiatives aimed at improving young adults' well-being through volunteerism in South Africa.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study explored the impact of volunteering on psychological well-being, emphasising the importance of understanding its benefits and challenges. By identifying key factors such as the type of volunteer activity, duration of commitment, and individual motivations, this research provided valuable insights for volunteer organisations, policymakers, and psychological well-being practitioners. A deeper understanding of these factors allowed organisations to design volunteer programs that maximise psychological benefits while mitigating potential adverse effects such as burnout and emotional fatigue (Yamada & Gutierrez, 2013).

Furthermore, this study offered practical recommendations for individuals seeking meaningful volunteer experiences. By examining how distinct types of volunteer activities and motivations influenced well-being, volunteers were able to make more informed decisions about their commitments. A well-structured approach to volunteer program design was shown to lead to more fulfilling experiences, benefiting both volunteers and the communities they serve (West & Pateman, 2016; Thomas et al., 2020).

1.8 Operational definitions of Terms

1.8.1 Volunteerism:

General Definition: Voluntary and intentional acts of service, performed consistently and selflessly, without regard for personal benefit or retribution, often done out inside established organisations, and committed to assisting causes or persons in need (Wilson, 2012).

Operational Definition: In the context of this study, volunteerism is understood to be the conscious participation of individuals in a range of volunteer activities, such as direct service,

administrative work, fundraising, or advocacy projects, all of which are carried out with the primary goal of improving the welfare of others and promoting social progress.

1.8.2 Psychological Well-Being:

General Definition: The concept of psychological well-being involves an individual's personal feelings of happiness, fulfilment, purpose, and overall psychological well-being (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

Operational Definition: Psychological well-being is explored using validated measures such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), which provides a comprehensive understanding of several facets of psychological well-being, including pleasant emotions, interpersonal relationships, and a sense of self-governance.

1.8.3 Types of Volunteer Activities:

General Definition: Volunteer work encompasses a wide range of roles and responsibilities, including hands-on help, administrative tasks, cause promotion, fundraising, and community project coordination (Bloomer & Walshe, 2020).

Operational Definition: Within the scope of this study, volunteer activities have been characterised based on the specific responsibilities they require (such as hands-on service or clerical work) and the specific areas of interest they target (such as educational institutions, healthcare, or environmental preservation).

1.8.4 Duration of Volunteer Commitment:

General Definition: Volunteer dedication spans the time period in which people dedicate themselves in philanthropic endeavours, which can range from temporary involvements to long-term, consistent commitments (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Snyder & Omoto, 2008).

Operational Definition: The evaluation of volunteers' dedication is determined through their

own accounts of the duration they have spent engaging in volunteer work, in terms of months or years.

1.8.5 Underlying Motivations for Volunteering:

General Definition: The fundamental reasons why individuals choose to volunteer are rooted in their internal desires, values, and motivations. These include acts of selflessness, the pursuit of personal gratification, the desire for social bonds, emotional necessities, or external influences (Raba'ah Hamzah et al., 2015).

Operational Definition: Self-reported questionnaires are used to analyse the essence of volunteering. These questionnaires probe participants' understanding of their primary motivations for volunteering, which include external influences like social recognition and duty, as well as internal drivers like altruism and personal fulfilment.

1.8.6 Demographic Variables:

General Definition: Demographic determinants include personal characteristics such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, degree of education, and employment status, all of which might influence one's willingness to volunteer and general psychological well-being (Plagnol & Huppert, 2009).

Operational Definition: Using an extensive questionnaire, demographic characteristics are carefully collected. Crucial details about participants' age (measured in years), gender (male, female, or other), level of education, employment status, and family income are skilfully captured.

1.9 Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured into five chapters:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction:** Provides the background to the study, outlines the research problem, aims, objectives, research questions, scope, and significance of the study, and defines key operational terms.
- **Chapter 2: Literature Review:** Reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature on volunteering and psychological well-being, identifies gaps in existing research, and establishes the conceptual framework for the study.
- **Chapter 3: Research Methodology:** Describes the qualitative research design, sampling procedures, data collection methods, and data analysis strategies employed in the study, while also addressing ethical considerations.
- **Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis:** Presents and analyses the results of the study using thematic analysis, supported by participants' narratives and relevant literature.
- **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations:** Summarises the key findings, discusses their implications for theory and practice, outlines study limitations, and provides recommendations for future research and policy.

1.10 Conclusion

The study's background, research topic, aim, objectives, research questions, scope, and importance were all presented in this chapter. It also outlined the main ideas that underpinned the inquiry. The chapter emphasised the need of investigating the connection between volunteering and psychological well-being in South Africa, particularly among young individuals in the Gauteng Province.

In order to place the study within the larger academic discourse, the next chapter will offer a thorough assessment of the body of research on volunteering, psychological well-being, and associated theoretical frameworks.

CHAPTER 2 - THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) serves as a broad framework for understanding the factors that facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological well-being, all of which are directly relevant to educational settings and volunteering (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The theory posits that individuals possess three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel in control of one's actions), competence (the need to feel effective in interactions), and relatedness (the need to feel connected to others) (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The first mini theory, known as Cognitive Evaluation Theory, dives into the complex elements that shape intrinsic motivation, highlighting the importance of perceived autonomy and competence. The second mini-theory, Organismic Integration Theory, explores the internalisation of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Martela, 2020; Pelletier & Rocchi, 2023). The concept of Causality Orientations reveals whether individuals are more likely to act autonomously or in a controlled manner (Hagger et al., 2015). Basic Psychological Need Theory explores how psychological needs relate to overall well-being, highlighting how social contexts can support or obstruct the fulfilment of these needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Finally, Goal Content Theory explores how intrinsic and extrinsic goals shape well-being, while Relationship Motivation Theory highlights the significance of close relationships in fulfilling psychological needs (Arshad et al., 2019; Van Hiel & Vansteenkiste, 2009).

Overall, SDT provides a comprehensive viewpoint on understanding the inner forces that drive individuals to volunteer and the intricate connection between these motivations and their

psychological well-being. The theory elucidates how volunteering can satisfy the core aspirations of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Engaging in volunteer activities allows individuals to take charge of their efforts, enhance their skills, and cultivate community relationships (Dysvik et al., 2013). The opportunity to engage in meaningful activities that align with personal interests enhances volunteers' sense of autonomy. Furthermore, volunteering fosters social relationships and a sense of belonging, fulfilling intrinsic desires for connection and support (von Bonsdorff & Rantanen, 2011; Yang et al., 2022). In summary, individuals who perceive their volunteer roles as autonomous, competent, and connected are likely to experience higher levels of psychological health.

In the context of this study, SDT was applied to interpret how participants described their volunteer experiences. Specifically, the analysis considered whether and how volunteering fulfilled their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and how these needs in turn shaped their psychological well-being.

2.1.2 Meaning-Making Theory

According to Meaning-Making Theory (MMT), also known as Meaning-Centred or Meaning Construction Theory, individuals actively create meaning from their experiences, and psychological health depends on this continuous process of meaning-making (Park, 2010; Marin, 2017). Fundamentally, MMT makes the assumption that seeking meaning is a basic human effort and that maintaining psychological well-being requires a strong feeling of purpose (Steger, 2012; Baxter et al., 2021). This theoretical viewpoint emphasises how people interpret life experiences and preserve a cohesive sense of self by drawing on their own ideas, values, and narratives.

The difference between situational meaning and global meaning is a key concept in MMT. Global meaning includes broad convictions and aspirations that influence one's

perspective on the world, including presumptions about justice, fairness, and individual identity (Park, 2010). In contrast, situational meaning refers to how unique life experiences are interpreted in connection to global meaning frameworks. People use meaning-making techniques to regain coherence and lessen psychological discomfort when differences, such as those between one's beliefs and experiences, occur (Park & George, 2013). Successful meaning-making has been associated with increased resilience, well-being, and adaptive coping (Park, 2016; George & Park, 2017).

MMT offers a crucial foundation for comprehending how service projects support psychological well-being in the context of volunteering. Volunteering allows people to reconcile their own ideals with their actions, resulting in congruence between global meaning and situational meaning. In addition to providing situational significance through real-world experiences of changing the world, helping others may, for instance, reinforce values of justice, community, and charity (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Tan et al., 2020). This sense of alignment promotes purpose, coherence, and fulfilment, all of which are critical components of psychological well-being (Steger et al., 2006; Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020).

Furthermore, volunteering frequently includes confronting other viewpoints, social problems, and emotionally taxing circumstances. These encounters might serve as a stimulus for introspection and reassessment of personal meaning systems. Research indicates that reflective practices like these help volunteers develop appreciation, perspective expansion, and compassion, all of which are linked to improved psychological well-being outcomes (Davis et al., 2003; Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Fegg et al., 2008). Therefore, meaning-making theory is especially helpful in describing the beneficial effects of volunteering, as people not solely contribute themselves to others but also utilise service to rebuild meaning, eventually promoting psychological well-being.

In the present study, MMT was used as a lens to understand how young adult volunteers in Gauteng made sense of their experiences. This perspective helped explain how participants derived meaning and purpose from their involvement, how they interpreted obstacles, and how these meaning-making processes influenced their psychological well-being. By situating meaning-making within the lived realities of young South Africans where volunteering intersects with identity, community development, and resilience this study contributed to theoretical discussions on how meaning construction mediates the relationship between volunteering and well-being.

2.1.3 Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) created Ecological Systems Theory (EST), which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human development in the context of various, interrelated environmental systems. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994) and Neal & Neal (2013), this paradigm highlights that individual conduct and psychological well-being must be understood within nested systems of influence, such as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each of these layers interacts dynamically, determining how people perceive and respond to their surroundings.

Individual experiences are influenced directly by the most proximate surroundings at the microsystem level such as family, peers, and volunteer groups. Positive workplace cultures and encouraging peer networks can boost young people's engagement and promote well-being by giving them a feeling of community and social support (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). In contrast, disagreement, or a lack of support within these microsystems may impair volunteering's psychological advantages.

The interactions between microsystems are known as the mesosystem. For example, the

interaction between family values and organisational culture may influence the amount to which young people engage in volunteer activities. According to research, when family encouragement is combined with institutional possibilities, people are more likely to stay committed and internalise positive meaning from their volunteering (Holdsworth, 2010).

The exosystem includes wider environments that indirectly impact individuals, such as legislation, media discourses, and community resources. Government sponsorship of volunteer programs, for example, or media depictions of young volunteering, might influence volunteerism's options, accessibility, and perceived worth (Musick & Wilson, 2008). In South Africa, socioeconomic disparities typically regulate access to volunteering opportunities, determining who has the time and finances to participate (Perold et al., 2007).

The macrosystem consists of prevailing society expectations, ideas, and cultural norms. The psychological advantages of volunteering may be strengthened by prosocial actions encouraged by cultural values that place a strong focus on community solidarity and Ubuntu, which are prevalent in many African environments (Swartz et al., 2019). In a similar vein, how society views young people as active participants in community development can influence their sense of self and purpose, both of which are closely related to psychological health.

In summary, Meaning-Making Theory emphasizes the importance of finding meaning in volunteer activities, while Self-Determination Theory underscores the significance of intrinsic motivation and social connections in fostering psychological well-being among volunteers. Additionally, Ecological Systems Theory highlights the diverse ecological factors that shape volunteering experiences, advocating for a multi-level approach to understanding volunteer outcomes. Together, these theoretical frameworks enrich our understanding of volunteer participation by offering insights into how volunteering influences psychological well-being.

And lastly, the chronosystem takes into consideration time factors, such as life transitions and sociohistorical shifts. Volunteering throughout important developmental stages can help young individuals establish identity, resilience, and coping techniques that will serve them well into adulthood (Eime et al., 2013). Furthermore, wider social transformations, such as the advent of digital volunteerism or reactions to crises like COVID-19, modify volunteer experiences and psychological effects (Nissen & Wachsmuth, 2023).

In the context of this study, EST was applied to interpret how young adults' volunteer experiences were shaped not only by personal motives and characteristics but also by relational, organisational, and cultural contexts in Gauteng. This framework helped explain how psychological benefits such as meaning, purpose, and well-being emerged from the interplay between individual agency and broader ecological factors that either facilitated or constrained volunteer participation.

2.2 Conclusion

This chapter presented the theoretical background for the current study, focusing on three complementary frameworks: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Meaning-Making Theory (MMT), and Ecological Systems Theory (EST). SDT shed light on how intrinsic motivation and the pursuit of autonomy, competence, and relatedness contribute to psychological well-being in the context of volunteering. MMT highlighted the importance of purpose and coherence, emphasising how individuals extract meaning from their volunteer experiences and how this meaning-making process promotes resilience, growth, and well-being. EST extended the perspective by positioning volunteer experiences within linked ecological systems, demonstrating how human, social, organisational, and cultural variables influence both volunteer opportunities and results.

These frameworks collaborate in order to provide a comprehensive knowledge of how volunteering might affect psychological well-being. SDT emphasises the function of motivation and psychological needs, MMT emphasises the importance of personal meaning and identity building, and EST explains how larger social and cultural surroundings influence these processes. Together, they provide a strong interpretative lens for evaluating young adults' volunteer experiences in Gauteng Province, ensuring that both individual agency and environmental factors are included.

The theoretical basis presented here paves the way for the following chapter, which examines empirical research on the link between volunteering and psychological well-being. By combining these theoretical approaches with previous research findings, the study will be better able to objectively investigate how young adults perceive the psychological effects of volunteering in a variety of circumstances.

CHAPTER 3 - LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

This literature study is arranged around three main themes: personal development, social connection, and finding meaning. These topics represent the primary results in the literature on the impacts of volunteering on psychological well-being, as well as entry points for connecting the study to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Meaning-Making Theory (MMT), and Ecological Systems Theory (EST). Together, these viewpoints highlight the significance of motivation, meaning, and context in creating volunteer experiences. The review also includes critical viewpoints, which emphasise the intricacies and problems of volunteerism. This establishes a conceptual basis for investigating how young adults in Gauteng Province perceive the link between volunteering and well-being.

3.2 Personal Growth

Miller and Cohen (2001) propose that engaging in helping others offers numerous benefits for individuals, aligning with **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**, which emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Volunteering is linked to increased positive emotions, greater life satisfaction, enhanced social involvement, and reduced depressive symptoms. Supporting this, Musick and Wilson (2003) found that participation in volunteer activities correlates with lower levels of depression and higher life satisfaction eight years later compared to non-volunteers.

Research by Whillans et al. (2016) suggests that helping others can mitigate stress's negative effects on well-being and physical health, reinforcing the tenets of SDT, which highlight the role of supportive environments in promoting well-being. Additionally, Thoits and Hewitt (2001) identified a meaningful connection between time spent volunteering and enhanced happiness, life satisfaction, and physical health, suggesting that volunteerism contributes to

In addition to its psychological advantages, volunteering can help people's physical health. The overall advantages of prosocial involvement were highlighted by Schreier et al. (2013), who showed that teenagers who regularly volunteered had lower cardiovascular risk factors. These results align with EST, which posits that growth is influenced by both personal motivation and the larger ecological setting, including communities and schools, which offer interaction possibilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Neal & Neal, 2013).

However, the research does identify difficulties. While most studies stress the benefits, some warn against excessively idealised views of volunteering. For example, when presented with conditions of powerlessness and systematic inequity, international volunteers have expressed anxiety, including feelings of shame, irritation, and weariness (Lough & Carter-Black, 2015; VICE, 2022). This highlights MMT's emphasis on interpretation: results are determined by how individuals make meaning of their experiences, not by volunteering itself (Park, 2010; George & Park, 2017). Thus, human development is not spontaneous but rather depends on both individual goals and contextual factors.

3.3 Social Connectedness

Social connectedness refers to individuals' feelings of belonging and attachment within their social relationships (Hoffman, Mehrpour, & Staerklé, 2023). Volunteering is consistently linked to numerous positive outcomes, with social connectedness playing a vital role in moderating these effects. Research by Brown et al. (2012) suggests that self-efficacy, social connectedness, and self-esteem play a role in shaping the ways in which volunteering connects with personal well-being. This supports **Ecological Systems Theory**, which highlights the importance of social contexts in individual development.

Creaven et al. (2017) emphasizes the critical role of social connectivity in cultivating a sense of thriving, arguing that while volunteering is commendable, it cannot fully counteract the

negative effects of inadequate social connectivity in other life areas. Thus, fostering strong social relationships beyond humanitarian endeavours is essential for well-being.

Individuals' willingness to engage in volunteer work is significantly influenced by their social connections, which serve as a crucial link between psychological well-being, religious participation, and personal growth (Jongenelis et al., 2019). Research by Li et al. (2018) highlights the substantial impact of interpersonal ties on older adults' well-being, positively affecting both their physical and psychological health.

Piliavin and Siegl (2007) demonstrated the benefits of volunteering for older adults, showing connections to improved psychological well-being, increased self-esteem, and relief from depressive symptoms (Anderson et al., 2014). Steptoe et al. (2013) highlighted how volunteering alleviates the negative consequences of social role losses, isolation, and loneliness among the elderly, thereby enhancing social connectivity.

Shmotkin et al. (2003) found a clear connection between formal volunteering and social connectedness, noting that older volunteers often have stronger support networks than non-volunteers. Windsor, Anstey, and Rodgers (2008) emphasized evaluating positive outcomes not just in mental and physical health but also in enhancing social connections, which foster effective social integration. Encouraging older adults to engage in volunteering can thus significantly benefit their psychological well-being (Matthews & Nazroo, 2020).

3.4 Discovering Purpose

Meaning-making theory emphasises the need for a strong sense of purpose, stating that humans manufacture meaning via experiences that correspond with personal values and global belief systems. Volunteering frequently gives possibilities for purpose discovery, especially when people see their efforts as significant and important. McMunn et al. (2009) discovered that participants who were recognised for their efforts had better life satisfaction and decreased

sadness, indicating that appreciation promotes purpose and meaning.

Volunteering-derived meaning has repeatedly been linked to improved psychological and physical health, cognitive resilience, and lifespan (Hill et al., 2016; Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020). Volunteering can also promote compassion, thankfulness, and perspective-taking, which can improve psychological well-being (Seppala et al., 2013; Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

However, not everyone experiences meaning in the same way. Some volunteers may suffer if their expectations are not met or their services are underestimated. Meaning making is an active, dynamic process that can result in both positive and negative consequences, as evidenced by the potential for disillusionment or decreased well-being (Okamura & Miller, 2010; Tan et al., 2020). Since volunteering enables young adults in South Africa to experiment with roles, examine values, and create self-narratives that support a feeling of purpose and belonging, it may also have an impact on identity formation (Swartz et al., 2019).

3.5 Age and Gender

Volunteering is recognised for its significant psychological benefits across different age groups. Lühr et al. (2021) found that volunteering positively impacts self-confidence, especially among individuals aged 55-84, compared to those aged 45-54. Volunteering correlates strongly with perceived social support, particularly among older adults.

Anderson et al. (2014) reported a compelling correlation between volunteering and various positive outcomes, including reduced depressive symptoms and enhanced self-perceived well-being, particularly in the elderly. For older individuals, volunteering validates their sense of self, boosts self-esteem, and provides renewed purpose (Ho et al., 2012). Conversely, younger adults may require more consistent participation to experience similar benefits

(Windsor et al., 2008). Tang (2006) observed that individuals under fifty-five often volunteer for self-improvement, while those fifty-five and older are motivated by a desire to serve. Chi et al. (2021) noted that older adults derive greater life satisfaction from their volunteer efforts, with prolonged commitment linked to higher contentment. Principles of curiosity for learning are more prevalent among older adults (Principi et al., 2012). VanSickle et al. (2015) found that older volunteers with higher financial resources are often motivated by community service, while younger volunteers are driven by professional advancement goals.

Gender differences influence volunteering preferences, with women tending to engage in roles related to caregiving, such as teaching assistance or hospice support, while men often participate in physically demanding roles (Rotolo & Wilson, 2007). Walk et al. (2018) reported that men who receive training are more likely to continue volunteering than women who receive similar training.

Furthermore, men and women differ in their volunteering preferences and organisational engagement, affecting overall participation levels. Women are more inclined toward informal volunteering settings, while men tend to favour formal ones (Emmerik & Jawahar, 2005). Nelan and Grineski (2013) found that while women are more likely to volunteer, men are more engaged in emergency planning and disaster relief activities.

3.6 Conclusion

Volunteering is identified as a substantial contribution to psychological well-being in the research, although the routes are complicated, context-dependent, and not always good. The self-determination theory emphasises how intrinsic motivation and possibilities for autonomy, competence, and relatedness promote human development. Meaning-making theory highlights the necessity of establishing purpose and coherence, demonstrating how volunteers' ideals match with their actual experiences. Ecological Systems Theory places these processes into

wider social, cultural, and structural settings, acknowledging that family, community, and society norms all influence volunteer experiences.

However, critical viewpoints warn against considering volunteering to be intrinsically advantageous. Well-being may be compromised by negative experiences like disappointment, conflict, or exclusion, especially when people's expectations are not fulfilled or when access to worthwhile possibilities is restricted by systemic injustices. This emphasises how volunteering must be viewed as a socially placed activity that is impacted by both enabling and limiting variables.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the relationship between volunteering and psychological well-being among young adults. Qualitative research is a methodological approach that seeks to understand complex human phenomena by examining individuals' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours within their natural contexts. This approach is particularly valuable when investigating under-researched or marginalised populations, as it enables the discovery of fresh insights and diverse perspectives that may not emerge through quantitative inquiry (Aspers & Corte, 2021).

Unlike quantitative research, which often relies on rigid, hypothesis-driven structures, qualitative methods emphasise flexibility and openness, allowing for a deeper exploration of the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Lekan et al., 2021). This adaptability makes qualitative research especially suitable for examining subjective aspects of psychological well-being and the nuanced ways in which volunteering shapes personal meaning, motivation, and fulfilment (Cho et al., 2022).

In this study, a qualitative approach provided the opportunity to uncover the subtle, lived experiences of young adults who engage in volunteer work. It allowed for the exploration of how different forms of volunteering, commitment levels, and demographic factors intersect to influence psychological well-being. By situating individual narratives within broader sociocultural and developmental contexts, the approach offered a comprehensive understanding of both the personal and social dimensions of volunteerism (Kumnig et al., 2014; Jongenelis et al., 2021).

4.2 Research Paradigm

This study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises understanding the subjective meaning of human experiences. Interpretivism acknowledges that reality is dynamic, socially constructed, and context-dependent (Schwandt, 2014; Samkange et al., 2021). Rooted in the philosophical traditions of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and phenomenology (Husserl, 1931/1970), it emphasises how individuals' worldviews are shaped by their social settings, beliefs, and perceptions. From this perspective, multiple realities coexist, and phenomena can only be meaningfully understood through the viewpoints of those experiencing them (Delahunty & Ríordáin, 2022; Aguzzoli et al., 2024).

Interpretivism was particularly suited to this research because the psychological outcomes of volunteering are highly individualised, shaped by social interactions, cultural values, and personal motivations (Li, 2020; Siphukhanyo, 2024). Two young adults may engage in the same volunteer activity but experience vastly different levels of social connection, growth, or purpose. This paradigm therefore provided the flexibility to capture the richness and diversity of such experiences.

Methodologically, interpretivism aligns closely with qualitative research techniques such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' lived experiences of volunteering, enabling a deep examination of the meanings they attributed to their engagement. Through analysing narratives, language, and contextual influences, patterns and themes were identified that shed light on the ways volunteering contributes to psychological well-being (Bengtsson, 2016).

Furthermore, interpretivism acknowledges the researcher as an active instrument in knowledge production. Reflexivity was therefore central to this study, requiring the researcher to remain critically aware of how personal perspectives, values, and interactions with participants could shape data interpretation (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). This reflexive stance was especially important given the subjective and sensitive nature of psychological well-being.

In summary, the interpretivist paradigm offered a robust framework for exploring the complex, individualised experiences of young volunteers. By focusing on participants' personal meanings and situating these within broader social and cultural contexts, this paradigm enabled a nuanced understanding of both the benefits and challenges associated with volunteering.

4.3 Study design

4.3.1 Narrative Inquiry:

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore the effects of volunteering on psychological well-being among young adults in Gauteng. Narrative inquiry was particularly suited to this research as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of individuals lived experiences and subjective interpretations of how volunteering influenced their psychological well-being. By focusing on participants' personal narratives, this approach uncovered nuanced insights into the psychological benefits and challenges of diverse types of volunteer activities across varying demographic groups.

Narrative inquiry, as a qualitative research methodology, focuses on the collection, interpretation, and analysis of personal stories to generate meaningful insights into human experience (Shaw, 2018; Hu & Stahl, 2023). Unlike conventional research approaches that prioritise statistical generalisation, narrative inquiry privileges participants' voices, recognising that stories are not simply linear accounts of events, but rich, multidimensional constructions shaped by personal perspectives, emotions, and cultural contexts (Weiss & Johnson-Koenke,

2023). This method enabled participants to express how they made sense of their volunteering journeys and how these experiences were tied to their psychological well-being.

The approach also placed emphasis on reflexivity, requiring the researcher to critically engage with participants' narratives and remain aware of how personal perspectives shaped the research process (Stanley, 2008; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). By situating stories within specific times, places, and social contexts, narrative inquiry allowed for a holistic understanding of volunteering experiences, highlighting the interplay of psychological, cultural, and social dimensions (Adama et al., 2016; Haydon & van der Riet, 2016).

Through this design, the study generated rich narrative accounts that revealed how volunteering contributed to young adults' personal growth, social connectedness, and sense of purpose, while also acknowledging challenges such as burnout and emotional strain. Narrative inquiry therefore provided the methodological tools necessary to capture the complexity of meaning-making processes in volunteering and offered valuable contributions to both theoretical understanding and practical applications in psychology and the social sciences.

4.3.2 Thematic Analysis:

Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that involves systematically detecting, investigating, and presenting patterns or themes in data, allowing researchers to gain substantial insights from qualitative data (McLemore et al., 2014; Forbes, 2021). Thematic analysis, a flexible and widely used approach for engaging with qualitative data, enables researchers to recognize and interpret recurring patterns and themes within the data. This technique also provides a methodical way to comprehending qualitative information by allowing the identification, analysis, and sharing of patterns or themes found in data (Day et al., 2011; Bian et al., 2019).

According to Power et al. (2021), Thematic analysis is a qualitative research technique that allows researchers to adapt to a wide array of qualitative data sources. It allows researchers to uncover the intricate interpretations and underlying meanings within participants' stories.

This approach enables the recognition of recurring themes and individual experiences among various demographic categories and forms of volunteer work. Additionally, through thematic analysis, a comprehensive and intricate understanding of how volunteering impacts psychological well-being is achieved (Sun et al., 2021).

This approach enables the recognition of shared themes and individual nuances among various demographics and volunteer activities. Additionally, thematic analysis offers a comprehensive and intricate insight into the impact of volunteering on psychological well-being, transcending mere statistical associations (Braun et al., 2019; Islam & Akter, 2021). Thematic analysis enables researchers to tailor their approach to the specific research question, sample size, data collection method, and the necessity of uncovering the significance behind participants' experiences and viewpoints (Vernerova et al., 2022).

When researching the impact of volunteering on psychological well-being, thematic analysis is an effective technique for examining the intricate connections between various aspects such as demographics, types of volunteer activity, and psychological well-being. By employing this technique, the researchers will be able to deeply explore participant narratives and perspectives on their volunteer experiences and how volunteering shapes their psychological well-being.

In a study conducted by Li and Ferraro (2019), a thematic analysis was utilised to explore the impact of various volunteer activities on the psychological well-being of older individuals. The researchers discovered significant themes such as personal development,

sense of purpose, and social connections as key determinants of supporting greater psychological well-being in elderly participants. This study highlights the qualitative components of the beneficial results obtained via volunteer activity.

Another example is a study conducted by Jenkinson et al. (2013), which used thematic analysis to explore volunteers' experiences working with disadvantaged groups and how these experiences shape their psychological well-being. The findings highlighted key themes, including the development of empathy, the sense of fulfilment derived from making a positive impact, and the role of emotional resilience in supporting volunteers' psychological well-being. This study highlighted the varied ways in which the kind of volunteering activity and demographic characteristics interact to create psychological effects, highlighting the importance of theme analysis in capturing these complex relationships.

To ensure a rigorous and systematic analysis, this study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis:

- **Familiarisation with the Data** — The researcher thoroughly interacted with the data by verbatim transcription of the interviews, attentive reading and rereading of the transcripts, and note-taking of preliminary ideas and observations. This method helped guarantee that significant discoveries were not overlooked and promoted a deeper comprehension of the participants' stories.
- **Generating Initial Codes** — Throughout the study, the researcher used an inductive coding approach to carefully choose and highlight important words, ideas, and patterns found in the transcripts. To ensure uniformity, codes were generated manually using tools for qualitative data analysis. These codes reflected the important aspects of the data that were relevant to the study's goals.

- **Searching for Themes** — After the coding procedure was complete, the researcher explored how different codes related to one another to identify the deeper themes. To do this, relevant codes were carefully compiled and broad trends identified from the participants' experiences with volunteering and psychological well-being.
- **Reviewing Themes** — In order to confirm the themes' coherence, relevance, and originality, they were carefully refined through a procedure that involved careful cross-referencing with the dataset itself. This necessitated a thorough analysis to see whether these themes captured the substance of the data in question and whether more themes needed to be developed to provide reliable data that accurately captured the complex participant narratives.
- **Defining and Naming Themes** — The researcher further developed and described the themes by analysing their essential components and their connections to the study's goals. Each subject was explained in detail and backed up by actual quotes from participants to increase credibility and highlight its importance for determining psychological well-being.
- **Producing the Report** — Lastly, the themes were methodically presented and analysed in the study findings, using excerpts from participant narratives as support. The study also connected to existing research and theoretical frameworks that explored the relationship between volunteerism and psychological well-being.

Using this systematic theme analysis technique, the study documented both individual and collective viewpoints, emphasising the ways in which a variety of volunteer activities, motivating factors, and demographic variables influenced psychological well-being.

4.4 Participants

As outlined in South Africa's National Youth Policy and the National Youth Commission Act of 1996, individuals considered to be part of the youth demographic are those aged between 14 and 35 years.

This term includes many young people who have experienced various historical, sociopolitical, and social contexts. A 14-year-old is growing up in an atmosphere where many of the new reforms and victories of the fights are being achieved, while a 35-year-old lived through a period of heightened political tensions during his or her time as a student in school (Mkandawire, 2020).

For this study, young individuals between the ages of **18 and 35** who had engaged in voluntary activities were invited to participate. Participants were recruited from a variety of demographic backgrounds, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, and type of volunteer activity, to ensure diverse representation. Recruitment took place through multiple channels, including social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), online volunteer communities and forums, university volunteer groups, local volunteer organisations, charities, and campus-based volunteer initiatives (Appendix G).

To guarantee the selection of the most eligible participants, a rigorous screening procedure was implemented. Those interested in participating were asked to fill out a Google Form, which was made easily accessible through the recruitment materials (Appendix C). In order to better understand each candidate's individual qualities, this form included crucial questions such as age, language skills, and previous volunteer experience. To protect the study's efficacy and integrity, only applicants who fulfilled the predetermined requirements were taken into consideration.

Using social media platforms for recruitment entailed sending out invites to pertinent groups and forums where administrators had granted authorisation. Furthermore, all interested parties received comprehensive information about the study prior to giving their consent, and ethical issues were respected to guarantee voluntary participation.

Inclusion Criteria

- **Age:** Participants were required to be between 18 and 35 years old.
- **Volunteering Experience:** Participants were required to have engaged in at least one volunteer activity within the past year or more.
- **Demographics:** Diverse demographic backgrounds, comprising various gender identities, socioeconomic classes, and ethnicities, were represented by the participants.
- **Language Proficiency:** To guarantee effective communication and comprehension during semi-structured interviews, participants were required to be fluent in the study's primary language, such as English.

Exclusion Criteria

- **Age Outside the Range:** Individuals under the age of 18 or above the age of 35 were excluded. This guaranteed that the research stayed within the specified age range.
- **Lack of Volunteering Experience:** As the study aimed to explore the influence of recent volunteer experiences on psychological well-being, individuals who had not participated in voluntary activities were excluded.
- **Current Mental Health Conditions:** Participants with serious mental health issues (severe depression, schizophrenia, etc.) that would impair their capacity to accurately describe their experiences were disqualified. This prevented variables unrelated to the effects of volunteering from distorting the findings.

- **Conflict of Interest:** To maintain the integrity of the study, participants with potential conflicts of interest, such as those employed by institutions focused on psychological well-being or volunteering, were excluded to minimise potential bias.

Sample Size

To strike a balance between accuracy and practicality, Navalta et al. (2023) suggested employing a sample size of 6–15. Through a concentrated exploration of limited participants, researchers were able to reveal detailed narratives that provided nuanced insights into the topic at hand. This approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of the complexities present within each story, capturing the individualised contexts and significance woven throughout the accounts of participants (Zhang, 2020; Jaeni & Ghufon, 2024).

For example, in a study conducted by Sledge (2021), narrative inquiry was used to explore the lived experiences of African American women working as community college administrators. She conducted interviews with five participants to learn about the hurdles they experienced in progressing their careers as well as the unique techniques they used to attain their highest level of leadership as college president. Comparably, in their study, Lashuan and Wicker (2023) utilised a narrative inquiry approach to delve into the driving forces behind changes in volunteer behaviours and their impact on outcomes. By shedding light on an often-overlooked population, they gathered valuable insights on volunteer motivations through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 13 participants.

Additionally, other studies demonstrated that a sample size ranging from 5 to 15 participants was sufficient for revealing intricate connections between volunteering and psychological well-being, shedding light on both the direct consequences and potential

moderating variables such as age and gender (Frith & Frith, 2003; Human & Van Graan, 2013).

In order to provide a targeted yet varied exploration of volunteer experiences, this study sampled six to fifteen volunteers. First-come, first-served recruitment was used to find participants, and sampling continued until either the maximum sample size of 15 individuals was attained, or data saturation was reached. In order to guarantee that the information gathered was complete and rich, data saturation was assessed when no new themes, patterns, or insights surfaced from the interviews.

4.5 Data Collection

To guarantee a varied representation of participants, a purposive sampling method was used during recruitment for this study on the impact of volunteering on psychological well-being. With purposive sampling, a non-probability selection technique, researchers deliberately picked participants according to particular traits that supported the study's goals. This method allowed for the selection of individuals with appropriate experience or insights, hence increasing the depth and richness of the data acquired (Palinkas et al., 2015; Indra et al., 2023).

Purposive sampling was particularly suitable for exploring the complexities of volunteering and psychological well-being. By focusing on individuals engaged in diverse types of volunteer activities, researchers were able to gain a deeper understanding of how numerous factors such as demographics, age, and gender interacted to shape experiences of psychological well-being (Wang, Ling, et al., 2022). For instance, in their hermeneutic phenomenological exploration of volunteer well-being, Furtak and Barnard (2021) utilised purposive sampling to target participants who fit the definition of a formal volunteer and had volunteered at the NPO for a minimum period of 12 months, in which they conducted in-depth interviews that allowed them to delve deeply into how these experiences shaped participants' psychological well-being.

Furthermore, purposive sampling allowed for the inclusion of individuals from various backgrounds and volunteering circumstances, which was essential for capturing the different effects of volunteers (Miller et al., 2020). This method not only broadened the study's usefulness but also tackled the intricacies of the link between volunteer activities and psychological well-being. For example, Elias et al. (2016) used a purposive sample to explore long-term engagement in formal volunteering and well-being, illustrating how focused selection could provide valuable insights into the psychological benefits of volunteer work.

Furthermore, purposive selection allowed researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse nature of volunteerism and its contributions to psychological well-being. The study evaluated how these factors led to differences in psychological well-being by choosing individuals with diverse demographic traits and volunteering experiences. This strategy not only improved the study's internal validity, but it also provided for a more comprehensive knowledge of the various paths via which volunteering might alter psychological well-being outcomes (Sneed & Cohen, 2013; Chen et al., 2020).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected individuals, with a designated amount of time and schedule for their interviews (Appendix C). These interviews predominantly took place through video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. The data collection process took place over a period of 1st of August - 6th of September. The importance of semi-structured interviews in the framework of narrative inquiry was emphasised by several researchers (Mikuska & Lyndon, 2021; Kurniawati & Atmojo, 2022; Reeves et al., 2022).

The interview guide was created based on current research on volunteer activity and psychological well-being (Appendix A). The guide included open-ended questions (e.g., **Exploratory:** Can you describe your experiences with volunteer work and how they have influenced your psychological well-being? **Probing:** How did you feel during and after participating in volunteer activities? **Reflective:** What do you think are the key factors that shaped the psychological benefits of volunteering?), allowing participants to share their individual experiences and perspectives on how volunteering connected to their psychological well-being (see Appendix B).

Semi-structured interviews offered a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing for a thorough exploration of themes and topics pertaining to volunteers' experiences and psychological well-being. This method ensured that critical discussion areas were addressed while allowing participants to dig into personal and meaningful aspects (Testoni et al., 2023). This adaptability was critical in narrative inquiry given that it allowed for the development of detailed experiences that portrayed various aspects of an individual's lived experiences (Sahragard & Sadeghi, 2017).

Using Zoom or similar platforms enabled remote participation. This accessibility reduced logistical constraints and allowed participants to interact easily in their environments, potentially increasing their honesty and willingness to contribute firsthand experiences while capturing both verbal and non-verbal communication cues (Tangonan & Selda, 2019).

4.6 Data Analysis

This study employed a **hybrid thematic analysis** to examine how volunteering experiences relate to psychological well-being among young adults. The analytic approach combined **inductive and deductive reasoning**, allowing for the identification of themes grounded in participants' lived experiences while also engaging with established psychological well-being frameworks relevant to the research questions.

The rationale for adopting a hybrid approach was twofold. First, the exploratory nature of the study required sensitivity to unanticipated meanings emerging from participants' narratives. Second, the study sought to examine these experiences in relation to existing theoretical understandings of psychological well-being, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby strengthening analytic depth and theoretical coherence.

4.6.1 Analytic Procedure

Data analysis followed a systematic, iterative process:

- **Familiarisation**

The researcher engaged in repeated reading of verbatim interview transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the data and to note initial patterns and reflections.

- **Inductive Coding**

Open coding was conducted manually by the researcher, with codes assigned to meaningful units of text capturing participants' descriptions of volunteering experiences and perceived psychological outcomes. Codes were data-driven and remained close to participants' language.

- **Theme Development**

Related codes were grouped into preliminary themes through constant comparison. These themes were reviewed, refined, and reorganised to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes.

- **Deductive Refinement**

In the second phase, themes were examined in relation to established psychological well-being frameworks. Deductive engagement enabled refinement of themes by assessing how participants' accounts aligned with, extended, or challenged existing theoretical constructs relevant to the research questions.

- **Review and Finalisation of Themes**

Themes were reviewed across the full dataset to ensure they accurately represented participants' accounts. Negative cases and alternative interpretations were considered to enhance analytic rigour. Final themes were defined and named to reflect their conceptual scope.

4.6.2 Ensuring Rigour and Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility and dependability, an audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development was maintained. Peer debriefing with academic supervisors supported reflexive engagement with the data, and member checking was conducted to verify the resonance of interpretations with participants' experiences. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently until thematic saturation was reached and no new themes emerged.

4.7 Data Management

This study complied fully with South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act No. 4 of 2013. All personal data were managed in accordance with POPIA's core principles, including accountability, transparency, purpose limitation, and data minimisation, to ensure ethical handling and the protection of participants' privacy throughout the research process.

In practice, data management procedures were implemented as follows:

- **Purpose Limitation and Data Processing**

Personal data were collected solely for the purpose of examining young adults' experiences of volunteering and psychological well-being. No data were used beyond the stated research objectives. Participants were informed of the study's purpose prior to participation, and participation was voluntary throughout.

- **Informed Consent**

Participants received a written informed consent form outlining the study aims, the voluntary nature of participation, their rights under POPIA (including the right to withdraw or request data deletion), and the measures in place to protect their personal information. Consent was obtained before any data collection commenced.

- **Data Storage and Retention**

Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on secure, password-protected institutional servers at IIE MSA. Files were encrypted, and access permissions were restricted to authorised users only. In line with institutional policy, data will be retained for a maximum of five (5) years (Independent Institute of Education, 2006), after which all files will be permanently deleted using secure data erasure procedures.

- **Data Access and Security**

Access to raw data was limited to the researcher and academic supervisors. Data were not stored on personal devices, external drives, or cloud-based platforms. Audio recordings were transferred immediately to the secure server after interviews and deleted from recording devices.

- **Anonymisation and Confidentiality**

All interview transcripts were anonymised during transcription. Identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms were assigned to participants. Audio files were stored

separately from consent forms and any identifying documentation. No personal identifiers were included in the final thesis or related academic outputs.

- **Further Processing and Monitoring**

The data were used exclusively for this study. Any future use beyond the original scope would require renewed participant consent and additional ethical clearance. Participants were informed of their rights regarding data access, correction, and withdrawal in accordance with POPIA requirements.

Through these procedures, the study ensured lawful, secure, and ethical data management, safeguarding participants' confidentiality, dignity, and rights at all stages of the research.

4.8 Reporting of Results

The study's results were reported systematically in accordance with accepted qualitative research standards. Findings were presented clearly and coherently, supported by participant quotations and summary tables where appropriate. The presentation focused on accurately reflecting participants' perspectives while maintaining analytical rigour. Interpretive commentary was reserved for subsequent chapters, where the findings were contextualised within relevant theoretical frameworks and existing literature.

4.9 Trustworthiness and rigour

Establishing the reliability, dependability, and applicability of qualitative research results required ensuring trustworthiness (William, 2024; Enworo, 2023). This study used several techniques to increase its rigour, using recognised qualitative research criteria, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

4.9.1 Credibility

Credibility referred to the integrity and truthfulness of study findings in accurately portraying participants lived experiences (Okyere & Kwaku Kissah-Korsah, 2023). To strengthen this credibility, the study used member checking, which allowed participants to review and confirm the conclusions drawn from their replies. In addition, peer debriefing meetings with research colleagues or mentors were held to discuss emerging themes and resolve any hidden biases that existed from the researcher's perspective. The triangulation approach was utilised to compare data from various sources, including a wide range of participant groups and current research on volunteerism and psychological well-being. Finally, ongoing involvement with participants and iterative data assessments were undertaken to strengthen the results' credibility.

4.9.2 Transferability

According to Drisko (2024), transferability referred to the extent to which findings from research could be applied to different situations or groups. Although qualitative research did not aim for generalisability, this study contributed to transferability by vividly portraying participants lived experiences and comprehensive demographic insights and contextual nuances surrounding volunteerism in Gauteng Province. By methodically gathering rich narratives and assuring a varied range of young adults participating in several types of volunteering, this study provided the groundwork for future academics and practitioners to focus on the applicability of its results in other contexts.

4.9.3 Dependability

Dependability in research depended on the careful review of findings, interpretations, and recommendations, all of which were firmly based on data gathered from study participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This concept assured that the study's results were consistent and reproducible under comparable conditions. To maintain this reliability, a comprehensive audit trail was constructed, documenting each stage of the research process, including data gathering techniques, coding decisions, and topic progression. Keeping a research journal that recorded the researcher's viewpoints, presumptions, and any biases during the study was another way that reflexivity was implemented.

4.9.4 Confirmability

According to Ahmed (2024), confirmability acted as an indicator of impartiality in study findings. This concept stated that the outcomes had to be free of the biases or inclinations of those conducting the research. A clear audit record of the choices made for data collection, coding, and analysis was maintained for this project. Reflexive journaling assisted in uncovering and addressing any researcher biases.

Confirmability was also enhanced by member verification, which made sure that interpretations matched the participants' intended meanings. Furthermore, to support the study's conclusions, negative case analysis was conducted by actively searching out and embracing opposing or conflicting viewpoints.

When taken as a whole, these steps improved the study's reliability, rigour, and guaranteed that the research findings were credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable.

4.10 Ethical Considerations

4.10.1 Informed Consent

The ethical principle of informed consent was fundamental to this study, ensuring that participants thoroughly understood the study's objectives, potential benefits and risks, and their

rights before providing their assent to participate (Manti & Licari, 2018). Studies such as Wilson (2012) emphasised the significance of informed permission in volunteering research.

Participants received a comprehensive explanation of the research's goals, methods, and their rights regarding privacy and the ability to withdraw from the study.

Informed consent was especially important when studying populations sensitive to topics such as psychological well-being and volunteerism (Jongenelis & Pettigrew, 2020). By prioritising informed permission, the study protected participants' well-being and enhanced the trustworthiness and ethical credibility of the results.

Participants provided their voluntary and well-informed consent, signifying comprehension, and agreement with the study's participation conditions (see Appendix F). They were presented with detailed information regarding the study's aims, methodologies, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, and their rights. To ensure accurate transcription, participants were informed that interviews would be recorded and provided consent before recording. Identifiable information was anonymised during transcription, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym for further protection.

4.10.2 Confidentiality

Maintaining confidentiality was an essential ethical principle to protect participant data from unauthorised disclosure or use (Massimino et al., 2018; Cheah et al., 2023). Confidentiality was ensured to foster participant trust, encourage open communication, and reduce risks when discussing psychological well-being (Jeremić Stojković et al., 2020; Malm et al., 2022).

All information gathered, such as field notes, interview recordings, and transcripts, was stored on a password-protected device and backed up on the secure institutional server of IIE MSA. Only the researcher and designated academic supervisors had access.

Confidentiality measures included:

Verbatim transcription with pseudonyms replacing identifiable information.

Secure storage of physical documents in a locked cabinet.

Reporting in generalised terms without direct quotes or verbatim statements.

Secure retention of data for five years, after which it was deleted or shredded according to institutional policies.

4.10.3 Voluntary Participation

Voluntary participation was fundamental, ensuring participants could decide freely whether to participate without coercion (Kovane et al., 2022). Participants were provided with full information on the study's objectives, methods, risks, and benefits before agreeing to participate (Brear et al., 2023; Godskesen et al., 2023). Participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequence.

4.10.4 Minimisation of Harm

The principle of minimising harm was prioritised to protect participants from potential threats to psychological, physical, emotional, or social well-being (Polfuss et al., 2023). Measures were implemented to ensure that participants' emotional states were not negatively affected and to provide appropriate support or resources if needed (Amore, 2022; Ford et al., 2021; Rotolo & Wilson, 2007). Participants were informed of psychological support organisations such as LifeLine South Africa, SAFMH, SADAG, and Cape Mental Health.

Power dynamics were monitored, and reflexivity was used to ensure participant-centred, non-hierarchical, and respectful interactions. Participants were reminded they could leave the study at any point if they felt uncomfortable.

4.10.5 Ethical Review and Compliance

The ethics committee assessed the study protocol to ensure adherence to ethical standards. Ethical concerns were addressed and disclosed to the relevant authorities, as necessary.

4.10.6 Transparency and Integrity

Transparency and honesty were maintained throughout the research to ensure reproducibility and reliability (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; McEvoy et al., 2022). The researcher reported findings accurately and declared any potential conflicts of interest to preserve the legitimacy of the study (Pizzolato & Dierickx, 2022).

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter described the methodological approach that served as the basis for the investigation into the connection between young people's psychological health and volunteering in Gauteng. The use of a qualitative technique inside an interpretivist paradigm enabled the investigation of participants' subjective meanings and lived experiences in ways that quantitative designs could not. Narrative inquiry laid the groundwork for gathering detailed narratives of participants' travels, whereas thematic analysis provided a systematic method for discovering and evaluating recurring themes that represented both common and individual experiences.

Purposive sampling, which ensures variety across age, gender, socioeconomic position, and volunteer activities while protecting inclusion and exclusion criteria, was used to carefully recruit research participants. Participants were allowed to freely express their experiences through semi-structured interviews, and the results were guided by both theoretical frameworks and emergent insights thanks to rigorous data analysis techniques based on a hybrid theme approach.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were all considered in order to ensure that the results accurately represented the reality of the participants and to demonstrate rigour and trustworthiness. Ethical concerns were important to the study process, with rigorous adherence to informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary involvement, harm minimisation, and conformity with POPIA and institutional standards.

In general, the methodological decisions described in this chapter offered a strong and morally good basis for examining the ways in which volunteering influences psychological health. The next chapter offers the analysis's findings, revealing how young adults' voices and stories shed light on the intricate interplay between volunteerism, identity, and mental health.

CHAPTER 5: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive examination of interviews conducted with young adults in Gauteng who actively participate in volunteer activities. It seeks to understand how numerous factors such as the nature of their volunteering, the length of their commitment, and their underlying motivations contribute to their psychological well-being. By exploring these dimensions, the chapter aims to provide nuanced insights into the personal benefits and impacts of volunteering, fostering a deeper appreciation of how such engagement promotes individual growth and resilience within this vibrant community.

Five major themes that encapsulate the participants lived experiences and thoughts on wellbeing and volunteerism were found through the thematic analysis approach. Among these themes are:

- Personal Growth and Self-Discovery
- Social Connectedness and Community Belonging
- Intrinsic Motivation and Altruistic Fulfilment
- Skill Development and Career Enhancement
- Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Volunteering

This study aims to explore the positive influence of volunteering on the psychological well-being of young adults, employing the framework of Self-Determination Theory. It emphasizes the vital roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in cultivating positive emotions, a sense of purpose, and overall satisfaction. By examining a diverse range of volunteering activities, the research seeks to understand how these experiences contribute to emotional resilience and personal growth. Additionally, the study considers the impact of the duration of commitment and underlying motivations on the psychological benefits derived from

volunteering. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform strategies that encourage meaningful engagement in volunteer activities, fostering well-being and development among young adults.

This chapter commences with an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants, subsequently presenting the findings in a structured manner based on the identified themes. Direct participant quotes that are evaluated using the theoretical framework and the body of current literature are used to support each subject. The chapter ends with a summary of the main conclusions, emphasising the ways in which volunteering benefits young people's mental health in South Africa.

5.2 Demographic Data of Participants

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Volunteer Activity	Duration of Commitment
Naledi	24	Female	Tutoring disadvantaged learners	1 year (weekly)
Sipho	21	Male	Community food drive	6 months (monthly)
Thandi	26	Female	Animal shelter volunteering	2 years (weekly)
Lerato	23	Non-binary	Health awareness campaigns	8 months (flexible)
Kabelo	25	Male	Environmental clean-up initiatives	1.5 years (bi-weekly)

Table 1: Participants

The research included five participants aged 21 to 26 years old, representing a broad set of young adults involved in various types of volunteer activity in the Gauteng Province. The sample consisted of two females, two men, and one non-binary individual, demonstrating gender variety among young volunteers. Volunteers took part in a variety of voluntary endeavours, such as environmental projects, food drives in the community, working at animal shelters, health awareness campaigns, and tutoring underprivileged students.

Volunteer commitments varied significantly, spanning durations from six months to two years, and encompassing frequencies from weekly to monthly engagements. This diversity offered valuable insights into how different types and levels of volunteering influence young adults' psychological well-being. By examining these varied experiences, we can better understand the nuanced ways in which volunteer activities contribute to personal growth, resilience, and overall mental health among young individuals engaged in community service.

5.3 Presentation of Findings

The following themes emerged from the data and are presented with supporting participant illustrative quotes.

Theme 1: Personal Growth and Self-Discovery

Participants reported that volunteering helped them gain new skills, develop confidence, and find purpose in life.

Code	Supporting Quote (Pseudonym)	Interpretation
Confidence growth	"Volunteering made me realise I can lead projects. I didn't think I had it in me before." (Kabelo)	Volunteering fosters self-efficacy and leadership confidence.
Sense of purpose	"Helping kids with their studies gave me a reason to push through my own challenges." (Naledi)	Purpose and meaning contribute to psychological well-being.
Self-discovery	"I never knew I was good at public speaking until I joined the awareness campaign." (Lerato)	New roles provide opportunities for discovering hidden abilities.

Table 2: Theme 1 Codes

Volunteering, according to the participants, was a life-changing event that gave them a revitalised sense of purpose, confidence, and the ability to uncover latent talents. Many reported that volunteering aided in their career and personal development.

Kabelo remarked, "Volunteering showed me that I am capable of leading initiatives. Before, I

didn't think I had it in me. This claim emphasises how chances to exercise initiative in volunteer settings foster a sense of competence and leadership confidence. Lerato concurred, stating, "Before I started, I used to doubt myself a lot, but now I feel like I can take on challenges without second-guessing."

Similarly, Naledi explained how her involvement in tutoring motivated her: "Helping kids with their studies gave me a reason to push through my challenges. Seeing them improve made me proud and reminded me that I can make a difference." Thandi added, "When I joined the animal shelter, I thought it would just be cleaning and feeding, but I learnt to manage events and fundraisers and coordinate volunteers. I never imagined myself being that organised."

These reflections highlight that volunteering significantly enhances self-efficacy and personal empowerment, resonating well with principles outlined in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Participants consistently report experiencing heightened confidence, a greater sense of purpose, and improved feelings of self-worth, which align with Miller and Cohen's (2001) study. Similar findings were reported in a more recent study by Whelan et al. (2023), in which they found that engaging in acts of helping others acts as a reflective process, allowing individuals to recognise their own strengths and capabilities. This reciprocal dynamic fosters personal growth, encourages intrinsic motivation, and cultivates a deeper sense of connection and responsibility within communities, ultimately contributing to a more engaged and resilient society.

Volunteering serves as a valuable avenue for personal growth, enhancing self-awareness and reinforcing one's sense of identity. As Sipho summarised, "It's strange, but by giving my time, I learnt so much about myself." This experience aligns with numerous studies highlighting the positive impact of volunteerism on individual growth, fostering a greater

understanding of oneself while contributing meaningfully to the community (Fondling et al., 2023; Musick & Wilson, 2003).

Additionally, Hui and Ma (2022) show that consistent volunteer work improves emotional resilience and self-concept clarity, reflecting participants' self-discovery experiences. According to the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), these developmental results result from the mutual interactions that take place between people and the surroundings that sustain them.

Theme 2: Social Connection and Belonging

Volunteering was described as strengthening social bonds and creating a sense of belonging.

Code	Supporting Quote (Pseudonym)	Interpretation
Community appreciation	"People in the community thank us every time, and that makes me feel part of something bigger." (Sipho)	Recognition from others fosters belonging.
Peer bonding	"Working with fellow volunteers feels like family; we support each other." (Thandi)	Volunteering builds strong peer connections.
Social skills	"I've learned patience when talking to different kinds of people." (Lerato)	Improves interpersonal communication skills.

Table 3: Theme 2 Codes

Volunteering also increased participants' feelings of social connection and community integration. Participants frequently talked about how shared service activities strengthened their bonds with one another.

Sipho stated, "People in the community often appreciate us, which makes me feel like I'm a part of something greater. You understand that even little things matter. Thandi thought about how her interactions with other volunteers were like being a member of a family. It's like a second home where we plan, laugh, and worry together."

Lerato added, "I've encountered a lot of folks that have similar ideals to mine. It's pleasant to know that people actually care." In a similar vein, Kabelo said, "I used to be extremely reserved, but volunteering forced me to connect with strangers, lead conversations, and interact to people." "Now I feel more at ease in social situations." Naledi stated, "I made friends who I now see outside volunteering." We support one other with our studies and celebrate each other's birthdays; it's no longer just about the job.

These narratives underscore the fundamental human need for relatedness within Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which highlights that meaningful social connections play a vital role in fostering intrinsic motivation and overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Additionally, they align with Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital, which encompasses the networks and norms that promote trust and cooperation among individuals. Recent research further supports these insights: Hoffman et al. (2023) and Postigo et al. (2022) have demonstrated that volunteering contributes to both bonding and bridging social capital, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness, and enhancing collective efficacy. Furthermore, Schnell and Krampe (2020) found that social connectedness acts as a mediator between volunteering and well-being across different cultural contexts, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal support in sustaining motivation.

Participants' reflections also appear to support the principles of Meaning-Making Theory, as they frequently described social relationships as important sources of meaning and validation (George & Park, 2017). The feelings of belonging expressed by individuals such as Thandi and Lerato highlight how community involvement can foster emotional security and aid in identity development, particularly for young adults experiencing social transitions (Swartz et al., 2019; Matthews & Nazroo, 2020). Therefore, in addition to altruistic motives, volunteering seems to fulfil a profound psychological need for connection, mutual recognition, and shared identity. This

suggests that social relationships function both as a result of and a contributing factor to volunteer participation.

Theme 3: Autonomy and Values Alignment

Participants emphasised the importance of autonomy in choosing volunteer activities that align with their personal values.

Code	Supporting Quote (Pseudonym)	Interpretation
Value-driven volunteering	"I do it because I love animals. It's not about recognition, just what I believe in." (Thandi)	Alignment with values sustains motivation.
Autonomy in participation	"I choose when I join campaigns, and that freedom keeps me committed." (Lerato)	Autonomy reinforces intrinsic motivation.
Giving back	"Education changed my life, so I want to help others access the same." (Naledi)	Volunteers often motivated by reciprocity and moral values.

Table 4: Theme 3 Codes

Participants appreciated the importance of maintaining autonomy and aligning their personal values with the initiative, which significantly enhanced their overall satisfaction and fostered a powerful sense of motivation, thereby encouraging continued commitment and active engagement in volunteering activities.

Lerato stated, "I can decide on occasions to participate in campaigns, and that independence keeps me dedicated. I do it because I choose to, not because I feel compelled to. Thandi stated, "I do it because I adore animals. It isn't about accolades or hours worked; it's about what I believe in." Naledi echoed this, relating volunteering to her educational values: "Education transformed my life; therefore, I want to help others have the same opportunity." It's something close to my heart."

Recent research by Kim and Morgül (2022) and Allan et al. (2023) supports the idea that volunteer environments that support autonomy are associated with higher intrinsic motivation and greater likelihood of long-term commitment. Similarly, Yeung and Yau (2023) highlight that when volunteers' personal goals align with organisational missions, it enhances their satisfaction and sense of purpose.

Kabelo described autonomy as a form of empowerment: "They trust me to handle projects my way. I appreciate that no one's constantly overseeing me. It makes me feel respected and responsible." Sipho added, "I choose to volunteer with organisations that align with my beliefs. That's what motivates me to keep returning; if I didn't believe in the cause, I would lose interest." These insights reflect the aspects of autonomy and values outlined in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), where self-directed engagement fosters increased intrinsic motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The participants' experiences are also consistent with Clary and Snyder's (1999) functional approach, which emphasises value expression as a significant motivator for volunteering.

According to Meaning-Making Theory, participants' attention on aligning personal values with volunteering responsibilities represents the process of creating coherent self-narratives (Park, 2010; Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020). For these young adults, volunteering was more than just a chore; it was a reflection of their values and identities, strengthening their sense of self and maintaining motivation throughout time.

Theme 4: Psychological Benefits

All participants highlighted emotional and psychological well-being benefits associated with volunteering.

Code	Supporting Quote (Pseudonym)	Interpretation
Stress relief	"Being at the shelter makes me calmer, almost like therapy." (Thandi)	Volunteering can reduce stress and anxiety.
Increased happiness	"Even when I'm tired, I feel happy after helping people at the food drive." (Sipho)	Positive emotions enhance well-being.
Satisfaction	"When learners succeed, it feels like my small effort is worth it." (Naledi)	Satisfaction linked to observable impact of volunteering.

Table 5: Theme 4 Codes

All participants reported experiencing notable psychological benefits from their volunteer activities, such as enhanced happiness, decreased stress levels, and an overall improvement in emotional well-being.

Thandi explained, "Being at the shelter calms me down, almost like therapy." When I am there, I forget about my problems." Sipho also said, "I feel happy after serving people at the food drive, regardless of whether I'm drained from work. Giving has a healing quality to it." "I feel gratified when I see students comprehending a concept; it's an enjoyable feeling that lasts even after I leave," Naledi said.

Lerato continued, "I usually leave gatherings with a smile. It's as if no matter how horrible my week has been, helping someone resets everything." Kabelo explained, "It gave me a reason to get out of bed certain days." I felt more positive and connected to life."

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), these positive outcomes are associated with the fulfilment of competence and relatedness needs; participants felt both

effective in their roles and emotionally connected to others. Hui and Ma (2022) also highlight that volunteering can serve as an emotional regulation strategy, thereby supporting well-being through actions driven by a sense of purpose. These experiences underscore both hedonic well-being (such as pleasure and happiness) and eudaimonic well-being (including meaning and purpose). This duality aligns with the findings of Piliavin and Siegl (2007), as well as more recent research by Son and Wilson (2021) and Post (2024), which suggests that engaging in prosocial activities can enhance overall life satisfaction, emotional stability, and resilience.

Additionally, Windsor et al. (2021) discovered that regular volunteering can help decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety, indicating that altruistic involvement may serve as a protective factor for mental health. Participants expressed that feeling needed and appreciated contributes to their sense of self-worth and emotional strength, aligning with the principles of Meaning-Making Theory, which highlights the importance of purpose in supporting psychological well-being (George & Park, 2017). Therefore, volunteering appears to act both as a means of coping and as a valuable psychological resource, positively influencing participants' self-view, outlook, and resilience.

Theme 5: Challenges and Coping Strategies

Despite positive experiences, participants identified challenges such as time management, emotional strain, and lack of recognition.

Code	Supporting Quote (Pseudonym)	Interpretation
Time constraints	"Balancing studies and volunteering are difficult; sometimes I feel stretched thin." (Naledi)	Time management is a recurring challenge.
Emotional strain	"Seeing abandoned animals is painful, but focusing on the ones we help keeps me going." (Thandi)	Coping involves reframing experiences positively.

Lack of recognition	"Sometimes, people don't take volunteers seriously, and it feels demotivating." (Sipho)	External validation is important for sustaining motivation.
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Table 6: Theme 5 Codes

Although participants expressed enthusiasm for volunteering, they also identified various problems, such as emotional strain, time management, and a lack of acknowledgement.

Naledi stated, "Balancing my education and volunteering is difficult. There are times when I have tasks that are due, and I regret failing to show up." There are weeks when I'm exhausted, and I question if it's worth it, particularly when no one acknowledges your effort," Sipho said in a similar vein.

"Witnessing animals neglected and in pain wounds my heart, yet I remind myself that even helping one is a victory," Thandi said in reflection on the psychological toll. Lerato said, "I sometimes come home emotionally exhausted after neighbourhood trips. But when I think of the folks we saved, it helps me stay grounded." Kabelo said, "When the weight becomes too heavy, I turn to my group. Their support reminds me that we're all in this together. These observations highlight the unavoidable emotional and practical constraints of volunteering, as well as the resilience that people build as a result. Many people used cognitive reframing tactics, focusing on good outcomes rather than challenges.

From an ecological systems theory perspective, these coping mechanisms are influenced by various contextual factors, including institutional support, peer networks, and family dynamics, which collectively enable volunteers to adapt effectively and flourish (Neal &

Neal, 2013). This aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping theory, which describes how individuals evaluate and manage emotional demands.

Recent studies by Pillay and Kramers-Olen (2021) and Chi et al. (2022) further support the notion that social support and reflective coping serve as buffers against the emotional strain associated with volunteering. Likewise, Lim and Wang (2022) observed that volunteers who experience a sense of autonomy and peer validation tend to demonstrate greater emotional resilience and lower levels of burnout. Although volunteering can be emotionally challenging, participants' use of coping strategies such as peer support, reflection, and positive reappraisal exemplifies how these challenges can foster emotional growth and psychological resilience. This underscores the adaptive benefits of prosocial engagement (Post, 2024; Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020).

5.4 Collation of Major Findings

The study identified five interrelated themes:

1. Personal growth and self-discovery – volunteering fosters confidence, leadership, and purpose. Social connection and belonging – participation enhances social capital and emotional support.
2. Autonomy and values alignment – intrinsic motivation is sustained through freedom and value congruence.
3. Psychological benefits – volunteering reduces stress and increases happiness.
4. Challenges and coping – volunteers face emotional and practical challenges but develop resilience and coping mechanisms.

5.5 Data Interpretation and Discussion

This study identified five interrelated themes that collectively describe young adults' experiences of volunteering and its perceived relationship to psychological well-being. First, participants described volunteering as a catalyst for personal growth and self-discovery, particularly through increased confidence, skill development, and a strengthened sense of purpose. Second, social connection and belonging emerged as a central aspect of volunteering, with participants highlighting meaningful relationships with peers, beneficiaries, and communities. Third, autonomy and values alignment were identified as key factors sustaining engagement, as participants valued having choice and participating in causes aligned with their personal beliefs. Fourth, participants consistently reported psychological benefits, including enhanced happiness, emotional relief, and a sense of fulfilment. Finally, despite these benefits, participants also described challenges, such as time constraints and emotional strain, alongside the development of coping strategies that supported continued involvement.

5.6: Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the study derived from semi-structured interviews with young adults engaged in volunteer activities. Using thematic analysis, five themes were identified that capture participants' lived experiences of volunteering and their perceived psychological outcomes. The findings highlight volunteering as a multifaceted experience that encompasses personal development, social connection, value expression, emotional well-being, and challenge. The chapter focused on presenting participant-derived data in a clear and systematic manner, laying the foundation for a deeper theoretical interpretation and engagement with existing literature in the subsequent discussion chapter.

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Appendices

Appendix A (Interview Guide)

1. Exploratory Question:

“Can you describe your experiences with volunteer work and how they have influenced your psychological well-being?”

- **Probing Cue:** *“What aspects of your volunteer work have impacted you the most?”*
- **Probing Cue:** *“How did these experiences make you feel emotionally and mentally?”*

2. Experiential Question:

“Can you share a specific memory from your volunteer experience that stands out to you?”

- **Probing Cue:** *“What was happening during that moment, and how did it affect your feelings or thoughts?”*
- **Probing Cue:** *“What were the key factors that made this memory significant?”*

3. Motivational Question:

“Why did you choose to engage in volunteer work in the first place?”

- **Probing Cue:** *“Was there a particular event or reason that motivated you to volunteer?”*
- **Probing Cue:** *“Did your reasons for volunteering change over time?”*

4. Reflective Question:

“What do you think are the key factors that shape the psychological benefits of volunteering?”

- **Probing Cue:** *“How do you think these benefits are different for you compared to others who volunteer?”*

5. Challenges Question:

“What challenges, if any, have you encountered while volunteering?”

- **Probing Cue:** *“How did these challenges affect you emotionally or mentally?”*
- **Probing Cue:** *“Were there any specific strategies you used to overcome these challenges?”*

6. **Impact Question:**

“How has volunteering shaped your overall psychological well-being?”

- **Probing Cue:** *“Can you describe any positive or negative emotional changes you’ve noticed?”*
- **Probing Cue:** *“In what ways has your mental health or outlook on life been influenced by your volunteering?”*

Appendix B (Interview Questions)

Introduction:

This survey is part of a qualitative research study exploring the relationship between volunteerism and psychological well-being. I aim to investigate how participating in volunteer activities influences various aspects of well-being, including personal growth, social relationships, and overall life satisfaction. Your perspectives will contribute to understanding the diverse motivations behind volunteering and its potential benefits across different demographic groups.

Overall Well-being:

1. Exploring Well-being and Happiness:

- Can you describe how you have been feeling in terms of your overall well-being and happiness in recent months? What contributes to these feelings?
- Could you share a specific example or moment that stands out to you as contributing positively to your well-being?

Positive Affect:

2. Instances of Joy and Satisfaction:

- Think about recent instances or activities that have brought you joy or satisfaction. How do these experiences influence your overall mood and well-being?
- Can you elaborate on a particular experience that significantly impacted your sense of well-being?

Functioning:

3. Impact of Volunteering on Daily Life:

- In what ways do you feel volunteering affects your ability to manage daily tasks and responsibilities effectively?
- Could you provide examples of how volunteering has influenced your sense of accomplishment or capability?

Relationships:

4. Influence of Relationships on Well-being:

- How have your relationships, both within and outside of volunteering, influenced your sense of well-being?
- Can you describe how these relationships support your emotional and psychological needs?

Autonomy:

5. **Importance of Autonomy in Volunteering:**

- How important is having autonomy and independence in your volunteer activities?
- From your experience, how does autonomy contribute to your overall satisfaction and well-being?

Altruism:

6. **Motivation to Volunteer:**

- What motivates you to volunteer? How does your desire to help others play a role in your volunteer activities?

Career Development:

7. **Professional and Personal Growth:**

- How do you perceive volunteering contributing to your personal or professional development?
- Could you share specific examples of skills or knowledge you have gained through volunteering?

Social Integration:

8. **Connection to Community or Cause:**

- To what extent does volunteering help you feel connected to your community or a cause?
- How does this sense of connection impact your overall well-being?

Values Expression:

9. **Alignment of Values with Volunteer Work:**

- How does volunteering allow you to express your personal values or beliefs?
- Can you provide examples of how your values align with the volunteer work you do?

Personal Growth:

10. **Reflection on Personal Growth:**

- How has volunteering contributed to your personal growth or self-understanding?
- Are there any insights or changes in perspective you have gained through your volunteer experiences?

Impact of Volunteering on Well-being:

11. **Reflecting on Volunteering and Well-being:**

- Thinking about your experiences, how has volunteering influenced your overall psychological well-being?
- Could you share specific instances that illustrate this impact on your well-being?

Motivation and Satisfaction:

12. **Motivations for Volunteering:**

- How do your motivations for volunteering relate to your overall satisfaction and well-being?
- Are there specific motivations that you find particularly fulfilling or rewarding?

Challenges and Coping:

13. **Challenges Faced in Volunteering:**

- Can you discuss any challenges you have encountered while volunteering?
- How have you managed these challenges, and what impact have they had on your emotional and psychological well-being?

Appendix C (Interview Schedule)

Study Title: *Exploring the Impact of Volunteer Activities on Psychological Well-Being Among Young Adults in Gauteng*

1. Overview of Interview Process

- **Number of Participants:** 6–15
- **Interview Duration:** Approximately **45–60 minutes per participant**.
- **Timeframe for Data Collection:** **4–6 weeks** (depending on participant availability)
- **Mode of Interviews:** Virtual (Zoom, Microsoft Teams)
- **Type of Interview:** Semi-structured

2. Tentative Interview Schedule

Week	Activity	Details
Week 1	Participant Recruitment	Identify, contact, and confirm participation of 6–15 individuals. Distribute informed consent forms and schedule interviews.
Week 2	Conduct 3–5 Interviews	First batch of semi-structured interviews conducted virtually or in-person. Audio recordings and field notes taken.
Week 3	Conduct 3–5 Interviews	Second batch of interviews conducted. Initial transcription and preliminary thematic analysis begin.
Week 4	Conduct Remaining Interviews (if needed)	Complete any pending interviews. Continue transcription and early coding.
Week 5–6	Data Review & Follow-ups	Verify transcripts, conduct follow-up questions if clarification is needed, and finalize data for full thematic analysis.

3. Interview Procedure

3.1 Pre-Interview Preparation

- ✓ **Participant Confirmation:** Send reminders and confirm interview times.
 - ✓ **Technical Setup:** Test recording software.
 - ✓ **Consent Form:** Ensure participants have signed and returned the informed consent form.
-

3.2 Interview Flow

Duration: 45–60 minutes per participant

Section	Time Allocation	Details
Introduction	5 minutes	Welcome the participant, explain study purpose, confirm consent, and outline interview structure.
Main Interview	35–45 minutes	Explore participant experiences, motivations, psychological well-being outcomes, challenges, and demographic influences.
Closing	5–10 minutes	Ask for final reflections, provide debriefing information, explain next steps, and thank the participant.

4. Data Management & Analysis

- ✓ **Transcription:** Interviews will be transcribed verbatim within **24–48 hours** after each session.
- ✓ **Confidentiality:** Identifiers will be removed; data will be securely stored.
- ✓ **Thematic Analysis:** Initial coding begins **by Week 3**, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) hybrid thematic analysis approach.

Appendix D (Participant Screening Process)

To ensure the inclusion of participants who meet the study's criteria, a rigorous screening process will be conducted. Interested individuals will be required to complete a short Google Form, the link to which will be provided in all recruitment materials (e.g., digital flyers, social media posts). The form will collect essential information to verify eligibility according to the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The screening tool will assess:

- Age (participants must be between 18–35 years old)
- Language proficiency (participants must be fluent in English)
- Volunteer experience (participants must have engaged in at least one volunteer activity within the past 12 months)
- Availability and willingness to participate in a 45–60-minute interview.

The responses will be used solely to determine eligibility, and all information will be kept confidential in compliance with POPIA and institutional ethical standards.

Screening Questions (Google Form)

- 1. What is your age?**
 - Under 18
 - 18–24
 - 25–30
 - 31–35
 - Over 35
- 2. Are you fluent in English?**
 - Yes
 - No
- 3. Have you participated in any volunteer work in the last 12 months?**
 - Yes
 - No
- 4. Please briefly describe the type of volunteer work you participated in:**
(Short paragraph response)
- 5. Would you be available to participate in a 45–60-minute interview (in person or virtually)?**

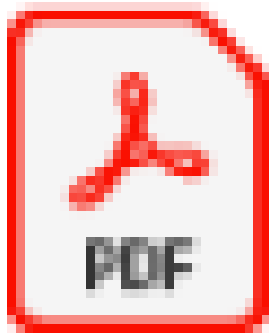
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
6. **Are you comfortable being audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysis?**
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

Appendix E (Certificate of Release)



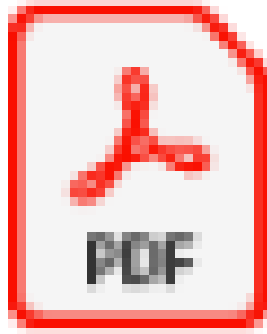
Adobe Acrobat Document

Appendix F (Ethics Clearance Request Form)



Adobe Acrobat Document

Appendix G (Participant or Respondent Informed Consent Form)



Adobe Acrobat Document

Appendix H (Recruitment Flyer)

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

Are you a young adult volunteer between the ages of 18 and 35, currently residing in Gauteng?

I'm conducting a research study as part of my Master's degree in Research Psychology, exploring volunteering and its impact on psychological well-being.



IF YOU:

- Are between 18 and 35
- Have experience volunteering (formal or informal)
- Can participate in a confidential 45–60 min online interview

WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

- **Participation is voluntary**, and all responses will remain **confidential**.
- To participate or find out more, please click the link below:
- [🔗 Participant Screening Process](#)
- Ethics clearance obtained from IIE MSA