

What Really Motivates People to Volunteer? Uncovering the Hidden Motives

Linking Intentions to Actual Behavior in a Thai Context

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Background and Problem Statement

- **Societal Need:** Volunteering addresses gaps in government services and reduces NPO operational costs.
- **The Youth Demographic:** Students represent 40% of the volunteer population but often have high turnover.
- **The "Intention-Action" Gap:** While many express an interest (intention), actual participation (behavior) is often hindered by time constraints and opportunity costs.
- **Cultural Gap:** Most research is Western-centric. This study examines volunteering in the collectivist context of Thailand.

The Multi-Method Program

This study utilizes three distinct methods to bridge the gap between thinking and doing:

- 1 **Study 1 (Survey):** Identify psychological drivers of volunteer *intentions*.
- 2 **Study 2 (Lab Experiment):** Test behavioral responses to *time trade-offs*.
- 3 **Study 3 (Field Experiment):** Verify findings in a *naturalistic environment*.

Motivational Dimensions:

- **VFI Dimensions:** Values, Understanding, Social, Protection, Enhancement.
- **External Factors:** Self-image (consistency & impression).
- **Spiritual Factors:** Religious Beliefs.

Hypotheses

H1–H5: VFI factors (+)

H6: Self-image (+)

H7: Religious beliefs (+)

Dependent Variable: Intention to Volunteer

Study 1: Identifying Intentions

- **Sample:** 781 undergraduate students (72.2% female; Avg. age 19.85).
- **Method:** CB-SEM (Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling).
- **Measurement:** 7-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

Study 1: Identifying Intentions

Table: Correlation Matrix and discriminant analysis results

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Values	0.749							
2. Understanding	0.715	0.741						
3. Self-enhancement	0.511	0.501	0.726					
4. Social	0.362	0.278	0.579	0.810				
5. Self-protection	0.358	0.279	0.655	0.620	0.780			
6. Self-image	0.303	0.197	0.673	0.519	0.710	0.800		
7. Religious	0.359	0.228	0.488	0.376	0.517	0.528	0.840	
8. Intention	0.500	0.404	0.565	0.506	0.589	0.557	0.413	0.814

Note: Diagonal values are the square root of average variance extracted (AVE).

Source: Authors' own work.

Study 1 Results: Drivers of Intention

Table: Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	β	t-value	Decision
H1 Values \rightarrow Intention	0.228	4.029***	Supported
H2 Understanding \rightarrow Intention	0.079	1.371	Not supported
H3 Self-enhancement \rightarrow Intention	0.038	0.555	Not supported
H4 Social \rightarrow Intention	0.123	2.690*	Supported
H5 Self-protective \rightarrow Intention	0.220	3.809***	Supported
H6 Self-image \rightarrow Intention	0.217	3.670***	Supported
H7 Religious \rightarrow Intention	0.020	0.519	Not supported

Note: * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

- **Insights:** Values and Self-protection are universal drivers. Social motives drive non-experienced students, while Self-image drives experienced ones.

Study 2: Testing Behavioral Trade-offs

- **Problem:** Study 1 ignored time costs. Study 2 tests actual behavior with 786 students.
- **Task:** 30-minute bead-sorting task. Choice between White Bag (Self) vs. Blue Bag (Charity).

Table: Summary of lab experimental groups.

Experimental group	Values of blue and white bags	Self-image	Social motive
C	Blue bag = 5 baht White bag = 5 baht	No	No
T1	Blue bag = 5 baht White bag = 10 baht	No	No
T2	Blue bag = 5 baht White bag = 5 baht	Yes	No
T3	Blue bag = 5 baht White bag = 10 baht	Yes	No
T4	Blue bag = 5 baht White bag = 5 baht	No	Yes

Study 2 Results: Effort Allocation

Estimation Results of Total Bags Completed

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
T1	-0.623 (0.807)	-0.552 (0.766)
T2	-0.206 (0.821)	0.271 (0.779)
T3	-1.806** (0.824)	-1.243 (0.785)
T4	-1.506* (0.813)	-0.982 (0.772)
Male		-5.304*** (0.572)
Volunteer experience		0.427 (0.506)
Northeast University		-0.511 (0.529)
Constant	36.351*** (0.575)	37.594*** (0.763)
Log-likelihood	-2691.678	-2650.062
N	786	786

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Study 2 Results: Effort Allocation

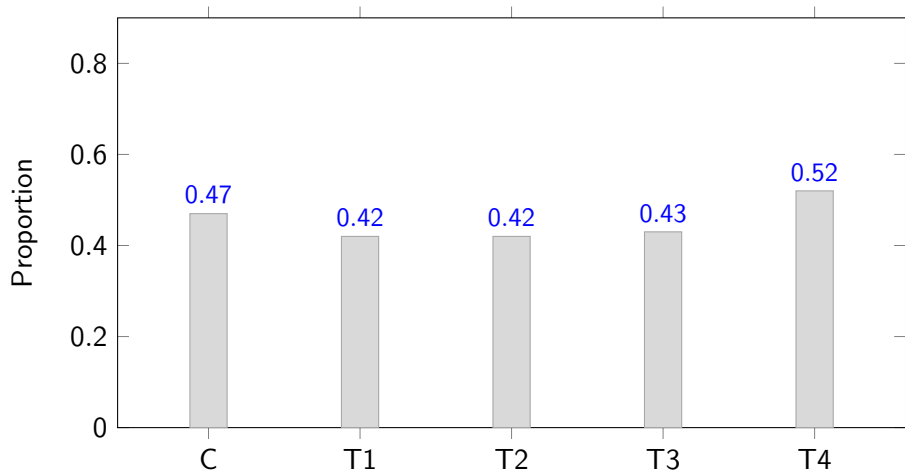


Figure: Proportion of volunteer effort by treatment group

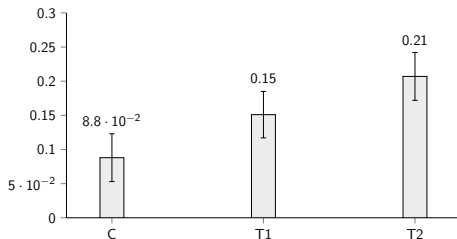
Study 2 Results: Effort Allocation

- **Social Motives (T4):** Significantly increased volunteering by 5.5% ($p < 0.05$).
- **Altruism:** Even in the control, students gave 45.4% of their time, showing they are not pure self-maximizers.

Study 3: Real-World Verification

- **Setting:** COVID-19 awareness campaign (Infographic creation).
- **Sample:** 480 independent undergraduate students.
- **Treatments:**
 - 1 **Social Information (T1):** "22/30 of your peers agreed to volunteer."
 - 2 **Peer Effect (T2):** Option to invite/work with a friend.
- **Validation:** Actual submission of work and attendance recorded.

Study 3 Results: Participation Rates



Proportion of participants volunteering across experimental groups

Logit Regression Results:

- **T1 (Social):** $\beta = 0.671^*$
- **T2 (Peer):** $\beta = 1.004^{***}$
- **Marginal Effect:** Participants were 22–25% more likely to join when exposed to social cues.

Study 2 Results

Treatment Effects

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
T1 (Social information)	0.603* (0.357)	0.671* (0.359)
T2 (Peer effect)	0.997*** (0.340)	1.004*** (0.345)
Gender (Male = 1)	–	-0.247 (0.308)
Age (years)	–	-0.123 (0.091)
Prior volunteering experience	–	0.655* (0.360)
University (Northeast = 1)	–	0.134 (0.279)
Constant	-2.331*** (0.280)	-0.349 (1.918)
Log-likelihood	-198.229	-195.292
N	480	480

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Discussion: The Power of Social Motives

- **Intentions vs. Action:** Values drive *intentions* (Study 1), but Social Information drives *action* (Study 2 & 3).
- **The Identity Effect:** Social signals work because they come from a reference group (peers) that participants identify with.
- **Opportunity Cost:** While people are sensitive to time costs, the negative effect is small compared to the positive pull of social norms.

Key Takeaway

Social information and peer contexts are the most effective levers for converting youth intention into actual voluntary effort.

- **For NPOs:** Shift recruitment from broad "altruism" messages to "social norm" signals (e.g., highlighting existing participation).
- **For Research:** Confirms that behavioral experiments are essential for validating survey-based psychological intentions.

Thank you!