



Expectations and Evaluation of Volunteers' Experience at the Paralympic Swimming European Championship

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Abstract

Sports organizations administer volunteer participation in sports events to facilitate management efficiency while fostering opportunities for learning, skill enhancement, and meaningful social contribution. This study sought to determine the influence of volunteer experience on individuals' intention to engage in future volunteer opportunities.

The study analyzed data from 159 volunteers who undertook organizational roles at the 2016 (n=74) and 2021 (n=85) IPC Swimming European Championships editions. Motivations and expectations were evaluated through a pre- and post-volunteering questionnaire. Findings indicated that participants highly valued aspects of personal development and positive experiences. The intention to volunteer again was influenced by the gap between initial expectations and post-event satisfaction regarding volunteer traditions (p=0.001). In the 2021 edition, community participation emerged as a key determinant (p<0.001).

The conclusions propose a strategic approach to volunteer programs that emphasize personal skill development and targeted competencies. Moreover, they highlight the importance of positive social experiences that promote teamwork and actively encourage local community engagement.

Keywords: motivation, sports events, social legacy, strategy, tourism.

Introduction

Volunteer participation in sports event organizations is a complex process shaped by the nature of various sports events and the strategic approaches employed by organizations to recruit, engage, and align volunteers' skills and motivations effectively (Bang & Ross, 2009). Volunteers' motivation may vary significantly across

different types of sports events. For example, volunteers engaged in paralympic sports activity may have different motivations from those participating in a professional sports event or non-sports related volunteering initiatives (Dunn, Chambers, & Hyde, 2015; Kim, 2018). In the field of human services, Clary et al. (1998) formulated a model known as Voluntary Function Inventory (VFI) comprising six broad functions: values (altruism and human concerns

for others), understanding (skills, abilities, and knowledge, as well as opportunities for learning experiences), social (social interaction and networking), career (external benefits obtained from engaging in a volunteer role), protective (referred to one's guilt reduction and addressing one's problems), and enhancement (personal development).

Volunteers scoring higher on VFI factors are more likely to continue their volunteering efforts. Millette and Gagné (2008) applied the self-determination theory to voluntary participation and developed a Volunteer Motivation Scale (VMS) to assess four types of motivation: external regulation (volunteering for external rewards or recognition, i.e., CV value); introjected regulation (volunteering due to internal pressures, i.e., obligation); identified regulation (it aligns with personal values or goals), and intrinsic regulation (personal satisfaction, enjoyment, or interest). The VMS has been adapted for use in different languages and contexts. Research on sports events revealed distinct differences and features in volunteer motivation, as supported by several studies. (Aisbett, Randle & Kappelides, 2015; Dunn, Chambers & Hyde, 2015; Farrell et al., 1998; Giannoulakis, Wang & Gray, 2007). Bang and Chelladurai (2003) validate the Volunteer Motivations Scale for International Sporting Events (VMS-ISE), such as the Olympics, World Cups, and other large-scale competitions. The original VMS-ISE includes five motivational dimensions, each measured through Likert-scale items: purposive motives, material motives, egoistic motives, external motives and leisure motives. Both scales are helpful for event organizers and researchers to understand why volunteers choose to participate, retention, and management strategies. Using the Olympic Volunteer Motivation Scale (OVMS), Rozmiarek, Poczta and Malchrowicz-Moško (2021) developed a study with 534 university students who signed up to be volunteers at the 2023 European Games in Poland. They found higher scores for motivation and passion for the games and gaining work experience in voluntary roles. The results suggest that event organizations should consider volunteers' prior experiences to enhance recruitment and management strategies, as experienced volunteers demonstrate greater motivation.

Additionally, the participation of student leaders in sports development programs, particularly through service-learning programs or voluntary participation, increases social capital and contributes to social change, leaving a lasting positive legacy (Bruening et al., 2015; Fairley, Lovegrove, & Brown, 2016; Morgan, 2013). Farrell et al. (1998) developed a special event volunteer motivation scale (SEVMS) for sports event volunteers, structured in four categories: purposive (contribution to event and community), solidary (social interaction, group identification, and building networks), external traditions (traditions regarding family and external influences), and commitments (expectations and responsibilities

from others). The model scale showed that volunteers' specific and diverse experiences in sports event management roles can increase expectations, satisfaction, and motivation to participate again in a similar experience.

The SEVMS was utilized and confirmed in various studies across different sports event volunteer participation (Dickson, Benson, Blackman & Terwiel, 2013; Dickson, Benson & Terwiel, 2014; Dickson, Darcy, Edwards & Terwiel, 2015). Recently, using the SEVMS for a small sports event, Miller, Martinez and Stoll (2024) demonstrated a purposive sense of community, community meaningfulness, sense of togetherness, and satisfaction from developing personal relationships and interactions from the volunteer experience. The findings can be utilized by practitioners responsible for small-scale sports events for volunteer recruitment and management. Furthermore, the importance of perceived organizational support (POS) and perceived supervisor support (PSS) during major sporting events are two critical factors that contribute to the enhancement of volunteer satisfaction and participation and their intention to participate again (Aisbett, Randle & Kappelides, 2015). This explains the relevance of strategic planning in recruiting, participating, and developing the volunteer role in sporting events.

The likelihood of volunteers repeating their experience and continuing to develop their post-event roles is largely dependent on their satisfaction and perception of the support they receive. To optimize volunteers' contributions at sporting events, Nichols and Ojala (2009) recommend a qualitative and transparent approach. This approach ensures that volunteers' interests and skills are aligned with the needs and management functions of the event, resembling a psychological contract. This agreement should outline the responsibilities and rights of the volunteers and the organization, fostering a structured framework for preparing and supporting volunteer participation. It is expected that a well-defined outline of the volunteer's roles will be created and communicated before and during the event. This is the key aspect that volunteers most appreciate in their interactions with event managers.

Another study by Bang and Ross (2009) pointed out seven distinct dimensions of volunteer motivations: Expression of Values, Community Involvement, Interpersonal Contacts, Career Orientation, Personal Growth, Extrinsic Rewards, and Love of Sport. This study highlighted that the motivational factors most strongly correlated with volunteer satisfaction were Expression of Values, Career Orientation, and Love of Sport. However, the results might differ in sports mega-events, where a passion for sport may not necessarily correlate with volunteers' intention to return to the experience. Patriotism, Community, and Career Orientation dimensions have been identified as key factors that explain volunteers' intention to repeat their experience in sports event organizations (Bang et al., 2019). A strong

relationship and affinity between the local community and the sporting event amplifies the social impact, leading to more significant commitment, satisfaction, and pride among the host population (Liu, 2016). Specific sports and events possess unique characteristics that inspire young volunteers to dedicate themselves to helping and serving others, fostering a sense of investment in both the event and the broader community (Renfree & West, 2024). Moreover, the foundation culture of volunteering at sports events is particularly important in the context of sports for people with disabilities, as it represents a form of learning and experience while interacting with people with different disabilities. In a society that aims to be cultured, humane, and inclusive, community service for individuals with disabilities is crucial (Brown & Pappous, 2022; Misener & Darcy, 2014).

Additionally, such participation positively impacts the awareness and attitudes of volunteers toward accessibility issues and the specific needs of athletes with different types of disabilities (Brittain & Beacom, 2016; Misener et al., 2019; Paradis et al., 2017). On the other hand, the active participation and commitment of people from the host city of the sports event, which corresponded to the patriotism dimension assessed by Bang and Chelladurai (2003), plays a vital role in motivating local community members to take on organizational roles in sports events. Regional tribalism, a component of a fan's allegiance to a sports team (Matsuoka & Chelladurai, 2001), is closely related to community involvement. In a study evaluating volunteers' participation in the 2008 World Fireman Games, associated with the concept of 'role exit', volunteers expressed a sense of support and solidarity towards the sport and positive post-event transformations were evident in the volunteers.

A notable observation, however, was the lack of sustained engagement by event organizers with volunteers after the event concluded, indicating a disconnect between organizers, volunteers, and athletes once the event ended (Gellweiler, Fletcher & Wise, 2019). In this context, a strategy for recruiting sports volunteers should be linked to the local volunteer community, with the primary goal being to bolster and facilitate the success of community-hosted events (Kim, 2018). This is especially important for local sports events where the resident population feels a strong sense of pride and connection to the sports activities (Kristiansen et al., 2015). Ringuet-Riot et al. (2014) highlight significantly higher levels of involvement and commitment among core volunteers compared to peripheral volunteers in voluntary sports organizations. This observation is supported by the literature that reinforces the strategic management of local human resources (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Walzel & Eickhoff, 2021), and promoting positive and social legacies of sports events (Bob & Swart, 2010; Lee, Kim, & Koo, 2016; Misener, 2015). The participation of volunteers in organizing medium-sized sporting events represents a collective experience that yields relevant social impacts

on the identity and acceptance of the local community, surpassing the effects of participation in sports mega-events (Doherty & Patil, 2019; Hallmann & Zehrer, 2017; Hover et al., 2016; Taks, Chalip & Green, 2015). Furthermore, literature on the legacy of sports events underscores the necessity for host cities to integrate long-term plans into broader urban and community development strategies, with input from key stakeholders (Thomson et al., 2011).

Positive social and sportive transformations in the local community are attainable if strategic planning empowers local volunteers' skills and intrinsic motivation for participation in the sports event. Understanding the experiences of sports event volunteers and how volunteer support systems and organizations affect volunteer satisfaction and future participation intent is crucial. This, in turn, affects the likelihood of their recommending the experience to others (Aisbett, Randle & Kappelides, 2015).

The IPC Swimming European Open Championships is an international sporting competition tailored to people with disabilities, operating under a single-class competition format. It serves as an important sports event for swimmers to qualify for the Paralympic Games. Overseen by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), this international organization is responsible for coordinating the rules and registration of national teams. The IPC Swimming European Open Championships were held over eight days in May 2016 and 2021 in Funchal, the capital city of Madeira Island, Portugal. The event was jointly organized by the Portuguese Swimming Federation and the Madeira Swimming Association. The Autonomous Region of Madeira, with a population of approximately 260,000 inhabitants and a population density of 334.5 inhabit./Km², served as an ideal setting for this prestigious competition. The 2016 edition of the event attracted a total of 1051 participants: 455 swimmers representing 50 countries, 316 staff members, and 280 volunteers. Similarly, the 2021 edition featured a total of 619 participants: 287 swimmers, 117 staff and 215 volunteers.

This research has three primary objectives: (i) to characterize the profile of volunteers who participated in two editions of the European Championship Paralympic Swimming, specifically in 2016 and 2021; (ii) to analyze the volunteer experience according to their initial expectations and motivations, and following the sport event; and (iii) to identify the predictors of the intention to volunteer again, equating the variation between volunteers expectations and motivations, before and after the sport event.

Material and Methods

Sample

The study included 159 volunteers of both sexes (78 men and 136 women), aged between 18 and 77 years

(29.35±15.85), who participated in the 2016 and 2021 editions of the IPC Swimming European Championships, held in Funchal, Portugal, over a period of seven days.

In the 2016 edition, out of a total of 160 volunteers, 74 (46.25%) participated in the study (29 males and 45 females), with a mean age of (34.57±18.22) years. In the 2021 edition, 85 (57.0%) subjects (49 males and 36 females) were aged between 18 and 52 (23.18±8.29) years. All participants completed the questionnaire before and after volunteering experience.

Advertisements on the websites of both the Portuguese Swimming Federation and the Regional Swimming Association (local co-organizer of the event) were used to recruit volunteers. Additionally, direct outreach to various organizations, including schools, universities, and civic center helped to recruit participants. Volunteers performed a variety of tasks: welcoming and providing general information; assisting with the competition secretariat; supporting transport materials for the athletes in competition; organizing, cleaning, and disinfecting the equipment needed for the competition; supporting the press and producing daily reports; assisting with the prize-giving ceremony; selling event souvenirs and controlling entry to the sports complex; accompanying the athletes selected for anti-doping control; conducting spectator surveys and supporting event organization.

The volunteers worked in two shifts: the morning shift (7 a.m. to 2 p.m.) and the afternoon shift (2 p.m. to 9 p.m.), for seven days. Volunteers who completed at least four shifts were included in the study. The 2021 edition, conducted in May 2021, took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and volunteers were allowed to participate only if they complied with health regulations established by the Public Health Administration.

Procedure

In its first phase, the study was presented and approved by the scientific committee of the Department of Physical Education and Sports of the University of Madeira, respecting the ethical principles established in the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was also presented to and approved by the event's organization, which supported its development. After the recruitment of volunteers by the organization, the study was presented and authorization was requested through informed consent. The study focused on recruiting volunteers aged 18 and over. The questionnaire was completed online, and only duly completed questionnaires were accepted up to one day before the start of the sporting event. Contact information was provided to clarify possible doubts participants might have. At the volunteers' check-in, a member of the team was available to support them in filling out the forms and to clarify any doubts.

After the event, the participants surveyed in the pre-event were invited to fill out the questionnaire again in

an online format. Only a questionnaire received up to one month after the end of the sporting event was considered.

Instrument

All participants completed an individual questionnaire assessing volunteers' motivations at sporting events based on the framework developed by Downward and Ralston (2005), translated into Portuguese by Rodrigues and Soares (2020) and the language appropriacy confirmed by an expert. The questionnaire consisted of 32 statements rated on a Likert scale from 1 (Not important) to 5 (Extremely important), categorized into seven factors: i) community participation; ii) Personal development; iii) Business opportunities; iv) Volunteer traditions; v) Esteem; vi) Egoistic, and vii) Positive experiences. In addition to motivation-related questions, participants provided sociodemographic variables, including age, gender, qualifications, professional status, place of residence, and marital status. The authors adapted the questionnaire in the item linked to the name of the European Championship Paralympic Swimming, adding: "I helped the city of Funchal". Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.724 to 0.921. Higher values of the dimensions correspond to higher expectations and motivation. The questionnaire was administered in two stages, before and after the volunteering experience. Before the volunteering experience, participants completed the questionnaire between one day and two weeks before the event. After the event concluded, volunteers were asked to complete the questionnaire again, with responses accepted for up to one month post-event. The intention to repeat the volunteering experience was quantified on a scale of 1 to 5 (definitely not to definitely yes).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to characterize the sample regarding the variables studied. The variable variation of the dimensions (community, personal development, job opportunity, tradition of volunteering, esteem, selfishness, and personal experience) was determined by subtracting the post-volunteering value from pre-volunteering values. The normality of the quantitative variable distributions was determined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

The paired samples t-test was used to determine the differences between the two moments (pre- and post-volunteering experience) in motivation and expectations. Multiple linear regression using the stepwise method determined the effect of variations in these dimensions on the intention to repeat the experience. Two multiple regression models were run, both using variation in the dimensions of a) community involvement, b) personal development, c) job opportunities, d) tradition of volunteering, e) esteem, f) selfishness, and g) personal experience

and age as independent variables. The level of intention to repeat the experience was used as the dependent variable.

A significance level of 5% was applied. The statistical treatment was carried out using SPSS software, version 27.0.

Results

Volunteer Profile

The volunteers predominantly consist of young people, primarily Portuguese, residents of Madeira with a variety of qualifications. In the 2016 edition, 55% of the volunteers were students, with the vast majority being university students (92%). In the 2021 edition, this percentage rose to 79%. Notably, in 2016, 17.7% of volunteers were retired; in 2021, this percentage dropped to 0% (Table 1).

In the 2016 edition, there was notable participation of female volunteers, comprising 61.1% of the total, whereas, in the 2021 edition, this trend reversed with 39.5% ($p<.001$). Across both editions, volunteers lack prior experience or involvement with swimming (only 31.3% vs. 28.2%, $p=.590$) or sports for individuals with disabilities. However, in the 2016 edition, a higher percentage of volunteers had a connection to adapted sports compared to the 2021 edition (16.0% vs. 4.8%, $p=.003$).

The research also showed significant differences in educational qualifications ($p=.001$), with higher levels of schooling associated with the 2016 edition. Moreover, the research indicated that volunteers in the 2021 edition had greater experience with sporting events than those in the 2016 edition (59.7% vs 38.9%, $p=.001$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Volunteer profile in the two editions of sports events (2016 and 2021).

	2016 Edition	2021 Edition	p
n (volunteer participants)	74	85	
Sex (male) (%)	39.1 (29)	60.0 (51)	<.001
Age (mean±SD)	34.20±18.55	23.78±9.38	<.001
Nationality (Portuguese) (%)	92.3	98.4	.480
Resident (Madeira) (%)	96.5	97.6	.569
Professional status			
Retired (%)	16.7	0	
Full-time worker (%)	10.4	12.9	
Part-time worker (%)	2.1	2.4	
Temporary worker (%)	2.8	0	<.001
Unemployed (%)	9.0	4	
Student (%)	54.9	79	
Other (%)	4.2	1.6	
Academic qualifications			
Elementary School (%)	14.6	5.6	
Middle School (%)	6.3	14.5	
High School (%)	48.6	56.5	.001
Degree (%)	22.2	18.5	
Master/PhD (%)	8.4	4.9	
Volunteering experience (yes) (%)	38.9	59.7	.001
Relationship with swimming sports activity (yes) (%)	31.3	28.2	.590
Relationship with the sports for disabled people (yes) (%)	16.0	4.8	.003

Participants reported being very satisfied with their volunteer experience (5.65 ± 1.46 , on a scale of 0 to 7). On average, satisfaction was higher in the 2021 edition (5.80 ± 1.24) compared to the 2016 edition (5.51 ± 1.67) ($p<.05$).

In both editions of the sporting event, volunteers exhibited higher mean scores in the Personal Development and Positive Experience dimensions. Conversely, the Job Opportunity and Volunteer Traditions dimensions were the

factors with the lowest mean scores. However, no differences were found between the two editions ($p>.05$)(Table 2).

Before their volunteering experience, significant differences were noted in the volunteers' expectations between the editions, specifically in Job Opportunity ($p=.016$), with higher values in the 2021 edition (2.68 ± 1.09 vs 3.00 ± 1.07) and in Positive Experience, with higher values in the 2016 edition ($p=.048$, $3.71\pm.73$ vs $3.51\pm.89$).

Significant differences were found across several factors both before and after volunteering in both editions. The differences were more significant in the Community Participation, Personal Development, Employment Opportunities, and Selfishness factors in both editions, with additional disparities noted in the remaining factors in the 2021 edition ($p<.001$) (table 2).

Higher values were noted before the experience in Personal Development, Job Opportunities, and Positive Experience factors, suggesting some level of dissatisfaction with expectations. The positive effects of the experience on volunteers (variation before and after the experience) have been more evident in the factors of Volunteering traditions, Community participation, Selfishness, and Esteem, with these trends consistent in both editions. Personal Development scored highest in the volunteers' expectations, as measured on the Likert scale in both editions ($3.75\pm.80$ and $3.64\pm.95$). After the event, the Community Participation factor ($3.73\pm.97$) in the 2016 edition and Positive Experiences ($3.49\pm.94$) in the 2021 edition showed higher values. Considering the variation before and after volunteering (expectations vs. satisfaction), no

Table 2. Comparative analysis before and after the volunteering experience in sports events and between the two editions (2016 vs 2021).

Volunteering (mean $\pm\sigma$)							
Factors	2016 Edition (n=74)			2021 Edition (n=85)			P ($\Delta 2016$ vs $\Delta 2021$)
	BEV	AEV	$\Delta 2016$	BEV	AEV	$\Delta 2021$	
Community participation	$3.63\pm.86$	$3.73\pm.97$	$.25\pm.95^{***}$	$3.50\pm.93$	3.47 ± 1.01	$.06\pm.86^{***}$	.605
Personal development	$3.75\pm.80$	3.45 ± 1.05	$-.14\pm1.02^{***}$	$3.64\pm.95$	3.46 ± 1.08	$-.20\pm.99^{***}$	.721
Employment opportunities	2.68 ± 1.09	2.46 ± 1.05	$-.13\pm.87^{***}$	3.00 ± 1.07	2.87 ± 1.03	$-.22\pm.91^{***}$	.532
Volunteer traditions	$2.57\pm.91$	$3.17\pm.92$	$.63\pm1.00^{**}$	2.69 ± 1.00	3.33 ± 1.00	$.57\pm.96^{***}$	.734
Esteem	$3.32\pm.66$	$3.39\pm.82$	$.15\pm.83^{**}$	$3.18\pm.82$	$3.46\pm.84$	$.23\pm.95^{***}$	.605
Egoistic	$2.74\pm.73$	$3.23\pm.83$	$.24\pm.88^{***}$	$2.91\pm.94$	$3.38\pm.96$	$.31\pm.85^{***}$	.197
Positive experiences	$3.71\pm.73$	$3.67\pm.96$	$-.02\pm.98^{**}$	$3.51\pm.89$	$3.49\pm.94$	$-.07\pm.95^{***}$	.540

BEV – Before sports event experience; AEV – After sports event experience; Δ = AEV-BEV; $***p<.001$; $**p<.01$

Table 3. Multiple linear regression model as a predictor of the volunteers' intention to repeat the experience (n=159).

Dependent variable	Edition	Independent variables	β	R ² (%)	p	Factors
Volunteer's intention to repeat the volunteer experience (R ² =22.8%)	2016	Δ Volunteer traditions (R ² =16.0%)	.355	16.0%	.001	Δ Community Participation; Δ Personal Development; Δ Business Opportunities; Δ Volunteer Traditions; Δ Esteem; Δ Egoistic; Δ Positive Experiences; Age; Gender
		Age (R ² =6.8%)	.640	6.8%	.021	
	2021	Δ Community participation (R ² =15.9%)	.399	15.9%	<.001	

statistically significant differences were found between the 2016 edition and the 2021 edition ($p > .05$) (Table 2).

The multiple linear regression model shows that in the 2016 edition, volunteers' intention to repeat the experience is explained by variation in Volunteering Traditions ($R^2 = 16\%$), and in the 2021 edition by Community Participation ($R^2 = 15.9\%$).

Furthermore, age appears to significantly influence volunteers' intention to repeat the experience, explaining 6.8% of the variation ($R^2 = 6.8\%$). Specifically, older volunteers exhibit a stronger inclination to repeat the volunteering experience ($p < .05$) (Table 3).

Discussion

The sociodemographic profile of the volunteers in the European Championship Paralympic Swimming varied notably between the two editions, despite the event being hosted in the same city and maintaining a similar volunteering role. Volunteer profiles predominantly featured university students seeking valuable learning experiences in the context of the organization of sporting events. According to research in the voluntary field, universities play an important role in incorporating volunteer and service-learning programs in local sports organizations to build well-rounded citizens, promote social responsibility, and strengthen community engagement (Whitley & Yoder, 2015). Additionally, such initiatives bolster students' employability prospects and contribute to a good CV (Holmes et al., 2021). Although young volunteers, particularly university students, constituted the most significant participation group in both editions, there was considerable participation of retired/retired people in the 2016 edition compared to the 2021 edition. This shift may be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated implications for older people, particularly during the partial confinement phase that took place in May 2021. Alternatively, there may have been a volunteer recruitment strategy for 2021 that prioritized university students.

In addition, the higher percentage of female participants in the 2016 edition compared to 2021 may be attributed to the older age of the volunteers in the 2016 edition, as female participation tends to be more prevalent among the older volunteering groups.

The study findings indicate that accumulated volunteer experience is relatively weak, albeit a higher percentage was observed among volunteers in the 2021 edition. Approximately one-third of the volunteers were linked to the event's sport (swimming) or adaptive sport for people with disabilities. Recruitment of volunteers possessing experience and expertise associated with swimming and Paralympic swimming could enhance the efficiency of event management and foster sustained engagement in

post-event activities. Research suggests that institutional and technical capital among sports volunteers play a crucial role in facilitating access to and selecting volunteer roles in sporting events (Hayton & Blundell, 2021).

When members affiliated with sports (such as referees or experienced athletes) assume volunteer roles, their commitment to tackling new challenges can improve performance and even attract new members for regular sports participation. In this regard, the volunteer selection strategy must consider the commitment, skills, and availability of elements linked to sports and social structures (Hallmann, 2015).

A significant difference in experience with adaptive sports was observed between the two editions, which may stem from the absence of a recruitment strategy targeting the local adaptive sports community. If the goal of volunteer engagement in sporting events is to drive long-term sporting and social transformations, it is crucial to involve local volunteers who are directly linked to the specific activities of the event and demonstrate a strong connection to the community (Kristiansen et al., 2015). Meaningful social and sporting impacts can be achieved in the local community if there is a connection between the volunteering profile and the volunteers' usual specific activity (Fairley, Lovegrove & Brown, 2016). This process is facilitated through a discerning and meticulous strategy of volunteers for sporting events (Cuskelly et al., 2021; Doherty & Patil, 2019; Taks, 2013). Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of tailored recruitment, training, and the development of volunteer roles to match the qualifications and skills of higher education students and graduates, particularly those attending specialized programs. In this context, the recruitment phase and pre-event communication are pivotal in shaping volunteer experience (Power & Nedvetskaya, 2022), as well as the management of expectations by the organization.

This approach is particularly significant for individuals working with a population with disabilities (Misenar et al., 2019). Additionally, higher education students enrolled in fields such as sports, psychology, education, social service, and organization may be able to apply and enhance their course knowledge by performing organizational and specific tasks within sporting events. As a result, integrating and fostering volunteering programs for university students emerges not only as an opportunity but also a necessity, highlighting the connection between students' training in service learning, enhanced prospects in the professional market, and contribution to the reinforcement of civic duty and social responsibility (Homes et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2011).

Despite the relatively low scores for the volunteering tradition presented in both editions, a notable improvement was observed in volunteers' post-event evaluation compared to their pre-event expectations, especially in

the 2016 edition. This enhancement further reinforced the intention to repeat the volunteer experience. Consequently, for future sports event editions, the organization responsible for recruiting and supporting volunteers should utilize the knowledge and experience gained by volunteers in previous editions. By creating incentives that lead to volunteer loyalty across successive editions of the event, organizations can also enhance operational efficiency while simultaneously yielding highly positive outcomes for volunteers, leading to mutual benefits (a win-win scenario). Furthermore, the study findings suggest that volunteers' experience in support roles at sporting events for people with disabilities can be used to encourage their continued participation and recognize their contribution in future editions. Scientific research also corroborates this perspective, indicating that volunteers engaged in solidarity support and cooperative activities with disabled people also experience personal growth and greater happiness (Johnson et al., 2017; Kim, 2018).

In both editions, the most valued dimensions of volunteers' expectations and motivations included personal development, positive experiences, and community participation. The literature reports that a sense of belonging, interaction, and connection with the event and with its various stakeholders are key aspects that volunteers appreciate (Power & Nedvetskaya, 2022). However, the results of the pre- and after-event evaluation did not align, as the volunteers' assessment of their participation in the sporting event was not overwhelmingly positive in both editions. In fact, in these dimensions, the data exhibited a high standard deviation value, suggesting significant variability in the way they experienced their participation in the event. It is plausible that the volunteers' experience at the sporting event did not fully meet their initial expectations, potentially due to gaps in the organization's strategic planning and lack of adequate volunteer training. These are crucial aspects that deserve greater attention in a future recruitment program and adequate preparation for the volunteer's activity. When event organizers implement well-planned strategies such as pre-event role assignment, skills development, and ongoing support throughout the volunteer experience, there is a greater possibility of volunteer satisfaction and future participation (Dickson et al., 2013; Love et al., 2011).

In general, the results suggest that the European Championship Paralympic swimming has the potential to attract volunteers who are motivated by the desire to help others and the community. A volunteer program should be designed to appeal to volunteers who "want to be part of the team", engage socially, and develop personal skills and competencies. This would agree with the findings of Doherty (2009), which identified that skill enrichment and a positive life experience were key elements influencing planning and on-site volunteers and directly

impacted their future volunteering intentions. Likewise, the possibility of volunteers returning to participate in repeated events is supported by local pride community commitment, and a sense of collective identity associated with volunteering (Dickson et al., 2015; Kristiansen et al., 2015). In addition, research indicates that small- and medium-sized sporting events tend to generate more positive social impacts on the local communities compared to mega sporting events (Miller, Martinez & Stoll, 2024; Taks, 2013; Taks, Chalip & Green, 2015). Therefore, when local sports associations and clubs decide to co-organize an international sports event in partnership with their national and international counterparts, they should prioritize strategies that maximize advantages for local sports development. By doing so, they can enhance local social and sporting impacts within the community, contributing to a sustainable legacy that extends beyond the sporting event itself. Tourism-oriented sporting events can also serve as a catalyst for greater community participation by integrating residents into various aspects of event management and programming. To effectively implement this strategy, it is crucial to adopt socially responsible planning and governance practice, which entails defining the roles and participation objectives of the various organizational actors, including sports tourists in management roles and sports members of local clubs and associations. Sustainability should be a central consideration in the strategic planning of sports tourism events, encompassing positive social impacts and utilizing the contribution of volunteers and the local community (Chalip, 2006; Tomino, Peri'c & Wise, 2020).

Transparent governance in the management of sporting events requires timely clarification and specification of the roles of the various participants in the event (Leopkey & Parent, 2019). If exchanges of knowledge and skills between professionals and volunteers and between tourists and residents are planned intentionally, there will be a greater possibility of leaving a positive legacy after the sports event. This, in turn, enhances volunteer satisfaction and strengthens their commitment to future participation. In the volunteers' assessment of their experience at the sporting event, the personal development dimensions (2016 edition) and the Employment Opportunity dimension (2021 edition) received the lowest results.

Overall, volunteers' assessment of their participation experience varied significantly, as reflected in the high standard deviation. This disparity can be understood by the profile of the volunteers and by the diversity of roles they experienced. These findings highlight the need for event organizers and volunteer coordinators to be more attentive to the expectations and abilities of the volunteers. Addressing this can yield multiple benefits and enhance the effective development of volunteers' specific skills. Consistent with the results presented by Chiu, Kang and

Cho (2024), it appears that the management of the volunteering experience influenced satisfaction, which, in turn, impacted their intention to participate again. The intention of volunteers to repeat the volunteering experience was linked to a positive evaluation of the volunteering tradition and age, as observed in the 2016 edition, and to the variation in community participation, as noted in the 2021 edition.

Like the other studies, there is an association of motivational aspects such as interaction and socialization during the experience with organizational satisfaction and commitment and the intention to repeat the experience (Hyde et al., 2016). Therefore, for a future volunteer recruitment strategy, it is recommended that organizations actively reach out to returning volunteers and analyse their feedback on the assigned tasks. The volunteers' participation at sports events can be more faithful and reliable if there is a strategy to optimize their role by developing personal skills and positive experiences, such as new, exciting, and challenging tasks and facilitating interactions with interesting individuals (Angosto et al., 2021). Furthermore, fostering a sense of teamwork, boosting self-confidence, and including and training people with disabilities in voluntary roles (Kappelides & Spoor, 2019) are crucial dimensions to consider. Recruitment strategies should also prioritize volunteers who demonstrate strong community ties and a sense of local pride, as these factors are associated with greater social commitment and participation (Jones et al., 2018; Kristiansen et al., 2015). The emphasis on community participation by volunteers in the 2021 edition can also be explained by the fact that we experienced two periods of confinement due to COVID-19 (between March 2020 and April 2021). During this period, there was greater awareness of social protection and community contributions. Given this, fostering community participation and developing volunteers' skills in alignment with their motivations should be key priorities in future recruitment and training efforts. Strengthening these aspects will not only improve the volunteer experience but also enhance retention rates, ensuring greater continuity and effectiveness in future sporting events.

Study Limitations

The sample size is small and limited to a single sporting event. This aspect conditions the generalization of the results obtained. Conducting the same study in different sporting events of different magnitudes and sports would allow a better understanding of the effect of the event on the intention of volunteers to repeat the experience. The evaluation of the 2021 edition may be affected by the specific conditions imposed by a pandemic, which will undoubtedly influence the data. The evaluation of the

loyalty rate at the event would also be an important aspect to be studied. It would be essential to identify, more than the intention to repeat, those who really become loyal to the event. However, this aspect was not evaluated.

Conclusions and Implications

This study does not confirm the existence of a deeply rooted local volunteering culture at the European Championship Paralympic Swimming. However, the event has a strong potential to attract and engage the participation of the resident community in volunteering roles, particularly among young university students and occasionally among retired residents. Considering the prospect of repeating the sporting event in new editions, it is recommended to implement a targeted, retention-oriented strategy when planning the local volunteer program to maximize the benefits of volunteers' experience and expertise. The opportunity for volunteers to return for subsequent editions of the adapted swimming event that takes place repeatedly in the exact location is associated with community participation and established volunteer traditions. Consequently, it is imperative to involve local volunteers whose profiles align with the specific functions and sports associated with the event. Their knowledge and experience in swimming and adapted swimming sports competitions can significantly enhance organizational efficiency and the overall quality of the event. Moreover, this study's conclusions point to a volunteering program that prioritizes the development of personal skills and specialized competencies while fostering positive and social experiences that emphasize teamwork and solidarity contributions.

From a methodological perspective, this study acknowledges the necessity of incorporating qualitative data to delve deeper into and corroborate some of the issues studied. Additionally, it would be desirable to broaden the volunteer sample size, which would allow for segmentation, facilitation, and development of an adequate recruitment and support strategy for volunteers throughout the various phases of sporting events, whether in the pre-phase, during, or post-event (Doherty & Patil, 2019). In line with this, it is necessary to evaluate the participation of volunteers according to the specific roles carried out in the volunteer program across different sporting events.

Do volunteers' expectations and motivations vary according to their assigned roles? This question warrants further investigation. Additionally, a critical area for future research involves analyzing organizations' approaches to recruitment, management, and retention strategies for human resources in sports events. Finally, expanding the study sample and conducting a longitudinal study could enable the identification of loyalty rates and potential predictors of sustained commitment over

time. Understanding these factors could contribute to more effective volunteer engagement strategies, ultimately enhancing the sustainability and impact of sports event volunteering.

Ethics approval and informed consent

The study followed the ethical guidelines and principles recommended by the university's Ethics Committee for individual scientific research. The 2021 edition was carried out in May 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and volunteers were allowed to participate according to the rules established by the Public Health Administration. The anonymity and voluntary participation of the survey participants were respected.

Competing interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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