

Co-creating the brand: volunteer voices at the Buenos Aires Youth Olympic Games

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Abstract

Purpose – For emerging mega-events, building a strong brand and positive reputation is critical for long-term success. Building on stakeholder theory and contemporary branding perspectives, this study analyses the lived experiences of 1,791 volunteers at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires to examine how volunteer management practices function as brand touchpoints through which organisational reputation is co-created.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting a reflexive thematic analysis of 2,074 advice units extracted from open-ended survey responses, we identified seven interrelated brand touchpoints across the volunteer journey.

Findings – Indicators reveal high satisfaction (96.2%) and strong re-volunteering intention (98.6%), qualitative findings show that this positive evaluation coexists with constructive recommendations focused on (1) recruitment and training, (2) overall event planning and organisation, (3) organisation and distribution of activities, (4) implementation and execution, (5) working conditions, (6) recognition and incentives and (7) perceived event impact. These touchpoints represent critical moments in which organisational practices shaped volunteers' experiential evaluations and contributed to the co-creation of event brand meaning and reputational capital.

Originality/value – This study reconceptualises volunteer feedback as a strategic resource for brand co-creation. By framing volunteer management as structured brand touchpoints, it provides a theoretically grounded and practical framework for strengthening reputation and social legacy in emerging mega-events, particularly in Latin America.

Keywords Sporting event brand, Organisational reputation, Social legacy, Volunteer management, Youth Olympic Games, Lived experience

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Research has consistently highlighted the critical role of volunteers in the successful delivery of major sport events (Costa *et al.*, 2006; Koutrou and Pappous, 2016; Orlowski and Wicker, 2015). However, their role extends far beyond operations. As one of the most visible stakeholder groups, volunteers are fundamental to co-creating the sporting event brand and shaping its reputation (Bang, 2009). Modern branding theory recognises that brand meaning is not simply dictated by an organisation but is co-created through the lived experiences and narratives of its diverse stakeholders (Tjandra *et al.*, 2021). An organisation's reputation,



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described as the collective perception of its ability to deliver value (Fombrun, 2005), directly influences volunteer commitment and satisfaction (Bang, 2009). This dynamic is particularly significant for newer mega-events like the Youth Olympic Games (YOG), which are still establishing their global brand identity.

As a relatively new addition to the Olympic family, the YOG is an emerging mega-event still in the process of building its brand. The concept, proposed by former IOC President Jacques Rogge and approved in 2007, was born out of a concern for rising youth inactivity and obesity and a desire to reconnect the Olympic Movement with its educational and cultural roots (asdeporte.com, 2018; Souza and Tavares, 2024). It was designed to be distinct from the senior Games, with a smaller scale, a mandatory Culture and Education Program, and a focus on youth empowerment over media spectacle (Hanstad et al., 2013). Consequently, the YOG has faced questions about whether it is a unique product, the IOC's cherished project – its “menina dos olhos” or “apple of the eye” (Souza and Tavares, 2024) – or merely a “poor copy” of the Olympic Games (Hanstad et al., 2013, p. 315), making the perceptions of its key stakeholders critical to its long-term reputational success.

The 2018 YOG in Buenos Aires provided a unique context to address this gap. For the city's political leadership, hosting the YOG was a strategic component of a broader urban policy aimed at positioning Buenos Aires as a competitive “global city” through city marketing and the development of its historically neglected southern districts (Catalano and Schettini, 2020; Rullansky, 2024). As the first YOG held in the Americas, the event was positioned as a historic moment for the region (asdeporte.com, 2018). This edition was also marked by innovative features, including an open-city concept and a hybrid programming model combining sport, culture, and education (Souza and Tavares, 2024). In this context, the volunteer program emerges not just as an operational function, but as a powerful mechanism for shaping the event's brand and reputation.

Building on these premises, this study focuses on how volunteers contribute to the co-creation of event brand meaning and reputation through their lived experiences. Drawing on stakeholder theory, which conceptualises organisations as systems of interdependent actors who can affect or be affected by organisational outcomes (Freeman, 1984), and on contemporary branding and consumer experience literature, this research examines how volunteers' experiences across different moments of interaction influence their perceptions and subsequent narratives about the event.

Stakeholder theory in sport events

Sport events are characterised by the involvement of multiple actors whose interactions shape both organisational processes and outcomes (Hautbois et al., 2012; Strittmatter et al., 2022). Within this context, stakeholder theory provides a useful framework for understanding how value is created through the relationships between these actors. Stakeholders are commonly defined as individuals or groups who can affect or be affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives (Freeman, 1984; Friedman et al., 2004), highlighting the interdependent nature of event environments. Building on this perspective, sport events can be understood as systems of interconnected stakeholders who jointly contribute to the creation of value. Organisations therefore depend on the active participation and interaction of diverse groups, including organisers, athletes, spectators, sponsors and volunteers (Harrison et al., 2015; Friedman et al., 2004), often having to respond to multiple and sometimes conflicting interests (Friedman et al., 2004). Furthermore, stakeholder salience varies depending on attributes such as power, legitimacy and urgency, which determine the degree to which stakeholders can influence organisational outcomes (Mitchell et al., 1997).

These dynamics are particularly relevant in sport events, where stakeholder relationships are fluid and evolve across different stages of the event lifecycle (Hautbois et al., 2012). Research has shown that stakeholder networks play a central role in shaping event governance, decision-making processes and overall success (Hautbois et al., 2012; Strittmatter et al.,

2022), reinforcing the importance of understanding how stakeholders interact within complex event environments. Within this network of actors, volunteers represent a particularly significant stakeholder group. While traditionally viewed as operational support, their role extends beyond functional tasks, as they actively participate in the event experience, interact with other stakeholders, and contribute to shaping perceptions of the event. In this sense, volunteers should be understood not merely as service providers but as active stakeholders who contribute to the value creation process and influence how the event is perceived and remembered (Bazzanella *et al.*, 2019; Strittmatter *et al.*, 2022).

Branding, consumer behaviour and event experience

Modern branding theory recognises that brand meaning is not dictated solely by organisations but is constructed through the lived experiences of stakeholders across multiple interactions. In this sense, brand experience theory conceptualises these interactions as multidimensional experiential events – encompassing sensory, affective, cognitive and behavioural responses – that shape individual evaluations and subsequent behaviours (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Within sport and event contexts, brands represent one of the most valuable assets, as their equity is rooted in consumer perceptions and behavioural responses (Kunkel and Biscaia, 2020). Consequently, the event brand can be understood as the outcome of accumulated experiences, where stakeholders interpret and assign meaning to their interactions with the organisation. Prior research has shown that these experiences influence satisfaction, engagement and behavioural intentions, reinforcing the link between experience, perception and consumer behaviour (Funk, 2008; Kunkel and Biscaia, 2020; Yoshida *et al.*, 2013).

This relationship becomes particularly relevant when considering the concept of brand touchpoints, defined as discrete episodes of interaction between stakeholders and the organisation across the event journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In the volunteer context, each stage of this journey, such as recruitment, training and on-site participation, constitutes a touchpoint where organisational practices evoke experiential responses that inform perceptions of competence, fairness and relational value. These perceptions, in turn, influence volunteers' behavioural responses, including advocacy, word-of-mouth and narrative construction, which are central mechanisms through which event reputation is co-created (Fombrun, 2005; Tjandra *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, the brand of a sport event is not a fixed organisational output but a dynamic outcome emerging from stakeholder experiences across touchpoints, through which brand meaning is continuously constructed and reputational capital is either strengthened or eroded.

Stakeholder interactions and brand co-creation

Building on stakeholder theory and contemporary branding perspectives, brand co-creation emerges as a relational process through which multiple actors jointly construct meaning through their interactions. Rather than being controlled by the organisation, brand meaning is shaped through the experiences and narratives of stakeholders who actively participate in the event environment (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Tjandra *et al.*, 2021). In this view, stakeholders are not passive recipients of value but active contributors who integrate their resources – such as time, skills and emotions – into the service experience, generating value through interaction (Rihova *et al.*, 2013). These interactions give rise to lived experiences that stakeholders interpret and evaluate, forming the basis of the meanings they associate with the event.

Importantly, these meanings are not confined to individual perceptions but are externalised through stakeholder narratives, including word-of-mouth and social interactions, which contribute to the collective construction of the event brand. In this sense, stakeholder experiences function as the mechanism through which brand meaning is continuously negotiated and reconstructed. As a result, the event brand can be understood as a dynamic and socially constructed outcome that emerges from stakeholder interactions across multiple touchpoints, where experiences generate meanings, and meanings ultimately shape brand perceptions and reputation (Fombrun, 2005; Tjandra *et al.*, 2021).

Volunteer management as brand touchpoints

Effective volunteer management practices are essential to shaping the volunteer experience (Doherty, 2009; Lachance *et al.*, 2021). These practices encompass all phases of the strategic handling of volunteers, from recruitment to recognition (Wicker, 2017). The literature has identified several core components, including planning, recruitment, training, supervision, task assignment and recognition (Cuskelly *et al.*, 2006; Einolf, 2018; Prince and Piatak, 2023). However, research on YOG volunteers specifically has shown that “involvement- and interaction-related practices” are essential factors in shaping positive long-term memories (Wang *et al.*, 2022, p. 228), which in turn form the basis of their perception of the event’s brand. Building on this literature, the present study reconceptualises these management practices not only as organisational processes but as brand touchpoints – specific moments of interaction between volunteers and the organisation through which experiential responses are generated. In this sense, each stage of the volunteer journey constitutes a touchpoint where experiences are formed, perceptions are shaped and brand meaning is constructed.

The present study

Although prior research has advanced the understanding of volunteer management practices in sport events, much of the available evidence comes from quantitative approaches. Few studies have explored these practices from a qualitative perspective (Hayday *et al.*, 2019; Kim and Cuskelly, 2017). Furthermore, existing research is largely concentrated in Anglo-Saxon and Asian contexts (Kim and Cuskelly, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2022, 2023), leaving limited insight into how volunteer management practices operate in Spanish-speaking and Latin American settings. This gap is particularly relevant for understanding how event experiences are constructed and how positive event reputation can be fostered across diverse cultural contexts.

Building on stakeholder theory and contemporary branding perspectives, this study examines volunteer management practices as key brand touchpoints through which event reputation is co-created in the context of and emerging sport mega-event. Specifically, the aim of this study is to explore how volunteers’ lived experiences across different stages of the volunteer journey function as mechanisms of brand co-creation and reputation formation at the Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games.

Adopting a qualitative approach grounded in volunteers’ lived experiences – understood as how individuals interpret, feel and assign meaning to their participation (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013) – this study analyses open-ended feedback from event volunteers to identify salient points of interaction between volunteers and the organising committee. These interactions are conceptualised as brand touchpoints, where organisational practices evoke multidimensional experiential responses that shape volunteers’ perceptions of organisational capability and event reputation.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. What touchpoints of the volunteer experience are most salient in shaping perceptions of an emerging sport mega-event?
- RQ2. How do volunteers’ lived experiences across key brand touchpoints contribute to the co-creation of event brand meaning and organisational reputation?
- RQ3. What context-specific insights emerge from a Latin American edition of the Youth Olympic Games that inform volunteer management as a brand co-creation strategy?

This study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it advances sport event branding research by empirically identifying volunteer management practices as brand touchpoints through which reputation is co-created. Second, it extends existing work on volunteer management by integrating qualitative evidence into contemporary branding and co-creation frameworks. Third, it provides empirical insight from a Spanish-speaking Latin

American context, contributing to a more geographically and culturally inclusive understanding of brand co-creation processes in sport mega-events.

Methodology

This qualitative study adopts an inductive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of volunteers at the YOG held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2018. The study is based on the secondary analysis of data derived from a large-scale post-event survey administered to event volunteers. While the survey was originally designed for programme evaluation purposes, its inclusion of multiple open-ended and evaluative items provides a rich empirical basis for examining how volunteers interpret, evaluate and reflect upon their experiences.

Theoretical framework

This study is theoretically grounded in brand experience theory (Brakus *et al.*, 2009) and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and contemporary branding theory, which recognise that brand meaning is co-created through stakeholder experiences (Tjandra *et al.*, 2021) and that organisational reputation reflects collective perceptions of value delivery (Fombrun, 2005). These frameworks position volunteers as active co-creators of event brand and reputation, rather than merely operational support. By adopting this stakeholder-centric perspective, we examine how volunteers' lived experiences at multiple touchpoints – from recruitment through post-event reflection – contribute to the construction of event brand meaning and organisational reputation capital. In this context, each touchpoint is understood as an experiential encounter that evokes affective, cognitive and behavioural responses, shaping volunteers' evaluations and influencing their subsequent advocacy behaviours, which contribute to the co-creation of event reputation.

Methodological approach

Our analytical approach follows reflexive thematic analysis principles (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022). This method was selected due to its theoretical flexibility and its suitability for examining meaning-making processes within participants' accounts. The analysis followed a predominantly deductive orientation, guided by the study's theoretical framework, while remaining open to the identification of nuanced patterns within the data. In line with the reflexive approach, themes were developed through an iterative and interpretative process involving familiarisation with the data, initial coding and the construction and refinement of themes. Rather than relying on procedural or quantification-driven techniques, the analysis emphasised the active role of the researcher in identifying patterns of meaning and interpreting how volunteers make sense of their experiences across different stages of their engagement with the event.

Data source and measures

The data analysed in this study were drawn from a post-event online survey administered to volunteers after the conclusion of the YOG in Buenos Aires, Argentina and sought feedback on various aspects of their participation, including their roles as volunteers, training programmes, logistical organisation and overall levels of satisfaction. The survey was designed by the organising committee in collaboration with an external consultancy agency and aimed to evaluate the volunteer programme. The authors were not involved in the design of the questionnaire or in the data collection process.

This study focuses on four survey items selected for their relevance to volunteers' experiential evaluations and reputational perceptions of the event: (1) an open-ended question, "Leave us some advice or recommendations", which served as the primary source for the inductive thematic analysis; (2) an open-ended response item, "Tell us about your experience",

used to contextualise overall experiential sentiment; (3) a dichotomous (yes/no) question, “Would you like to continue volunteering in other areas and/or activities?”; capturing future behavioural intentions and (4) a 5-point Likert scale item, “How would you rate your experience as a volunteer at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires?”, ranging from 1 (dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Together, these items enabled the examination of both experiential mechanisms (through qualitative data) and outcome-oriented indicators related to satisfaction and future engagement.

Although satisfaction with the experience was measured using just a single item, and although multi-item measures are preferred due to their psychometric robustness (Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2012), single-item measures have demonstrated acceptable validity when assessing clearly defined constructs in large samples (Allen *et al.*, 2022; Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007). In the present study, this item serves a descriptive and contextualising function, situating the qualitative findings within a general evaluative framework, rather than functioning as a primary analytical variable.

Sample characteristics

The final sample consisted of 1,791 respondents. As shown in Table 1, 55.1% of participants identified as female and 44.9% as male. Most respondents (53%) were aged 18 to 25, and a large majority (76.1%) reported participating as volunteers for the first time. Regarding place of residence, over a third lived in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA), while others came from the Interior or surrounding metropolitan zones. Notably, 94.4% of participants resided in Argentina, although individuals from 24 other countries also took part in the study.

Data analysis

Our data analysis followed a multi-method approach. The primary open-ended question was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, guided by the study’s theoretical framework, while

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Female	986	55.1
	Male	805	44.9
Age range	16–17	10	0.6
	18–25	950	53.0
	26–35	433	24.2
	36–50	241	13.5
	51+	157	8.8
First-time volunteer	Yes	1,362	76.1
	No	429	23.9
Zone of residence	CABA	674	37.6
	Interior	374	20.9
	Zona Sur	239	13.3
	Zona Oeste	232	13.0
	Zona Norte	173	9.7
	Out of the country	99	5.5
Country of residence	Argentina	1,691	94.4
	Brazil	43	2.4
	Others	57	3.2

Note(s): The category “Others” groups the countries Peru (*n* = 8), Colombia, Chile and Bolivia (*n* = 5 each), Uruguay and USA (*n* = 4 each), Rusia (*n* = 3), Canada, Ecuador, Spain, France, Germany, Guatemala and Japan (*n* = 2 each), Australia, Czech Republic, Great Britain, Italy, Mexico, Mauricio, Paraguay, Thailand, and Trinidad and Tobago (*n* = 1 each)

the remaining survey items were examined through classification and frequency analyses to contextualise volunteers' experiences and future intentions.

Thematic analysis of volunteer recommendations. Responses to the open-ended question “Leave us some advice or recommendations” constituted the core qualitative corpus. A total of 1,791 responses were analysed. As individual responses often contained more than one piece of advice, the material was segmented during analysis, resulting in 2,074 discrete advice units. These units were derived exclusively from the “advice or recommendations” item and did not include responses from other survey questions. Responses were written in Spanish and analysed in their original language. Entries consisting of a single word (e.g. “yes”, “no”, “none”) were excluded due to insufficient interpretive content.

Thematic analysis followed a reflexive and iterative process. First, one of the researchers conducted repeated readings of the data to achieve familiarisation and generated an initial set of codes. A second researcher engaged with the coding process to provide a complementary interpretative perspective. The evolving coding structure and thematic development were subsequently discussed and refined through an iterative and reflexive dialogue among the research team, ensuring methodological rigor and coherence across the dataset. This process emphasised the interpretative role of the researchers in constructing themes, consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022).

To further support thematic coherence and refinement, AI-assisted analysis was implemented following the structured approach proposed by Naeem *et al.* (2025) for the use of generative AI in thematic analysis. This framework conceptualises AI as a guided analytical assistant operating across defined stages, while maintaining the centrality of researcher interpretation. In line with this approach, the use of ChatGPT (GPT-4, OpenAI) in this study focused on three specific analytical functions adapted to our research design: (1) identification of semantic patterns and recurring expressions across coded segments; (2) detection of co-occurrences and overlaps between codes and (3) clustering of conceptually related codes to support theme refinement. These steps correspond to the stages of keyword identification, coding support and theme development described by Naeem *et al.* (2025), while excluding earlier stages (e.g. data familiarisation and initial coding), which were conducted exclusively by the researchers.

Operationally, the analysis was conducted by submitting batches of pre-coded textual segments to ChatGPT using structured prompts designed to elicit pattern recognition rather than interpretation. For example, prompts asked the model to: (1) identify frequently co-occurring concepts across codes; (2) group codes with overlapping meanings and (3) highlight potential redundancies or ambiguities in code definitions. In all cases, the AI was explicitly instructed not to generate new themes, but to support the identification of relationships within the existing coding structure. This procedure aligns with prior applications of AI in qualitative analysis, where generative tools have been used to extract keywords, quotations and patterns from textual data under researcher guidance (Naeem *et al.*, 2025). Importantly, the AI outputs were treated as provisional analytical suggestions and were critically evaluated through iterative discussion between the authors.

This step functioned as a form of methodological triangulation (Flick, 2018), enhancing the consistency and internal coherence of the coding structure without displacing the interpretive role of the researchers. ChatGPT did not generate themes independently, and all final decisions regarding theme definition, refinement and naming remained under the responsibility of the research team.

This approach is consistent with recent methodological developments that position AI as a conversational and reflexive analytical partner rather than an autonomous coder (Nguyen-Trung, 2025; Friese, 2026), reinforcing transparency, analytical rigour and researcher reflexivity in AI-assisted qualitative research.

Analysis of additional survey items. Responses to the open-ended item “Tell us about your experience” were manually reviewed and interpreted to capture overall sentiment, and subsequently grouped into positive, negative or neutral categories. The dichotomous and

Likert-scale items were examined using frequency distributions to describe levels of satisfaction and volunteers’ intentions to continue volunteering. These analyses were used to contextualise the qualitative findings providing complementary descriptive insights into volunteers’ overall evaluations and behavioural intentions and supporting the interpretation of organisational reputation and perceived value.

Ethical considerations

This research is based on the secondary analysis of an anonymised dataset provided by the event organisers. All data were received without any personally identifiable information, ensuring the confidentiality of all volunteer participants. The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for secondary data analysis, including secure data handling, responsible use and transparent reporting. Throughout the analysis, particular care was taken to represent volunteers’ perspectives accurately and respectfully.

Results

Thematic analysis of advice and recommendations

Our thematic analysis of volunteers’ recommendations identified seven *brand touchpoints* – critical episodes of volunteer–organisation interaction across the volunteer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) – that were salient in shaping volunteers’ overall experience and perceptions of the Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games. The analysis was conducted on 2,074 discrete advice units extracted from 1,791 mandatory open-ended responses. An initial inductive coding cycle generated 46 codes, which were subsequently reviewed, consolidated and refined through iterative discussion and author consensus to arrive at seven final themes. Each advice unit was assigned to a single touchpoint, where content could plausibly fit more than one theme; placement was determined by the strongest interpretive fit agreed by the authors.

Conceptually, each touchpoint captures a moment in which organisational practices evoke multidimensional experiential responses – affective, cognitive, behavioural and, where relevant, sensory (Brakus et al., 2009) – that inform perceptions of organisational capability and, in turn, contribute to the co-creation of event brand meaning and organisational reputation. The seven touchpoints span pre-event (recruitment and training), during the event (planning and organisation, execution of activities, working conditions, recognition) and post-event (perceived impact). As shown in Table 2, the distribution of advice units suggests that volunteers’ concerns were not concentrated in a single operational dimension but distributed across the full volunteer journey, reinforcing the systemic nature of brand co-creation processes.

Below, we detail each touchpoint, report its distribution across the dataset and provide illustrative extracts to show how volunteers’ narratives translate lived experience into reputational evaluations and actionable implications for volunteer management.

Table 2. Distribution of brand touchpoints across advice units

Brand touchpoint	n	%
1. Recruitment and Training Processes	325	15.7
2. Overall Event Planning and Organisation	382	18.4
3. Organisation and Distribution of Activities	326	15.7
4. Implementation and Execution of Activities	185	8.9
5. Working Conditions	396	19.2
6. Recognition, Benefits and Incentives	262	12.6
7. Impact of the Event	198	9.5
Note(s): n = 2,074		

Touchpoint 1. Recruitment and training processes (15.7%). This touchpoint encompassed comments addressing areas for improvement in the volunteer induction process, from registration and selection to pre-event training. The responses highlighted the need for greater clarity and effectiveness in communication, a better match between volunteer profiles and assigned roles, and more specific training tailored to the actual tasks.

As the earliest stage of the volunteer journey, this touchpoint reflects how initial interactions with the organising committee shaped volunteers' expectations regarding coordination, professionalism and the degree of recognition for their time and skills.

One of the most frequently mentioned points was the timing and method of selection notification. Several participants received confirmation with little advance notice, which complicated their personal planning, especially for those not residing in the host city:

Some of us were called about the [start] date and didn't have time to do the necessary training or change departments if we didn't like our assigned role.

Opportunities were also identified to improve consistency in communication channels and follow up on applicant queries. Some volunteers reported sending emails without receiving a clear response about their status; as one expressed,

I sent emails regarding my application status and they always told me they were still in the selection process

These accounts indicate that early-stage communication was closely associated with how volunteers evaluated the organisation's capacity to coordinate and respond effectively.

Regarding the assignment of roles, some comments suggested that the profiles and interests declared by volunteers should be taken into account to make better use of their skills and prior experience. One person stated:

I am a sports journalist and I was [stationed] in a [stadium] garage . . . the selection process needs to be ironed out.

With respect to training, many participants indicated that the content was too general or not closely related to the tasks they ultimately performed. This was compounded by technical difficulties with the virtual platform and suggestions to incorporate practical content, such as first aid or basic English communication:

The online training was very generic, and it was not clear to me what my tasks were.

Among the proposals put forward were conducting preliminary interviews, providing information earlier and organising face-to-face meetings before the event to foster familiarity among work teams. Overall, the comments reflect that more advanced planning, tailored training, and direct communication are key elements for strengthening the volunteer experience from the outset. These accounts indicate that volunteers framed recruitment issues not merely as logistical challenges, but signals of how much the organisation valued their time, expertise and prior experience.

Touchpoint 2. Overall event planning and organisation (18.4%). This touchpoint comprises comments referring to broader aspects of the event's planning and operational organisation beyond volunteers' specific roles. Participants discussed logistical coordination, venue access, crowd management, mobility within the parks, service provision, media coverage and accessibility conditions.

Although many volunteers evaluated the overall organisation positively, a substantial number of comments highlighted operational challenges related to space management and high attendance levels. Crowd control and stadium capacity were among the most frequently mentioned issues. Several participants described situations where spectators were unable to enter venues after long waiting times, suggesting the need for improved rotation systems or ticket allocation mechanisms:

Many people were left outside after waiting in long queues. Perhaps if spectators were rotated or tickets were numbered, more people could enjoy the event.

In addition to access management, volunteers frequently referred to deficiencies in signage, spatial orientation and information availability within the parks. Comments pointed to confusion regarding directions and the location of services, as well as inconsistencies in food provision and service quality. One participant noted:

... the food and services left much to be desired, as did the information, signage, and guidance within the park. My recommendation would be for much more clarity, better services, and more information.

Some responses also proposed concrete improvements aimed at enhancing the spectator experience, including the installation of large screens outside stadiums and the provision of real-time information regarding venue occupancy or estimated waiting times. Accessibility was also raised, particularly in relation to infrastructure barriers affecting people with disabilities. As one volunteer stated:

The games did not adequately consider access for people with disabilities. The stones [on the venue pathways] prevented wheelchairs from passing, and there was a lack of adequate spaces..

Overall, comments grouped within this touchpoint reflect volunteers' evaluations of the event's large-scale organisational capacity, particularly regarding spatial coordination, service delivery and inclusivity under conditions of high public demand.

Touchpoint 3. Organisation and distribution of activities (15.7%). This touchpoint group's comments concern the distribution of tasks among volunteers, coordination between teams and internal communication during the event.

One of the most frequently mentioned areas for improvement was the need to distribute tasks in a way that avoided downtime or prolonged periods of inactivity, as these were associated with demotivation and a sense of underutilisation. Another recurrent issue was the proportion of volunteers assigned to each sector relative to its operational demands:

Sometimes we volunteers didn't have much to do and we just sat around doing nothing. I feel that perhaps there were too many of us for the sports activities and tasks assigned.

Such accounts indicate that inactivity was not perceived merely as an organisational inefficiency, but as affecting volunteers' sense of usefulness and contribution.

Opportunities to improve communication regarding roles and assignments were also mentioned, especially during the first few days of the event, when some participants reported receiving late or contradictory information about their duties. One of them recounted:

First they assigned me to one area, and then they moved me to another without warning. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do.

These situations generated uncertainty regarding role clarity and task expectations. Coordination between teams and internal communication was another area highlighted for improvement. Several comments pointed out inconsistencies in the instructions given by different managers, which affected the resolution of everyday situations.

Sometimes they [the managers] gave contradictory instructions, and that made it difficult when we had to respond to the public,

said one volunteer. In some cases, a lack of coordination between sectors led to overlapping tasks or avoidable tensions between teams.

Among the proposals was the suggestion to encourage advance planning of tasks and to establish communication channels prior to the event, both to clarify roles and to promote a sense of team cohesion. One person recommended:

It would have been good if the coordinators had set up of the Games so groups with their volunteers a few weeks before the start so that we could clear up any doubts and get off to a smoother start.

Overall, comments within this touchpoint emphasise how daily task allocation, role clarity and internal communications shaped volunteers' perceptions of operational coherence and teamwork during the event.

Touchpoint 4. Implementation and execution of activities (8.9%). This touchpoint captures comments concerning the on-site execution of assigned functions, particularly in relation to supervision, leadership presence and operational guidance during the event.

One frequently mentioned aspect was the need for stronger direct support and supervision in the workplace. Some volunteers pointed out that, in certain areas, the execution of tasks depended largely on individual initiative, as managers were only intermittently present:

In my area, we basically managed on our own because the coordinator was not at the park.

Such situations were described as increasing uncertainty and placing additional responsibility on volunteers to resolve issues independently.

Similarly, opportunities were identified to improve the consistency of instructions given by managers. Some participants described situations where instructions were confusing or contradictory, leading to unease and hesitation in task execution. As one volunteer said,

Sometimes coordinators gave contradictory instructions, and that caused unease.

The quality of the relationship between coordinators and volunteers emerged as another dimension within this touchpoint. Several comments suggested that the perceived attitude of coordinators influenced volunteers' sense of recognition and inclusion within their teams:

Sometimes it seemed like our bosses [the coordinators] were doing us a favour by answering our questions.

In addition, some responses indicated that the fulfilment of responsibilities was unevenly distributed, as there were cases where some volunteers assumed greater workloads due to limited engagement from colleagues:

There were people in my area who stood on the sidelines or left, taking up [volunteer] space that could have been used by those who really wanted to be part of the games.

Uneven task engagement was described as generating frustration among those who felt strongly committed to their roles.

Overall, comments within this touchpoint highlight how leadership presence, supervisory consistency and team dynamics shaped volunteer's experiences of support, fairness and operational clarity during activity implementation.

Touchpoint 5. Working conditions (19.2%). This touchpoint, the most frequently mentioned, groups comments concerning physical well-being and the material conditions under which volunteers performed their roles. Participants referred to access to food, rest, transport, safety and the adequacy of material resources.

One of the most notable aspects was the food provided, both in terms of quality and quantity, as well as attention to specific dietary requirements. One volunteer noted:

I am coeliac and had problems with the food, as the coeliac menu was not available every day. I only ate the specific menu a few days; the rest of the time I had to eat whatever was available, putting my health at risk.

These accounts illustrate how food provision was closely associated with perceptions of care and responsiveness to individual needs. In addition, it was suggested that a food supplement be provided for those who finished late:

The [volunteer shift] days were very busy and sometimes lasted until 8:30 or 9 p.m. Many of us continued with our studies or work afterwards, so dinner would have been more than justified.

The availability of adequate rest areas was another priority, especially during long days or in adverse weather conditions. In this regard, one comment noted:

In the Olympic Park, there was nowhere to sit or shelter from the sun. We were on the ground in the heat with no shelter.

Lack of appropriate rest infrastructure was described as physically demanding and as affecting volunteers' capacity to remain engaged throughout extended shifts.

In terms of mobility, comments highlighted the importance of public transport frequency and coverage for safe travel. The need to reinforce overall security within venues also emerged through better lighting, access control and staff presence. Safe mobility and venue security were framed as prerequisites for carrying out assigned tasks with confidence. Finally, opportunities were identified to improve conditions related to uniforms and work materials. One participant commented:

I had to change my [uniform] trousers because the size was huge. Many colleagues were in the same situation. There was no option to try them on beforehand.

Overall, comments within this touchpoint emphasise how basic material conditions, as food, rest, transport, safety and equipment, shaped volunteers' physical comfort and their ability to sustain participation during the event.

Touchpoint 6. Recognition, benefits and incentives (12.6%). This touchpoint group's comments concerning how volunteers perceived formal and informal recognition for their participation, both, during and after the event. Participants referred to certificates, interpersonal gestures of appreciation, inclusion in celebratory activities and commemorative items.

One of the most frequently mentioned elements was the awarding of certificates, valued both for their symbolic value and for their potential professional utility. It was suggested that formal recognition should include personalised details, such as the role performed and the disciplines assigned:

[They should have] Send a certificate . . . including not only the role performed but also the sports in which each volunteer participated.

Certificates were described not only as acknowledgements of participation, but also as documents that could support future academic or professional trajectories. The importance of receiving personal gestures of recognition, such as the direct presentation of certificates or words of thanks from coordinators, was also highlighted. One participant said that

it would have been nice if a coordinator or member of staff had greeted me and thanked me for doing my bit, just like the other volunteers.

Such comments indicate that interpersonal acknowledgment from coordinators was closely associated with volunteers' sense of visibility and appreciation within their teams.

Another aspect concerned inclusion in recreational activities or social events, such as closing celebrations, so as not to create perceptions of unequal treatment:

. . . that they leave us [volunteers] out of the [closing] party that our coordinators and, of course, the athletes DID attend . . .

Exclusion from these spaces was described as generating perceptions of unequal status within the broader event structure.

Finally, several responses pointed to the importance of souvenirs or commemorative items, which could have served as tangible reminders of the shared experience. One participant commented that

there was not any memorabilia given of the event as a recognition, something simple, like a medal or a bracelet.

Tangible objects were framed as material anchors of participation and collective memory. Overall, comments within this touchpoint emphasise how formal acknowledgements, interpersonal gestures and tangible mementos shape volunteers' sense of appreciation and lasting connection to the event.

Touchpoint 7. Impact of the event (9.5%). In addition to the six previous touchpoints, the analysis identified a distinct cluster of comments referring to the perceived broader impact of the event (9.5% of comments). Their reflections addressed how volunteers interpreted the event's influence on their environment, their country and their own personal or professional development.

Feelings of pride and gratitude for having been part of the event were frequently expressed, often linked to national identity and collective representation. One person wrote:

Thank you for allowing us to be part of something so big, which makes us feel so Argentine, so part of it [the national achievement]

Expressions of belonging extended beyond individual participation to a shared national narrative. In several comments, the event was described as evidence that the country was capable of successfully organising a large-scale international event:

We showed that Argentines can do things well, and very well.

Many volunteers also referred to the desire for the Games to leave a lasting legacy, both in terms of infrastructure and human and social development. The experience was framed as a potential starting point for new initiatives, and as a collective moment that should not be forgotten

May this legacy continue. May time not make us forget EVERYTHING that happened here [at the Games].

Finally, some messages directly encouraged replicating similar initiatives at national and international levels, highlighting a sense of increased collective confidence:

Apply for anything and everything. We can do it!

Overall, comments within this touchpoint emphasise how volunteers perceived the event as extending beyond operational participation, influencing personal development and contributing to a broader sense of collective achievement.

Satisfaction and intentions to re-volunteer

To complement the thematic findings, responses to the open-ended question "Tell us about your experience" were manually classified according to the overall sentiment. Of the total responses, 96.2% were categorised as positive experience, 2.5% as neutral and 1.3% as negative.

Despite the numerous recommendations identified across the seven touchpoints, these results indicate suggestions for improvement coexisted with a predominantly favourable overall evaluation of the event. Volunteers frequently expressed constructive criticism while simultaneously describing their participation as meaningful and rewarding.

Similarly, 98.6% of respondents indicated that they would like to volunteer again in other events, suggesting a strong willingness to continue their engagement. In terms of overall satisfaction, 72.3% reported being "very satisfied", 20.5% "satisfied", 4% "normally satisfied", 2.1% "slightly dissatisfied" and 1.2% "dissatisfied".

Taken together, these indicators show that high levels of satisfaction and re-volunteering intention were present even among participants who identified areas for organisational improvement.

Discussion

Building on stakeholder theory and contemporary branding perspectives, we aimed to explore how volunteers' lived experiences across different stages of their journey function as mechanisms of brand co-creation and reputation formation at the Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games. To do so, we formulated three research questions designed to understand which aspects of the volunteer experience are most relevant in shaping perceptions of an emerging sport mega-event, how these experiences contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning and what context-specific insights emerge from a Latin American edition of the YOG, a geographical setting still underexplored in the literature.

Our findings indicate that volunteers' lived experiences can be meaningfully conceptualised as seven interrelated brand touchpoints: recruitment and training; overall event planning and organisation; organisation and distribution of activities; implementation and execution; working conditions; recognition, benefits and incentives; and perceived event impact. These touchpoints operated as critical moments along the volunteer journey in which organisational practices shaped volunteers' evaluations of the event and contributed to the co-creation of reputational meaning.

Our first research question sought to identify which aspects of the volunteer experience are most relevant in shaping perceptions of an emerging sport mega-event. Although the overall experience was evaluated very positively, volunteers' comments clustered around concrete operational dimensions, particularly working conditions, task organisation, and internal coordination. Basic elements such as food provision, rest areas, safety and clarity in role allocation emerged as central to volunteers' assessments.

These findings reinforce the idea that organisational reputation is not built solely through symbolic narratives or institutional discourse, but through stakeholders' concrete perceptions of how their expectations are addressed (Bang, 2009). When volunteers perceive deficiencies in fundamental conditions or coordination, such experiences can weaken brand credibility, even when overall satisfaction remains high. In this respect, our results align with previous research emphasising the importance of volunteer management practices in shaping event experiences (Hanstad *et al.*, 2013; Sand *et al.*, 2017) as well as studies on YOG volunteers highlighting how organisational practices influence volunteers' evaluations of the event (Wang *et al.*, 2022, 2023). However, the Buenos Aires 2018 edition generated a particularly strong sense of pride and collective engagement, suggesting that the open and city-integrated format contributed positively to reputational construction.

Our second research question examined how experiences at key brand touchpoints contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning and organisational reputation. The seven touchpoints identified in our analysis can be understood as experiential stages in which volunteers interacted with the organisation and formed cognitive and affective evaluations. From a stakeholder journey perspective (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), each stage – from recruitment to post-event reflection – constitutes a moment of brand activation. In the case of volunteers, these interactions are not passive. Their recommendations and suggestions reflect an active role in shaping and refining the event's meaning.

In line with brand experience theory (Brakus *et al.*, 2009), the touchpoints triggered affective responses (such as pride or frustration), cognitive evaluations (perceptions of professionalism, coordination or fairness), and behavioural intentions (willingness to re-volunteer). The very high levels of reported satisfaction (96.2%) and intention to re-volunteer (98.6%) suggest that, overall, the configuration of these touchpoints produced a predominantly positive brand experience. Nevertheless, our qualitative findings demonstrate that reputation co-creation is dynamic and contingent. As Wang *et al.* (2022) argue, long-term memories of

the event are constructed through concrete experiences, and operational shortcomings can leave lasting impressions. The volunteers' recommendations should therefore be interpreted not merely as criticism, but as active participation in strengthening the brand for future editions.

Our third research question explored what context-specific insights emerge from the Latin American edition of the YOG and how these can inform volunteer management as a brand co-creation strategy. This study contributes evidence from a region that has received comparatively limited attention in mega-event volunteer research. While studies conducted in European and Asian contexts have emphasised issues such as event identity or the long-term construction of volunteer memory (Hanstad *et al.*, 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2022), our findings highlight the prominence of collective pride and national representation in Buenos Aires 2018.

The "Impact of the Event" touchpoint illustrates how volunteers framed their experience not only in operational terms, but also as part of a broader symbolic and societal project. Expressions of national pride and collective accomplishment suggest that, in this context, brand co-creation extended beyond service delivery to encompass identity and legacy. In emerging settings, reputational capital may therefore be closely intertwined with processes of social affirmation and perceived international recognition.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, in the Latin American context, volunteer experience is more strongly anchored in collective identity, social recognition and symbolic participation than has been reported in other settings. This highlights the importance of contextualising volunteer management strategies, as the mechanisms through which reputation is co-created may vary across socio-cultural environments. In this sense, Buenos Aires 2018 provides evidence that brand co-creation in emerging regions may extend beyond operational excellence to encompass broader processes of social meaning-making.

Theoretically, our study contributes by integrating stakeholder theory and contemporary branding perspectives into the analysis of volunteer management in sport mega-events. Conceptualising management practices as brand touchpoints allows us to understand volunteer experience as a structured process of reputational co-creation rather than as a purely operational dimension. Practically, our findings offer a roadmap for event organisers. Volunteers' recommendations demonstrate that communication clarity, balanced task distribution, adequate working conditions and meaningful recognition are not peripheral considerations, but strategic levers for strengthening reputation and fostering loyalty. Designing volunteer management with a long-term experiential perspective can enhance both social legacy and sustained engagement.

This study has limitations. First, it is based on the secondary analysis of survey data from a single event, which limits generalisability. Second, although intentions to re-volunteer were extremely high, we cannot determine whether these intentions translated into actual behaviour. Third, as the survey instrument was designed by the organising committee, we had no control over item formulation. Future research could incorporate longitudinal designs, comparative analyses across regions or YOG editions, and subgroup analyses to further refine understanding of how brand touchpoints operate across cultural and organisational contexts.

Conclusions

This study provides a qualitatively grounded framework that clarifies how the volunteer experience at a sport mega-event operates as a structured system of brand touchpoints through which reputation is co-created. By analysing volunteers' lived experiences in a Latin American context, we demonstrate that volunteer management practices are not merely operational components, but strategic mechanisms shaping brand meaning and reputational capital. Conceptualising the volunteer journey as seven interrelated touchpoints offers a coherent analytical lens that moves beyond descriptive themes and situates volunteer management within contemporary branding and stakeholder perspectives.

Our findings contribute to the ongoing debate about the YOG's brand value (cf. [Hanstad et al., 2013](#); [Souza and Tavares, 2024](#)) by showing that, at the community level, an event that prioritises stakeholder experience can generate significant reputational capital, supporting its positioning as the "best of the Olympics" rather than a "poor copy". The high levels of satisfaction and re-volunteering intention are not merely indicators of operational success; they reflect the consolidation of positive brand experiences that foster loyalty, advocacy and long-term engagement.

Importantly, the prominence of touchpoints such as working conditions, coordination and recognition underscores that reputation is constructed through everyday managerial practices. Seemingly logistical details function as signals of organisational competence, respect, and value alignment. In this sense, the social legacy of the Buenos Aires 2018 YOG, captured in the "Impact of the Event" touchpoint, emerges not only from pride and collective achievement but from how volunteers interpreted their treatment throughout the journey.

For future mega-events, particularly in emerging or underrepresented regions, our findings suggest that investing strategically in volunteer touchpoints is essential for sustainable brand building. Listening to volunteers' voices not only improves operational design; it strengthens reputational resilience and enhances the long-term social value of the event.

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