

Perceived social value of volunteering, social capital and volunteer participation in later life: evidence from Slovakia

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine how older adults structure their perceptions of the social value of volunteering, how these perceptions relate to cognitive and structural social capital and to what extent these factors, together with sociodemographic characteristics, predict volunteering participation in later life. The study is set in a post-socialist country.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses a quantitative approach, drawing on data from a representative survey conducted in 2023. The research sample consisted of 372 respondents aged 55 and over.

Findings – Exploratory factor analysis confirmed a single-factor emancipatory perception of volunteering ($\alpha = 0.84$; 58.9% explained variance). The results showed that older adults who volunteered achieved significantly higher scores on the emancipation perception scale than those who were not involved. Hierarchical logistic regression showed that, although emancipatory perception and general trust are important prerequisites, the strongest predictors of later-life volunteering are, above all, membership in organisations and age.

Originality/value – The study empirically tests a model linking the perceived social value of volunteering with cognitive and structural dimensions of social capital to explain volunteering participation among older adults in a post-socialist context.

Keywords Volunteering in later life, Social value of volunteering, Emancipatory perception, Residual perception, Social capital, Generalised trust, Community embeddedness

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, volunteering in later life has attracted growing attention, largely due to demographic changes across Europe (Eurostat, 2023). As populations age and the share of older people increases, retirement is increasingly redefined not only as a period of leisure but also as a stage of engagement, including volunteering (Rodwell *et al.*, 2024).

A substantial body of research documents positive effects of volunteering in later life, including improved subjective well-being, physical and mental health (Hank and Erlinghagen, 2010; Li and Ferraro, 2005; Liu *et al.*, 2020; Morrow-Howell *et al.*, 2009), cognitive functioning (Keefer *et al.*, 2023; Proulx *et al.*, 2018) and reduced loneliness and social exclusion (Carr *et al.*, 2018; Gao and Yang, 2018) and attitudes towards ageing (Liu *et al.*, 2020).

Within the framework of active citizenship and democratic theory (Howell, 2010; Miller *et al.*, 2002), volunteering serves as a critical mechanism for cultivating interpersonal trust and social capital (Matten *et al.*, 2006) and fostering societal cohesion (Kelle *et al.*, 2024). It also demonstrates adaptive capacity during crises such as COVID-19 or the war in Ukraine (Brozmanová Gregorová, 2025; Spear *et al.*, 2020).

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Volunteering in later life is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including individual characteristics, social networks and organisational structures (Lu *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, national differences in volunteering rates, particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe, underscore the significance of cultural, historical and welfare-state factors, as well as perspectives on shared beliefs, preferences and attitudes, in shaping volunteering (Gil *et al.*, 2019). Slovakia is a relevant case in this regard. As a country with experience of a socialist regime and the subsequent transformation of civil society, it is undergoing dynamic development in volunteering participation (Brozmanová Gregorová, 2025).

The paper contributes to understanding volunteering in later life not merely as a function of individual resources, but as a socially embedded practice shaped by normative meanings and relational structures. By integrating the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), the concept of social capital (Putnam, 2000), the framework of social value of volunteering (Frič and Pospíšilová, 2010; Frič, 2014) and research on post-socialist civil society (Howard, 2003; Voicu and Voicu, 2009), the study argues that engagement in volunteering emerges from the interaction between perceived societal value and individuals' embeddedness within social networks and trust-based environments.

Perceived social value of volunteering

The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) posits that behaviour stems from intention, shaped by three factors: attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. For volunteering, participation thus depends not only on resources but also on perceptions of its meaningfulness, social value, age-appropriateness and feasibility – making such perceptions direct drivers of involvement.

As Frič (2014) states, the social value of volunteering is changing amid its growing involvement in social problem-solving. Frič and Pospíšilová (2010), drawing on Payton and Moody (1994) explanation of preferences for philanthropic solutions to social problems, identifies three types of social significance of volunteering. The first, *compensatory significance*, views volunteering as a substitute for state or market failures. The second, *complementary significance*, sees it as supplementing existing state or market solutions, offering alternatives to public policies. The third, *emancipatory significance*, positions volunteering as a preferred, culturally valued form of problem-solving that neither the state nor the market can fully replicate, deriving its value from distinct ethical, communal and altruistic dimensions. Distinguishing these meanings is key to analysing perceptions of volunteering in later life. If society views it mainly as compensation for systemic failures, its value differs from seeing it as an autonomous, culturally esteemed expression of civic engagement.

Social capital as context: cognitive and structural dimensions

The concept of social capital (Putnam, 2000) also provides an important contextual dimension for our analyses. Volunteering is both an expression and a source of social capital: it strengthens relationships, reciprocity and trust, while being supported by these factors (Høgenhaven, 2025). Putnam (1993) and Harpham *et al.* (2002) distinguish between cognitive and structural social capital.

Cognitive social capital focuses on the qualitative aspects of relationships, such as generalised trust and shared values (Chen *et al.*, 2024). Older adults with higher levels of generalised trust are more likely to engage in volunteer activities (Brown and Ferris, 2007; Hu and Chen, 2019; Musick and Wilson, 2008). This influence is particularly pronounced among those aged 75 and older, where interpersonal trust becomes a crucial factor in maintaining active engagement despite potential declines in broader social networks (Sánchez-García *et al.*, 2025).

Structural social capital consists of objectively verifiable activities and resources that enable the exchange of knowledge and coordinated collective action. Uphoff *et al.* (2013) It refers

to the networks and institutional affiliations that connect individuals to others. In this study, community embeddedness and organisational membership capture structural dimensions of social capital. While community embeddedness reflects identification with and attachment to a local community, organisational membership can be understood as a structural source of social capital that increases the likelihood of volunteer engagement (Wilson, 2012). Volunteering in later life may depend on the extent to which older adults are structurally embedded in networks that facilitate and normalise engagement.

The volunteering in Slovakia context

Research on civic participation in Central and Eastern Europe points to the continuing influence of historical experiences (Howard, 2003). The lack of participative values, mistrust in democracy and governments and less developed social responsibility and autonomy were identified as the main discontinuities between Western capitalism and Eastern European cultures (Voicu and Voicu, 2009).

Slovakia has undergone a transformation from a socialist regime to a pluralistic civil society. Despite the limitations that the communist regime imposed across all areas of society, most people in Slovakia today think that socialism led to a more moral way of behaviour and that people helped each other more; they showed greater solidarity and were closer (FOCUS Marketing and Social Research, 2018). According to Strečanský (2020), this favourable view is the result of nostalgic optimism and persistent stereotypes. Distortion in people's thinking is also reflected in their perceptions of the welfare state and solidarity. A significant part of the public in Slovakia still believes in the state's ability to maintain the achieved level of social security and living conditions. At the same time, many are sceptical of voluntary solidarity and the ability of private providers in the social system (Šimek and Gonda, 2020).

In post-communist countries, volunteering engagement is also influenced by historical experiences of compulsory, centrally managed, and ideologically conditioned unpaid work, which can lead to persistent resistance to organised volunteer activities among the older generation. This phenomenon, often referred to as the legacy of "compulsory volunteering," creates specific psychological barriers that can hinder the development of the contemporary non-profit sector in the post-communist space and discourage potential volunteers from participating in organised structures (Pranaitytė, 2022).

Volunteering in Slovakia has undergone significant changes in recent decades. The latest empirical evidence on volunteering indicates a significant decline in engagement rates in 2025, attributed to a combination of interrelated structural, economic and socio-cultural influences that may currently be reinforcing one another. The rate of participation in organised volunteering has been growing since 2011, reaching 36.0% in 2019. In 2023, it remained at approximately the same level, but in 2025, it dropped significantly to 18.2%. Unorganised volunteering remained relatively stable between 2011, 2019, and 2023 (47.1% – 55.0% – 52.7%), but in 2025, there is also a sharp drop to 26.1%. Age differences indicate a shift in organised volunteering towards younger age groups. The lowest level of volunteering participation is among the 65+ age group, both in 2023 (30.9%) and significantly lower in 2025 (10.2%) (Brozmanová Gregorová, 2025).

While previous research significantly advanced knowledge on volunteering in later life, understanding how older adults perceive the social value of volunteering and to what extent these perceptions are related to their involvement in volunteer activities within a broader framework of social capital, particularly in post-socialist contexts where civic engagement is embedded in specific historical trajectories and trust dynamics, is essential.

Our research questions are:

- RQ1. How is the perception of social value of volunteering structured among older adults?
- RQ2. What is the relationship between the perception of social value of volunteering and cognitive and structural social capital?

RQ3. To what extent do the perception of social value of volunteering, cognitive and structural capital and sociodemographic characteristics predict involvement in volunteering in later life?

Methodology

Research sample

The total research sample obtained by quota selection consisted of 1,020 respondents aged 18–89 (AM_age = 47.54; SD_age = 16.32; 531 women). The quotas were set based on the characteristics of the adult population of Slovakia, according to data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (age, gender, nationality, education, settlement size, region). The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Matej Bel University. Data collection was carried out by an external company using personal interviews recorded on electronic devices (so-called CAPI) in October and November 2023. For the purposes of this study, a subset of 372 people aged 55 and over (M_age = 65.49; SD_age = 6.01; 179 men, 193 women) was selected from the total sample.

Research tool and variables

Perception of the social value of volunteering was measured using six statements. Respondents expressed their level of agreement on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

The level of general trust was assessed using the question “To what extent do you think people can generally be trusted?” on a four-point scale (1 = absolute trust, 4 = almost complete distrust). For the purposes of statistical analysis, the responses were recoded (reverse coding). Therefore, higher values indicate greater confidence.

Embeddedness in the community was measured using the statement “I identify myself as a member of my local community” on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Membership in an organisation was assessed by asking whether the respondent was a member of any organisation, club, association or society, with the options of active membership, passive membership, past membership and non-membership.

Volunteering was surveyed over the past 12 months, separately for organised and unorganised volunteering.

Procedure and data analysis

In the first step, exploratory factor analysis was performed to identify latent factors that explain the mutual correlations among items in the questionnaire measuring perceptions of social value of volunteering. The suitability of the data was assessed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin index ($KMO > 0.50$) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity ($p < 0.05$). Descriptive statistics for the variables under study were then calculated. The normality of the data distribution was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values (values range from -1 to 1). Homogeneity of variances was verified using Levene’s test of homogeneity of variances (≥ 0.05). Parametric tests (student’s *t*-test and analysis of variance – ANOVA) were used to compare differences in the monitored variables between individual groups of respondents, provided that the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were met. In cases of violation of the assumption of normality or when analysing ordinal variables, nonparametric alternatives were used – the Mann–Whitney U test and the Kruskal–Wallis test. For statistically significant ANOVA results, differences between groups were assessed using Scheffe’s post hoc test, chosen given the uneven representation of respondents across groups. For statistically significant results of the Kruskal–Wallis test, the differences were further analysed using Dunn’s post hoc test with correction for multiple comparisons. The effect size was interpreted in statistical tests using Cohen’s *d* in the *t*-test, omega squared (ω^2) in the analysis of variance,

and epsilon squared (ϵ^2) in the Kruskal–Wallis test. The relationships between variables were analysed using Spearman's correlation coefficient ρ .

Binary hierarchical logistic regression was used to identify social and sociodemographic predictors of volunteering involvement. The dependent variable (volunteer involvement) was dichotomous (1 = not involved, 2 = involved). Before including variables in the model, the assumptions of logistic regression were verified. For nominal variables, sufficient frequencies in individual categories in relation to the dependent variable were checked. In the economic situation variable, we merged the first two and last two categories. Further adjustments were made to the category coding to ensure the reference categories were unambiguous and interpretable. The ordinal variables trust in people and anchoring in the community were assessed for the purposes of logistic regression analysis in terms of the appropriateness of their specification as continuous variables. The assumption for cardinal variables was verified by testing the linearity of the predictors, and the assumption for the dependent variable was verified by testing the interaction of predictors and their natural logarithms. Multicollinearity among predictors was assessed using VIF values (<3), and the presence of influential outliers was assessed using Cook's Distance (<1). The models were built gradually (hierarchically). The regression coefficients (b), standard errors, odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals and Nagelkerke's R^2 value are reported. Model improvement was assessed using the chi-square test of model change. All analyses were performed using JASP 0.95.4.0. Results with a p -value < 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results

Exploratory factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was performed on six items measuring the perceived social value of volunteering. We selected items from research on young people's perceptions of volunteering in Slovakia (Brozmanová Gregorová *et al.*, 2018), adapted from (Frič and Pospíšilová, 2010; Frič, 2014). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test values indicated that most items were suitable for factor analysis (KMO > 0.5), with the exception of the item: “If the state fulfilled all its obligations, volunteers would not be necessary,” which showed low KMO (< 0.5) and very high uniqueness. This item was therefore excluded from the subsequent analysis.

The analysis in Table 1 confirmed a single-factor structure, with item loadings sufficiently high (0.66–0.86). The KMO test, together with Bartlett's sphericity test ($X^2 = 2577.572$, $p < 0.001$), confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The factor explains 58.9% of the variance and represents the emancipatory perception of volunteering. The high Cronbach's alpha value (0.84) confirms the internal consistency of the items within the factor, making it suitable for further statistical processing and interpretation [1].

Table 1 Emancipation perception of volunteering questionnaire items after rotation (n = 1020)	
Items	Emancipatory perception factor
Volunteers offer something that paid professionals cannot provide	0.683
Volunteering enables people to play an active role in a democratic society	0.786
Volunteers help to create a better world	0.857
Volunteers show the way to change a society based on selfishness	0.829
Without volunteers, our society would not be able to function at all	0.660
Eigenvalue	2.94
% Variance	58.9
Cronbach's alpha	0.84
Source(s): Authors' own work	

While the exploratory factor analysis supported a unidimensional emancipatory construct, the residual understanding of volunteering was represented by a single-item indicator. Given its low factor adequacy and high uniqueness, this item was analysed separately as an individual attitudinal statement rather than as a latent construct.

As documented in Table 2, the average values of individual items of the emancipation perception of volunteering ranged from 3.10 to 3.62, with medians ranging from 3.00 to 4.00. The summary score reached values of $Me = 17.00$ and $M = 17.34$. After converting to an average score, the value is 3.47 points, indicating a slight shift in responses toward agreement.

The average residual item indicated by the statement “*If the state fulfilled all its obligations, volunteers would not be necessary*,” is around the middle of the scale ($M = 3.45$; $Me = 3.00$; $SD = 1.28$). The average score for the emancipatory perception of volunteering, after conversion to a single item ($M = 3.47$), is almost identical to the average for the residual item ($M = 3.45$).

Differences in the emancipatory view of volunteering in relation to involvement in volunteering proved to be statistically significant ($F = 7.409$; $p < 0.001$; $\omega^2 = 0.049$), with the effect being interpreted as small to medium (see Table 3). Post hoc analysis (Scheffé) confirmed that older adults in unorganised volunteering ($M = 18.03$) and, especially, those involved in both organised and unorganised volunteering ($M = 18.57$) achieved significantly higher scores on the emancipation perspective than non-involved respondents ($M = 16.20$). The lowest scores on the emancipation perspective were reported by the group not involved in volunteering.

The differences between the groups were also confirmed in the residual item ($H = 24.27$; $p < 0.001$; $\epsilon^2 = 0.065$). Post hoc comparisons (Dunn) showed that non-involved respondents

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of perception of volunteering by older adults

Items	Median	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Volunteers offer something that paid professionals cannot provide	3.00	3.35	1.15	−0.18	−0.71
Volunteering enables people to take an active role in a democratic society	4.00	3.53	1.7	−0.35	−0.38
Volunteers help create a better world	4.00	3.53	1.6	−0.51	−0.31
Volunteers show the way to transform a society based on selfishness	4.00	3.62	1.9	−0.41	−0.56
Without volunteers, our society would not be able to function at all	3.00	3.10	1.17	1.17	1.17
Emancipatory perspective	17.00	17.34	17.34	−0.26	−0.15
If the state fulfilled all its responsibilities, volunteers would not be needed	3.00	3.45	1.28	−0.35	−0.88

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3 Perception of social value of volunteering by involvement in volunteering

Volunteering involvement	N	Emancipatory perspective		N	Residual item
		Mean	SD		Medián
Organised	24	17.33	2.97	24	3.00
Unorganised	86	18.03	3.74	86	3.00
Organised and Unorganised	101	18.57	4.45	101	3.00
Not involved	161	16.20	4.54	161	4.00
		ANOVA: $F(3, 368) = 7.409$, $p < 0.001$, $\omega^2 = 0.049$; Levenés: $p = 0.093$		Kruskal–Wallis: $H(3) = 24.27$, $p < 0.001$, $\epsilon^2 = 0.065$	

Source(s): Authors' own work

agreed significantly more with the residual statement than those involved in unorganised or combined volunteering. No differences were found between the involved groups.

Table 4 shows that the relationship between the emancipatory view of volunteering and cognitive social capital, as measured by general trust, was statistically significant and positive (Spearman's $\rho = 0.302$; $p < 0.001$). A higher level of general trust is associated with a higher score on older adults' emancipatory perception of volunteering. A significant relationship was also found between the emancipatory perception of volunteering and both variables, expressing the structural social capital of older adults. Stronger community embedding is associated with a higher score on the emancipatory perspective of volunteering ($\rho = 0.395$; $p < 0.001$). Significant differences were found according to membership in organisations ($H = 42.19$; $p < 0.001$; $\epsilon^2 = 0.116$). Active members had significantly higher scores on the emancipatory perception of volunteering compared to all other groups (passive members, non-members, and former members) (see Table 5).

For the residual item, a weak, statistically significant negative relationship with general trust was confirmed ($\rho = -0.129$; $p = 0.013$). Higher trust is associated with lower agreement with the residual statement. No relationship was found between the residual item and community embedding ($\rho = -0.021$; $p = 0.687$) and membership ($H = 3.061$; $p = 0.382$; $\epsilon^2 = 0.008$).

Predictors of involvement in volunteering

The results of the hierarchical logistic regression analysis are presented in four models (Table 6). The first model included the emancipatory perception of volunteering. The model was statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.64$; $p = 0.010$) and explained 6.3% of the variability in volunteering (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.063$). The emancipatory perception of volunteering was a significant predictor of participation ($\beta = 0.100$; $p = 0.013$; OR = 1.105).

In the second step, the variable general trust was added to Model 2. This step led to a significant improvement in the model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 12.45$; $p < 0.001$), and the explained variability increased to 17.3% (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.173$). After including this variable, the emancipatory perception of volunteering was no longer statistically significant ($p = 0.145$). On the contrary, general trust proved to be a strong predictor ($p < 0.001$; OR = 2.457).

Table 4 Correlations between emancipatory and residual perspectives and general trust and embedding in the community

Items	Emancipatory perspective – general trust	Emancipatory perspective – embedding in community	Residual perspective – general trust	Residual perspective – embedding in community
Spearman's rho	0.302	0.395	-0.129	-0.021
p	<0.001	<0.001	0.013	0.687

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 5 Emancipatory and residual perspectives by membership

Membership in an organisation	Emancipatory perspective		Residual item	
	N	Median	N	Median
Active member	59	21.00	59	3.00
Passive member	43	17.00	43	3.00
Not a member	163	16.00	163	4.00
Member in the past	99	17.00	99	4.00
	Kruskal–Wallis: $H = 42.19$, $p < 0.001$, $\epsilon^2 = 0.116$		Kruskal–Wallis: $H(3) = 24.27$, $p < 0.001$, $\epsilon^2 = 0.065$	

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 6 Results of hierarchical logistic regression predicting involvement in volunteering

Predictor	b	SE(b)	OR (95% CI)	p
<i>Model 1 (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.063$, $\Delta\chi^2 = 6.635^{**}$)</i>				
Emancipatory perspective	0.100	0.040	1.105 (1.022; 1.196)	0.013*
<i>Model 2 (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.173$, $\Delta\chi^2 = 12.451^{***}$, χ^2 change = 5.816)</i>				
Emancipatory perspective	0.062	0.043	1.064 (0.979; 1.158)	0.145
General trust	0.899	0.269	2.457 (1.449; 4.167)	< 0.001***
<i>Model 3 (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.283$, $\Delta\chi^2 = 13.649^{**}$, χ^2 change = 1.198)</i>				
Emancipatory perspective	0.035	0.048	1.036 (0.943; 1.138)	0.464
General	0.691	0.298	1.996 (1.114; 3.578)	0.020*
Community embedding	-0.006	0.211	0.994 (0.658; 1.502)	0.977
Membership in past	-0.143	0.484	0.867 (0.336; 2.237)	0.768
Passive membership	1.822	0.698	6.186 (1.576; 24.277)	0.009**
Active membership	1.351	0.598	3.863 (1.198; 12.460)	0.024*
<i>Model 4 (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.396$, $\Delta\chi^2 = 15.614$, χ^2 change = 1.965)</i>				
Emancipatory perspective	0.025	0.054	1.026 (0.922; 1.140)	0.641
General trust	0.517	0.321	1.677 (0.893; 3.146)	0.108
Community embedding	-0.150	0.232	0.861 (0.547; 1.355)	0.518
Membership in past	-0.538	0.526	0.584 (0.208; 1.637)	0.306
Passive membership	1.876	0.754	6.528 (1.490; 28.597)	0.013*
Active membership	1.341	0.661	3.824 (1.046; 13.983)	0.043*
Gender – women	0.344	0.521	1.410 (0.508; 3.914)	0.509
Education – secondary without graduation	-0.713	0.640	0.490 (0.140; 1.719)	0.265
Education – secondary with graduation	-0.132	0.633	0.876 (0.253; 3.031)	0.835
Education – university	-0.010	0.772	0.990 (0.218; 4.498)	0.989
Non-religion	0.049	0.603	1.050 (0.322; 3.425)	0.935
Religion	0.833	0.683	2.301 (0.603; 8.776)	0.222
Economic situation – average	1.162	0.630	3.196 (0.929; 10.995)	0.065
Economic situation – good	1.318	0.681	3.735 (0.983; 14.196)	0.053
Location rural	-0.819	0.534	0.441 (0.155; 1.255)	0.125
Age	-0.081	0.040	0.922 (0.852; 0.998)	0.044*
Note(s): * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.010$; *** $p < 0.001$				
Source(s): Authors' own work				

In the third step, the variables community embedding and membership were added to Model 3. This step again led to a significant improvement in the model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 13.65$; $p = 0.009$), and the explained variability increased to 28.3% (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.283$). In this model, general trust remained a significant predictor ($p = 0.020$), although the odds ratio decreased slightly (OR = 1.996). Passive and active membership proved to be particularly strong predictors. Passive membership increased the chance of involvement approximately 6.2-fold ($p = 0.009$) and active membership approximately 3.9-fold ($p = 0.024$) compared to those who are not and have never been members of any organisation. Community embedding did not prove to be a significant predictor ($p = 0.977$).

In the final fourth step, sociodemographic variables (gender, education, religion, economic situation, place of residence and age) were added to Model 4. Although the addition of this block of variables did not lead to a significant improvement in the model as a whole ($\Delta\chi^2 = 15.614$; $p = 0.111$), the total explained variability reached 39.6% (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.396$). After including these variables, the effect of general trust weakened and became insignificant ($p = 0.108$). Despite the insignificance of the fourth step as a whole, passive membership ($p = 0.013$; OR = 6.528), active membership ($p = 0.043$; OR = 3.824) and age ($b = -0.081$; $p = 0.044$; OR = 1.000) remained individually significant predictors in the model. OR = 6.528, active membership ($p = 0.043$; OR = 3.824) and age ($b = -0.081$; $p = 0.044$; OR = 0.922) remained individually significant predictors in the model.

The overall reliability and quality of the model is confirmed by its ability to correctly identify 71.4% of involved individuals (sensitivity) and 68.9% of non-involved individuals (specificity). The model diagnostics showed no problems with multicollinearity of variables ($VIF < 3$) or the presence of influential outliers (Cook's Distance < 1) that could systematically bias the results.

Discussion

The exploratory factor analysis confirmed a unidimensional structure aligned with the emancipatory perception of volunteering. Although theoretical frameworks distinguish between emancipatory and residual perceptions (Brozmanová Gregorová *et al.*, 2018; Frič and Pospíšilová, 2010; Frič, 2014), the residual interpretation did not emerge as a stable attitudinal dimension in our sample.

Emancipatory perception of volunteering formed a coherent factor, and it can be concluded that the social value of volunteering in our sample derives from its perception as an autonomous civic practice, not as a substitute for state provision. The item presenting the residual perception of volunteering may reflect the general opinion on the role of the state, but it is not a stable interpretative framework for understanding volunteering itself. This perception aligns with the emergence of new trends, in which the understanding of volunteering as a distinct sector of society is coming to the fore and corresponds to the reflexive model of volunteering (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003). This perception of volunteering is inextricably linked to the emancipation of an altruistic view of the world and a positive perspective on society's further development (Frič and Pospíšilová, 2010). At the same time, this perception is consistent with the widely accepted view of volunteering in Western societies, namely that volunteers are more than just a supplementary, cheaper human resource; they bring something qualitatively different from what paid employees can provide (Rochester *et al.*, 2010). These findings indicate a shift in older adults' perception of the social value of volunteering in Slovakia. Research conducted more than 10 years ago documented the prevailing view of the Slovak population that volunteers would not be needed if the state fulfilled its responsibilities. In 1998, 55% of respondents held this opinion (Woleková, 2002), and in 2003, 74% (Bútorová, 2004). There was also no shift in opinion among the younger generation. In a 2017 survey (Brozmanová Gregorová *et al.*, 2018) conducted among young people aged 15–30, up to 54% of respondents agreed with this statement. This means that the significant decline in volunteer efforts among older adults in Slovakia is accompanied by changes in the perception of the social value of volunteering.

Volunteering older adults scored significantly higher on the emancipation perspective than non-volunteers. This finding aligns with research on young people's perceptions of volunteering in Slovakia (Brozmanová Gregorová *et al.*, 2018) and indicates that participation in volunteering is connected with shared social meanings. Thus, volunteering in later life links closely to its cultural framing, with volunteers internalising an emancipatory view that legitimises civic engagement. This internalised perception may be particularly impactful in countries with lower volunteering rates, such as Slovakia, where the subjective sense of necessity and the resulting quality-of-life gains can be stronger than in nations where such activities are more commonplace (Morawski *et al.*, 2020).

The results indicate that the emancipatory perception of volunteering is associated with the cognitive and structural capital of older adults. Higher levels of general trust, higher community embedding and membership in organisations are associated with higher scores on the emancipatory perception of volunteering. It seems that social capital is connected not only with volunteering participation in later life (Høgenhaven, 2025; Hu and Xie, 2025; Xu and Ye, 2026) but also with the perceived social value of volunteering.

The hierarchical regression analysis provides important insight into how normative meanings and social capital jointly shape volunteering participation in later life. In the first model, the emancipatory perception of volunteering emerged as a significant predictor of involvement,

supporting the assumption derived from the theory of planned behaviour ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) that attitudinal evaluations are linked to behavioural engagement. With a growing emancipatory perception of volunteering, participation likelihood increased. Perceiving volunteering as an autonomous and culturally valued civic practice is associated with higher involvement.

However, once general trust was introduced into the model, the effect of the emancipatory perception diminished, while trust became a strong predictor of participation. This finding indicates that the behavioural relevance of normative meanings is embedded within a broader cognitive orientation toward others. In line with social capital theory, generalised trust appears to create a relational environment conducive to engagement. Volunteering and social trust are mutually reinforcing among older adults ([Hu and Xie, 2025](#)). The attenuation of the emancipatory effect after controlling for trust suggests that normative perceptions may partly reflect a wider trust-based social orientation rather than functioning independently.

The third model, which incorporated structural dimensions of social capital – community embedding and organisational membership – further clarified this relationship. Organisational membership proved to be a particularly strong predictor of volunteering, with both passive and active membership substantially increasing the likelihood of involvement. As [Brozmanová Gregorová \(2025\)](#) point out, membership in organisations appears to be one of the most consistent predictors of volunteer engagement in Slovakia, persisting across social changes, crises and transformations in the organisational forms of volunteering. This highlights the importance of structural embeddedness in networks that provide opportunities, recruitment channels and normative reinforcement for engagement mechanisms ([Matsuba et al., 2007](#)). In contrast, community embedding did not show a significant effect, suggesting that identification with the local community alone may not be sufficient to activate volunteering behaviour without more formalised network ties.

In the final model, after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, organisational membership and age remained significant predictors, while the effect of trust weakened. Importantly, the addition of sociodemographic variables did not significantly improve the model as a whole, indicating that demographic characteristics alone do not provide a sufficient explanation of volunteering participation. Instead, the findings suggest that structural social capital – particularly organisational membership – plays a central role in shaping engagement in later life. This aligns with [Wilson's \(2012\)](#) comprehensive review, which highlights that volunteerism is embedded within broader social processes and networks that facilitate engagement.

Limitations

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting the results of this study. The first significant limitation is the use of single-item indicators to measure social constructs such as general trust in people and community anchoring. Moreover, these variables are ordinal, which may limit the accuracy of regression estimates. Regarding the measurement instrument's structure, the one-dimensionality of the perception of volunteering proved to be a limitation, with factor analysis confirming stability only for the emancipatory perception. Residual perception did not constitute a stable factor and had to be analysed only as a separate attitudinal statement.

The research is also firmly anchored in the specific post-socialist context of Slovakia, which is marked by the historical legacy of “compulsory volunteering” and a lower level of trust, which may limit the generalizability of the results to countries with other democratic traditions. Finally, it should be emphasised that the relationships identified are correlational in nature and therefore do not allow for definitive conclusions to be drawn about the causal sequence between attitudes, social capital and actual involvement in volunteering.

Conclusion

Taken together, these results support the central argument of this study: volunteering participation in later life is not determined solely by individual demographic resources, nor exclusively by normative evaluations, but emerges from the interaction between perceived social value and social embeddedness. While an emancipatory perception of volunteering differentiates volunteers from non-volunteers at the descriptive level, their behavioural impact appears to be conditioned by broader relational and structural contexts. Engagement in later life is thus best understood as embedded within an engagement culture structured by trust and organisational networks rather than as the outcome of isolated attitudinal positions. Overall, the results underscore the importance of integrating normative and structural perspectives when analysing volunteering in post-socialist contexts, where the interplay between cultural meanings and social capital may be particularly consequential.

Note

- [1.] In a 2014 study of young people's perceptions of the social value of volunteering, statements were grouped into two factors representing an emancipatory and a residual view. The statement "Without the work of volunteers, our society could not function at all" appeared in both factors but had a higher value in the residual factor, so it was included in the residual factor.

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