

Factors Influencing Gen Z Volunteerism: Insights from a Multistate Study of 4-H Alumni Values and Preferences

Roshan Nayak¹
Cheryl Butterfield²
Gemma Miner³
Stacey MacArthur⁴
Aditya Sinha⁵
Donna Schwarting⁶

Abstract

This multistate exploratory study examines factors and preferences influencing volunteering decisions of Generation Z early 4-H alumni. Guided by the I.S.O.T.U.R.E. volunteer administration model, the study surveyed 910 Gen Z 4-H alumni across six states in the Western region of the U.S. to identify key factors affecting their decisions to begin and continue volunteering. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that personal value alignment, readiness to commit, and organizational support significantly influenced Gen Zers' volunteering decisions. Volunteer preferences (short-, medium-, or long-term) were also found to moderate the impact of certain factors, particularly for those motivated by long-term commitment and value congruence. Cluster analysis further identified two distinct groups based on how strongly they were influenced by these emerging factors. The results showed those in the highly influenced cluster were more likely to value education, community-building, and family. Additionally, we found that volunteering decisions are driven by a cause and influenced by personal connections, invitations, and prior relationships with the organization. The multistate study underscores the importance of tailoring recruitment, training, and engagement strategies to align with Gen Zers' social values, career interests, and preferences for meaningful, tech-enabled experiences. The findings offer practical implications for 4-H youth development program aiming to enhance volunteer recruitment and retention by adapting strategies to meet the expectations of Gen Zers.

Introduction

Each year, a large number of volunteers make invaluable contributions to their communities by offering their time and expertise. The Bureau of Labor Statistics data for 2022 reflect that on an average day approximately 11 million people volunteered in some ways (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). Volunteers participate in formal and informal volunteering activities, either in person, online, or through a hybrid approach. The estimated dollar value of a volunteer hour steadily increased over the past decade. According to Independent Sector (2024), the current national average is approximately \$33.50 per hour,

¹ Roshan Nayak is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, & Community Education at the Virginia Tech, 175 West Campus Drive, Litton-Reaves Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061, roshanayak@vt.edu. ORCID# 0009-0009-7855-0102

² Cheryl Butterfield is a Communications Manager at the New Mexico Farm & Livestock Bureau, 2220 N Telshor Blvd, Las Cruces, New Mexico 88011, cherylb@nmflb.org.

³ Gemma Miner is a State 4-H Interim Associate Director at the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2801 2nd St, Davis, California 95618, gmminer@ucanr.edu.

⁴ Stacey MacArthur is a Professor in the Youth Programs Department at the Utah State University, 4931 Old Main Hill, Logan, Utah 84322, stacey.macarthur@usu.edu. ORCID# 0009-0009-4946-8441

⁵ Aditya Sinha is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Extension Education at Bihar Agricultural University, Sabour, India, 813 210, inc.aditya@gmail.com. ORCID# 0000-0002-5193-9048

⁶ Donna Schwarting is a former Assistant Professor, University of Idaho – Extension, State of Idaho 4-H Volunteer Relations, Moscow, Idaho 83844, donnaschwarting@gmail.com.

translating into billions of dollars in value contributed annually. Volunteers positively impact not just the organizations they serve to achieve their missions, but also the broader communities in which they live.

The Cooperative Extension System, including the 4-H Youth Development Program, depends profoundly on volunteers for program development, delivery, and outreach. Volunteers donate their time and expertise for different reasons and perceive their contributions in varied ways (Brown et al., 2018). 4-H volunteers contribute hundreds of thousands of service hours, playing vital roles in planning, leadership, and the delivery of educational experiences for youth. 4-H volunteers contribute to expand and maintain programs and offer support to youth through teaching and realizing program outcomes (Worker et al., 2020). Volunteers serve as club leaders, project leaders, and chaperones to offer their service to 4-H. A multistate study by O'Neil et al. (2021) found 4-H volunteers felt their service contributed to building stronger, healthier, and more connected communities. In their study, most respondents also reported increased civic engagement, such as participating in local decision-making and voicing their opinions on community issues. Involvement in the 4-H program inspired them to contribute to other organizations as well.

Beyond community impact, volunteers also benefit personally. In a study across 12 states, Grant et al. (2020) found that 4-H volunteers reported using the skills they developed through their service in other aspects of their lives. Volunteering in 4-H helps develop new skills and connections (Worker et al., 2020), including a strong sense of purpose and a desire to give back to the community (Winton et al., 2024). Despite these benefits, 4-H volunteer numbers saw a decline in recent years (National 4-H Council, 2016, 2018, as cited in Doss et al., 2022). The Bureau of Labor Statistics also reported a decline in volunteer rates from 2012 to 2022 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). Furthermore, according to AmeriCorps (2023), the national rate of formal volunteering through organizations declined to a historic low between 2019 and 2021. While participation began to rebound in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic (Schlachter, 2024), it has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. Phillips and Phillips (2010) predicted that nonprofit organizations would face growing competition not only for financial resources but also for volunteers' time.

Generation Z represents a significant yet largely untapped pool of potential volunteers, particularly for youth-serving organizations such as 4-H (Miner et al., 2025). Generation Z, or Gen Zers, are the individuals born between 1995 and 2010 (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kelly, 2023; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). The Volunteering and Civic Life in America's 2021 survey reveals that Generation X is most actively involved in formal volunteering compared to all other generations (AmeriCorps, 2023). In the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics data for 2022, the age groups 15-24 and 25-34 represent the lowest percentages of the population who volunteered on an average day (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). As demographic shifts continue, the need to actively engage and recruit Gen Zers into volunteer roles becomes increasingly important. It is essential to improve recruitment and retention efforts and better understand what motivates Gen Zers to begin and continue volunteering. Gaining insight into factors influencing volunteering decisions and preferences of this generation can help inform more effective strategies for recruitment and long-term retention within 4-H program.

Literature Review

A substantial body of literature has examined the factors that motivate relatively older individuals to engage in volunteer activities. For example, Finkelstein (2007) examined the relationship between volunteer satisfaction and six motivational domains derived from the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary et al., 1998) in a sample of older adult volunteers. Motivations such as altruistic values (e.g., helping the less fortunate), understanding (e.g., supporting a meaningful cause), social connections, and personal fulfillment were positively associated with satisfaction. Recently, Doss et al. (2022) investigated the motivations of adult volunteers in the Texas 4-H program using the VFI. Most participants in their study were aged 31-50 and were primarily motivated by values and understanding. Particularly, career-related motivations were not prominent in either study, likely due to the older age of participants, for whom career development was less relevant than younger cohorts such as Gen Z.

Similarly, Saitgalina (2018) examined the motivations that influence continued volunteering in professional associations. In her study, volunteers who were motivated to help others or volunteered for self-improvement were more likely to be satisfied with their volunteer experience with their organizations. Saitgalina found that societal satisfaction, particularly the sense of working together toward a common mission, was positively associated with the intention to continue volunteering. Another study by Cleveland and Thomson (2007) found that values, personal development, and concerns for the community were key motivating factors for volunteers. Approximately 75% of participants in the study strongly agreed that their personal values influenced their decision to volunteer. However, the study found no significant relationship between the ranking of motivational factors and the frequency or duration of volunteer engagement.

Fritz et al. (2000) earlier conducted a multistate study involving 4-H organizational and project leaders (volunteers), who had an average age of 43, to examine their preferred forms of recognition and their primary motivations for volunteering. The findings indicated that recognition was a significant motivating factor. However, their study did not investigate potential variations in recognition preferences and motivations across different age groups. In a subsequent study, Fritz et al. (2003) surveyed 4-H volunteers in Nebraska and found volunteers particularly valued personalized recognition or expressions of appreciation. Dolot (2018) examined the characteristics of Gen Zers using a sample of participants in Poland. Interestingly, despite their young age, the study found that members of Gen Z were already professionally active. The findings highlight the significance of communication for individuals in this age group, noting that Gen Zers value and actively expect feedback from those assigning tasks. Seemiller and Grace (2017) provided valuable insights into Gen Z students' learning preferences, approaches to community engagement, and career aspirations. Their study found that Gen Zers' preference for volunteering was primarily motivated by a desire to create social change and make a lasting impact on society. They also observed that students tend to favor observational and intrapersonal learning approaches, showing a preference for watching others perform tasks before engaging in hands-on activities, along with a strong inclination toward independent learning.

Cho et al. (2018) studied motivating factors that affected Gen Zers' attitudes toward volunteering. Their findings indicated that value, career, learning, and self-esteem were significant motivational drivers for Gen Z. Their study found a positive relationship between Gen Zers' attitude towards volunteering and learning opportunities and career development. The authors emphasize, "it is necessary to obtain a better understanding of Gen Z's motivations for volunteering that could be encouraged to sustain their volunteering positive attitudes associated with volunteering" (Cho et al., 2018, p. 15). Hyams (2012) examined the factors that motivate young adults to volunteer with youth organizations and found college students were more attracted toward volunteering with youth organizations. Her research identified career enhancement as a key motivating factor distinguishing young individuals from older volunteer groups. Limited scholarly attention has been given to understanding the factors that shape Gen Zers' motivation to participate in volunteer activities (Howard, 2016), including Gen Zers with 4-H experience. Through this multistate study, we seek to address the gap in the literature by identifying the factors that influence volunteering decisions, including social and core values, as well as volunteering preferences among a subsample of Gen Zers previously associated with 4-H. To recruit, train, and retain Gen Z volunteers, organizations must understand their characteristics, values, preferences, and perspectives, in addition to external factors that may differ from those influencing previous generations.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study adopts the application aspects of ISOTURE model of volunteer administration and development. ISOTURE is an acronym that encompasses the principal components of Identification (I), Selection (S), Orientation (O), Training (T), Utilization (U), Recognition (R), and Evaluation (E) (Boyce, 1971; Dolan, 1969). ISOTURE is one of the widely used and effective volunteer management frameworks in Extension (Denny, 2023; Windon et al., 2021), including 4-H (Diem,

2016; Pleskac, 2022; Toelle et al., 2021). Terry et al. (2011a, 2011b) produced literature describing each component of the ISOTURE model within the context of volunteer management in 4-H. A brief description of each component of the ISOTURE model is provided in Table 1. In this study, using data from Gen Zers with 4-H experience, we apply these findings within the ISOTURE framework to answer the research questions and outline implications to strengthen the 4-H volunteer management framework.

Table 1

Description of Each Component of the ISOTURE Model

<i>Identification</i>	This step helps organizations with the recruitment process by identifying potential volunteers with the appropriate competencies and attitudes specific to the volunteering roles. The identification practice is guided by the organizational needs specific to the activities. This process allows organization to assess the types of volunteers available.
<i>Selection</i>	After identifying the roles, the next step is selecting the right volunteers to fill those roles. This is a crucial part of ensuring a good match between the volunteers and the tasks at hand. During this process, organizations can clearly communicate the role's expectations and responsibilities, the skills and knowledge required, the available resources and support, and the expected time commitment.
<i>Orientation</i>	Orientation is the first formal step in introducing volunteers to the organization's expectations and their roles. It also provides an opportunity for volunteers to learn about the organization's history, mission, vision, values, culture, and norms.
<i>Training</i>	Organizations offer training and support to prepare volunteers for their roles. The focus stays on volunteers to acquire the required knowledge and skills to perform the assigned tasks. Volunteer training is typically tailored specific to the role and offered through a variety of delivery modes.
<i>Utilization</i>	Volunteers apply the acquired knowledge and skills to meaningful activities. The organization plays a key role by offering opportunities for contribution and creating a safe, supportive environment where volunteers can work toward shared goals. Through their involvement, volunteers often feel satisfied and accomplished, gain new skills, make connections, and build relationships through ongoing interaction and engagement.
<i>Recognition</i>	The organization recognizes volunteers for their contribution to advancing their mission. Volunteers are rewarded for the impact they are making based on their performance. As an ongoing process, rewarding and recognition help volunteers stay motivated and engaged.
<i>Evaluation</i>	The last process allows organizations to listen to their volunteers. Through evaluation, volunteers provide feedback on their role and experience, including learning and achieving their personal and professional goals. This process helps assess volunteer performance and the effectiveness of the volunteering system.

Purpose and Objectives

This multistate exploratory study focuses on Gen Z 4-H alumni, identifying key factors that influence their decisions to volunteer and examining how these factors relate to their social values, core beliefs, and preferences for volunteering opportunities. The following objectives guided the study:

1. Determine key factors influencing Gen Zers' decision to consider and continue volunteering with an organization and examine the relationships among those factors.
2. Examine how the emerged factors influencing volunteering decisions vary by individuals' preferences for short-, medium-, and long-term volunteering opportunities.
3. Organize individuals into groups based on the extent to which the emerged factors influence their volunteering decisions.

4. Determine the association between the factors influencing volunteering decisions and individuals' social and core values.

Methodology

Study Population

The data reported in this article are part of a larger multistate research effort examining factors that influence Gen Zers' volunteering decisions. A subset of descriptive findings from the study was published in Miner et al. (2025). This article, with its unique research questions and distinct analytical approach, applies dimensionality reduction techniques to extract key factors and examines how they vary across groups, volunteering preferences, social values, and other relevant variables. The study's target population consisted of Gen Z individuals aged 18 and older who had previously participated in 4-H and resided in the six participating Western region states: California, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. We created a survey sample frame using youth enrollment data obtained from the 4-H organizations for those born between 1995 and 2003 (at least 18 years old at the time of survey administration in 2021). The sample frame was based on the contacts accessible at the time of the planning phase of the study and it did not include all Gen Z 4-H alumni from the participating states.

Survey Development

A survey instrument was developed by a group of experts comprising 4-H volunteer management coordinators, youth development specialists, and educators to ensure content validity and alignment of questions with broader theoretical constructs. The survey included a set of 18 items based on the ISOTURE model and designed to capture a wide range of factors influencing an individual's decision to volunteer and continue to volunteer with an organization. The survey included questions focused on participants' volunteering history, preference for volunteering opportunities, and social/core values influencing their volunteering choices. We also collected demographic information, including gender, race and ethnicity, residence, marital status, parents' or guardians' highest education level, and where participants spent the majority of their time. The questions and corresponding scales are presented in Table 2. The total design method proposed by Dillman (2014) guided the development of the survey and data collection plan, which included selecting the data collection mode, emphasizing the study's usefulness to participants, ensuring a logical flow for a smooth experience, pilot testing to assess content and face validity, determining the internal consistency of the scales, and setting up reminders. The pilot testing improved the readability and relevance of the survey questions, helping reduce response error.

Table 2*Study Questions and Corresponding Scales*

Questions	Options	Scale Type
1. Are you volunteering now, or have you volunteered in the past?	[Yes, No]	Categorical
2. Which type of volunteer opportunity do you prefer?	[Short, Medium, Long-term]	Categorical
3. How much do these factors influence your decision when considering volunteering with an organization? (18 items)	[Not at all, Very little, A little bit, Moderately, Extremely]	Continuous
4. How much do these factors influence continuing to volunteer with an organization? (18 items)	[Not at all, Very little, A little bit, Moderately, Extremely]	Continuous
5. Are you more likely to volunteer for a cause or organization that you have a personal connection to? (e.g., 4-H, Breast Cancer walks, etc.)	[Yes, No]	Categorical
6. What social or core values influenced your choice to volunteer?	[Yes, No]	Categorical
7. Do you prefer to be invited personally to volunteer?	[Yes, No]	Categorical
8. Does your previous relationship/contact with the organization have a role in volunteering?	[Yes, No]	Categorical

Note. The scale ranging from “*Not at all*” = 1 to “*Extremely*” = 5 was treated as a continuous scale

Data Collection

We administered the surveys via email invitations and social media weblinks using a convenient (non-probability) sampling procedure. This mixed approach aimed to reduce coverage bias that can occur when only a single method of survey administration is used. We recognize several factors may have contributed to sample frame coverage errors and a low response rate. These include an incomplete or inaccessible contact list, possible spelling errors in email addresses, the use of parent or guardian emails, shared family emails used to enroll multiple youth, and inactive email addresses when youth age out of the program. We collected the data from July 2021 to February 2022. In total, 910 (n) individuals from the six states responded to the survey via email (93.7%) and weblinks (6.3%), which constituted the study sample. Participants represented all six states, with most from California (44.9%) and Idaho (31.8%). State-level response rates were roughly proportional to each state’s contact-list size in the sampling frame. The Institutional Review Boards of the University of California, the University of Idaho, and New Mexico State University approved the study protocol.

Data Analysis

We cleaned the dataset for survey previews, missing values, and incomplete responses prior to the analysis. The demographic details, which include gender, race/ethnicity, residence type of the survey respondents are presented in Table 3. The respondents comprised mostly females (75.1%) and 65.4% identified as White, with Hispanic or Latino individuals making up 8.5% of the sample. Residence data showed that nearly 53% were in rural areas or towns, with other respondents distributed across cities, suburbs, and farms. Regarding where respondents spent the majority of their time, the largest proportion (40.8%) were employed, followed by college students (24.3%). See Appendix A for additional details on respondents’ state, marital status, and their parents’ or guardians’ highest level of education.

Table 3*Demographic Distribution of the Respondents*

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	<i>f</i>	%
Gender	695		
Male		144	20.7
Female		522	75.1
Nonbinary		18	2.6
Gender Identity Not Listed		2	0.3
Prefer Not to Respond		9	1.3
Residence type	696		
Rural (non-farm residence / town under 10,000)		202	29
Town or City (10,000 - 50,000)		170	24.4
Suburb of a City over 50,000		67	9.6
Farm		137	19.7
City over 50,000		112	16.1
Other		8	1.1
Race/Ethnicity*	910		
Hispanic or Latino		77	8.5
American Indian or Alaskan Native		25	2.7
Asian		28	3.1
Black or African American		7	0.8
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander		7	0.8
White		595	65.4
Other		23	2.5
Majority of Time Spent*	910		
Employed		371	40.8
4-year college		221	24.3
Self-employed		72	7.9
2-year college		61	6.7
Grad school		38	4.2
High School		32	3.5
Vocational/Trade School		12	1.3
Military		9	1
Other		60	6.6

Note. *The total numbers or percentages do not add up to 910 or 100%, respectively, due to missing data.

We developed a data analysis plan based on the study objectives and conducted the analysis accordingly, following a series of key steps. First, we conducted descriptive statistical analyses (e.g., frequency distributions, cross-tabulations) to examine the distribution of participants' responses to the survey questions. We included only individuals with prior or current volunteer experience ($n = 837$, 92%) in the analysis, unless otherwise noted in the corresponding table. Second, to assess the suitability of the dataset for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), we conducted preliminary tests. Subsequently, we employed Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to determine the number of factors that should be extracted based on the Scree plot, followed by Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with Varimax rotation to extract the factors underlying items influencing volunteering decision-making. We grouped items according to their factor loadings, and summated scores were calculated for each extracted or emerged factor. Furthermore, we calculated Pearson correlation coefficients (r) to determine the strength of the relationships between the two sets of factors identified through EFA.

Third, to determine how the emerged factors varied across individuals' volunteering preferences, we conducted Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests followed by a *post-hoc* analysis of Hochberg's GT2 to compare the means assuming equal variance across the groups. Fourth, we conducted a K-means cluster analysis using the summated scores of the emerged factors influencing the initiation and continuation of volunteering. The analysis helped us create distinct clusters or groups: 1) Cluster I: Individuals who were relatively less influenced by the emerged factors, and 2) Cluster II: Individuals who were relatively more influenced by those factors. We calculated summated mean scores for each factor within each cluster and compared them to better understand these groups. We then used chi-square tests (χ^2) to examine differences between the clusters across several variables, including parental involvement in volunteering, the influence of social and core values, and the role of organizational contacts.

The survey participants who reported currently volunteering or had volunteered in the past with an organization rated two sets of questions (18 items in each set) related to their decision to "consider" and "continue" volunteering with an organization. Survey participants rated these items on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "not at all" (coded as 1) to "very much" (coded as 5). We assessed the reliability of the scales using Cronbach's alpha (Gliem & Gliem, 2003), which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.85 for items related to participants' decisions to begin volunteering with an organization, and 0.89 for items assessing their decisions to continue volunteering. We used EFA to reduce the dimension of the data and extract emerging factors from responses to the questions inquiring how participants rated the factors influencing their decisions regarding volunteering and their ongoing commitment to an organization. Prior to conducting EFA, we tested the dataset to determine its suitability for factor analysis. A significant Bartlett's test of sphericity and a favorable Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin of Sampling Adequacy (KMO-SA) value confirmed the appropriateness of the dataset for PCA, see Table 4.

Table 4

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and KMO-SA Results

Questions	Bartlett's test of Sphericity		KMO-SA
	Chi-Square	p-value	
1. Factors influencing decision while considering volunteering	2816.78	<.001	.87
2. Factors influencing decision to continue volunteering	3630.58	<.001	.88

Findings

Objective 1: Factors Influencing Gen Zers' Decision to Consider and Continue Volunteering

The PCA results produced five components explaining 58.1% of the variance in the dataset for factors influencing decisions while considering volunteering and four components explaining 59.5% of the variance in the data for factors influencing decisions to continue volunteering. Based on the results of PCA, we extracted a set of five and four factors from the two sets of items, respectively, using the PAF method with Varimax rotation. For each item, factor loadings were calculated across all emerged factors, and each item was assigned to the factor with the highest loading value. Items were grouped accordingly to represent the underlying factors influencing Gen Zers' decisions to begin or continue volunteering, as shown in Tables 5 and 6, respectively. Because this was an exploratory analysis, we did not exclude any items due to low factor loadings (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Five factors emerged from 18 items influencing an individual's decision while considering volunteering for an organization. They were: 1) Volunteer identification and selection (3-items); 2) Volunteer orientation (4-items); 3) Volunteer utilization and evaluation (4-items); 4) Personal values aligned (4-items); and 5) Personal readiness to commit (3-items). Summated means and standard deviations were calculated for grouped items under

each emerged factor. Of the five emerged factors, *personal values aligned* influenced an individual's decision the most with a mean (M) of 4.33 ($SD = .65$); see Table 5.

Table 5

Grouped Factor Influencing Decision while Considering Volunteering for an Organization

Factors and Underlying Questions/Items	Factor loading	n	M	SD
Factor 1: Volunteer Identification and Selection (3-items)				
1. How the organization recruits volunteers	0.46			
2. Experience with the organization	0.35	722	3.65	.84
3. Organization personally invites volunteers to participate	0.68			
Factor 2: Volunteer orientation (4-items)				
1. The influence of a friend who volunteers for the organization	0.34			
2. The amount of training required	0.58	721	3.66	.79
3. Additional optional training offered (e.g., skills, resume, interests, etc.)	0.51			
4. The time required to volunteer	0.62			
Factor 3: Volunteer utilization & evaluation (4-items)				
1. How the organization supports volunteers	0.42			
2. How the organization recognizes volunteers	0.79			
3. How the organization supervises and gives feedback to volunteers	0.71	721	3.65	.90
4. The collective power of the organization gives a platform for my voice to be heard about things that matter to me	0.39			
Factor 4: Personal values aligned (4-items)				
1. My personal commitment to the success of the organization	0.51			
2. How meaningful the volunteer experience is for me	0.55			
3. The mission and values of the organization align with my core values	0.60	721	4.33	.65
4. Mission of organization has a personal connection to me or someone close to me (heart disease, cancer, 4-H participation, etc.)	0.54			
Factor 5: Personal Readiness to Commit (3-items)				
1. Other life, family and personal commitments	0.49			
2. The volunteer habits of an adult who cares about you	0.74	720	3.67	.89
3. Sharing my expertise with the organization	0.49			

Note. Scale: Not at all [coded 1], Very little [coded 2], A little bit [coded 3], Moderately [coded 4], Extremely [coded 5]

On the other hand, four major factors emerged using the PAF technique from 18 items were supposed to influence Gen Zers' decision to continue to volunteer with an organization. They were: 1) Volunteer recruitment and utilization (6-items); 2) Volunteer support, recognition, and evaluation (4-items); 3) Personal value congruence (5-items); and 4) Commitment and time (3-items). Among the four factors, *personal value congruence* was the most influential ($M = 4.29$; $SD = .66$); see Table 6.

Table 6

Factor Influencing Decision to Continue Volunteering with an Organization

Factors and Underlying Questions/Items	Factor loading	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Factor 1: Volunteer recruitment & utilization (6-items)				
1. How the organization recruits volunteers	0.60			
2. Organization personally invites volunteers to participate	0.57			
3. The influence of a friend who volunteers for the organization	0.47			
4. The collective power of the organization gives a platform for my voice to be heard about things that matter to me	0.48	612	3.35	0.91
5. The volunteer habits of an adult who cares about you	0.76			
6. Sharing my expertise with the organization	0.47			
Factor 2: Volunteer support, recognition, & evaluation (4-items)				
1. How the organization supports volunteers	0.61			
2. Additional optional training offered (e.g., skills, resume, interests, etc.)	0.48	599	3.70	0.91
3. How the organization recognizes volunteers	0.70			
4. How the organization supervises and gives feedback to volunteers	0.74			
Factor 3: Personal value congruence (5-items)				
1. Experience with the organization	0.43			
2. My personal commitment to the success of the organization	0.64			
3. How meaningful the volunteer experience is for me	0.67	605	4.29	0.66
4. The mission and values of the organization align with my core values	0.69			
5. Mission of organization has a personal connection to me or someone close to me (heart disease, cancer, 4-H participation, etc.)	0.48			
Factor 4: Commitment & time (3-items)				
1. The amount of training required	0.61			
2. The time required to volunteer	0.69	594	3.83	0.83
3. Other life, family and personal commitments	0.42			

Note. Scale: Not at all [coded 1], Very little [coded 2], A little bit [coded 3], Moderately [coded 4], Extremely [coded 5]

We calculated Pearson correlation coefficients (*r*) to determine the relationship between these two sets of emerged factors influencing individuals' decisions to begin volunteering and their decisions to continue volunteering for an organization. The results showed significant positive relationships among these factors, with *r* values ranging from .28 to .75; see Table 7. The factor of *volunteer utilization and evaluation* was highly correlated with *volunteer support, recognition, and evaluation* ($r = .75, p < .001$). The results also showed a strong correlation ($r = .68$) between *personal values aligned* and *personal value congruence*.

Table 7

Correlation Between Factors Influencing Decision to Consider and Continue Volunteering

Factors influencing decision to consider volunteering	Factors influencing decisions to continue volunteering							
	Volunteer recruitment & utilization		Volunteer support, recognition, & evaluation		Personal value congruence		Commitment & time	
	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i> *	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i> *	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i> *	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i> *
Volunteer identification & selection	612	.51	599	.39	605	.36	594	.28
Volunteer orientation	610	.41	597	.48	603	.36	593	.61
Volunteer utilization & evaluation	611	.60	598	.75	604	.39	593	.33
Personal values aligned	611	.34	598	.32	604	.68	593	.33
Personal readiness to commit	611	.66	598	.39	604	.44	593	.43

Note. * $p < .001$

Objective 2: Variations in Factors Influencing Volunteering Decisions by Commitment Preferences

We performed ANOVA to determine the variation in the degree to which various factors influencing an individual's decision while considering volunteering differ across short-, medium-, and long-term volunteering preferences. We used a *post-hoc* analysis using Hochberg's GT2 to compare the means assuming equal variance and unequal group sizes. We calculated Omega (ω) values for fixed effects to determine the effect size of the mean comparisons for each factor. We repeated the statistical analyses for factors influencing one's decision to continue volunteering.

The results showed the factor of *volunteer utilization and evaluation* significantly varied among the individuals who preferred short-, medium-, and long-term volunteering opportunities, ($F(2, 696) = 9.43, p < .001, \omega = .15$), see Table 8. The results from the Hochberg analysis showed that the respondents who preferred long-term volunteering opportunities reported that the volunteer utilization and evaluation factors significantly influenced their decision to volunteer compared to those who preferred short- and medium-term opportunities. Similarly, the influence of alignment of personal values as a factor significantly varied among short-, medium-, and long-term volunteering preferences, $F(2, 696) = 10.11, p < .001, \omega = .16$. Further analysis showed that the participants who preferred medium and long-term volunteering opportunities reported that the alignment to personal values significantly influenced their volunteering preference more than those preferring short-term opportunities. Respondents who preferred long-term opportunities reported a significantly higher level of influence of *personal readiness to commit* to volunteering than those who preferred short-term opportunities. However, the influence of *volunteer identification and selection* and *orientation* did not vary significantly across preference levels.

Table 8

ANOVA Results for Factors Influencing Decisions When Considering Volunteering by Preference

Factors influencing choice to volunteer	Volunteering Preference									df	F	P value	ω
	Short-term			Medium-term			Long-term						
	f	M	SD	f	M	SD	f	M	SD				
Volunteer identification & selection	236	3.61	0.90	291	3.62	0.79	171	3.80	0.83	697	2.98	.051	0.08
Volunteer orientation	234	3.72	0.76	292	3.61	0.78	171	3.66	0.86	696	1.36	.256	0.03
Volunteer utilization & evaluation	235	3.49	0.94	291	3.62	0.85	171	3.88	0.88	696	9.43	<.001*	0.15
Personal values aligned	235	4.19	0.75	291	4.37	0.59	171	4.48	0.60	696	10.11	<.001*	0.16
Personal readiness to commit	235	3.55	0.92	290	3.66	0.86	171	3.85	0.89	695	5.73	.003*	0.11

Note. *<.05

The ANOVA results for the factors influencing the decision to continue volunteering and volunteer preferences are presented in Table 9. The results showed *personal value congruence* significantly varied among the three levels of volunteering preferences, $F(2, 585) = 5.82, p = .003, \omega = .13$. Hochberg's mean comparison results indicated that respondents who preferred long-term volunteering opportunities were more influenced by *personal value congruence* than those who preferred short-term volunteering opportunities. The other extracted factors: *volunteer recruitment and utilization; volunteer support, recognition, and evaluation; and commitment and time* did not vary significantly by volunteering preferences at the .05 significance level.

Table 9

ANOVA Results for Factors Influencing Decisions When Continuing Volunteering by Preferences

Factors influencing continue to volunteer	Volunteering Preference									df	F	P value	ω
	Short-term			Medium-term			Long-term						
	f	M	SD	f	M	SD	f	M	SD				
Volunteer recruitment & utilization	195	3.31	0.92	247	3.31	0.90	151	3.49	0.94	592	2.09	.125	0.06
Volunteer support, recognition, & evaluation	191	3.68	0.86	240	3.64	0.96	149	3.84	0.90	579	2.48	.085	0.07
Personal value congruence	191	4.19	0.71	244	4.29	0.65	151	4.44	0.59	585	5.82	.003*	0.13
Commitment & time	187	3.92	0.79	239	3.80	0.84	149	3.74	0.89	574	2.06	.128	0.06

Note. *<.05

Objective 3: Clustering of Volunteers Based on the Influence of Emerged Factors on Volunteering Decisions

We divided the survey respondents into two distinct groups based on the extent to which various factors that emerged (described under objective 1 and listed in Tables 5 and 6) affected individuals' volunteering decisions. We performed K-means cluster analysis to create the two groups, Cluster I ($f = 230$; 38.8%) and Cluster II ($f = 363$; 61.2%), using the means of nine emerged factors, see Table 10. The two clusters were significantly different at the .05 significance level for each of the nine factors affecting volunteering decisions, at the time of beginning (five factors) and continuing volunteering (four factors). Respondents in Cluster II reported being highly influenced by each of the nine factors with a higher mean value in comparison to the respondents in Cluster I, see Table 10. The largest mean difference was between the two clusters for the *volunteer utilization and evaluation* (M difference = 1.29, $t = 23.02$, $p < .001$), followed by the *volunteer recruitment and utilization* (M difference = 1.27, $t = 22.99$, $p < .001$).

Table 10

Means of Factors Influencing Volunteering Practices by Clusters (n=593)

Emerged Factors		Cluster I ($f=230$) M	Cluster II ($f=363$) M
Factors influencing the decision to consider volunteering	1. Volunteer identification and selection	3.16	4.0
	2. Volunteer orientation	3.22	3.96
	3. Volunteer utilization and evaluation	2.87	4.16
	4. Personal values aligned	4.03	4.57
	5. Personal readiness to commit	3.05	4.07
Factors influencing the decision to continue volunteering	1. Volunteer recruitment and utilization	2.58	3.85
	2. Volunteer support, recognition, evaluation	2.95	4.17
	3. Personal value congruence	3.92	4.54
	4. Commitment and time	3.33	4.14

The chi-square test of independence showed no significant association between the clusters and volunteer preference type (short-, medium-, and long-term). In other words, among the Gen Z respondents who were currently volunteering or had volunteered with an organization in the past, the degree to which various factors influenced their volunteering decisions to start or continue volunteering was independent of their preferences for volunteering duration. The results also indicated that the clusters were independent of parental or guardian involvement in volunteering. For both current and past volunteers, we did not find their parents' or guardians' involvement in volunteering to be significantly associated with the degree to which various factors influenced their volunteering decisions.

Objective 4: Associations between Factors Influencing Volunteering Decisions and Individuals' Social and Core Values

The survey respondents indicated the social and core values that influenced their choice to volunteer. The majority of respondents reported education ($n = 577$, 63.4%), followed by building community ($n = 563$, 61.9%), as the major values influencing their choice to volunteer. On the other hand, we found patriotism and social justice to be the least influential social values affecting their volunteering decisions. Appendix A presents the complete list of social and core values ranked from highest to lowest. Chi-square tests of associations were performed to examine whether Clusters I and II were statistically associated with any of the social core values. The results showed that only *education*, *building community*, and *family importance* were significantly associated with the clusters, see Table 11. Respondents who were

highly influenced by factors affecting decisions to consider or continue volunteering with an organization were also most likely to be influenced by education ($\chi^2 = 5.56, p <.05$), building community ($\chi^2 = 6.37, p <.05$), and family importance ($\chi^2 = 8.09, p <.05$).

We further examined the association between cluster membership and two variables: personal invitation to volunteer and previous relationship with the organization. Results showed individuals in Cluster I were less likely to prefer personal invitations to volunteer and were also less likely to have had previous relationships or contact with the organization in their volunteering role. Nearly 84% of respondents (589 out of 698) reported they were more likely to volunteer for a cause or organization to which they had a personal connection.

Table 11

Test of Associations between Factor-based Clusters and Social or Core Values (n = 593)

Social/Core Value		Clusters I	Clusters II	Chi-Square Value	p-value*
		Low-Scoring	High-Scoring		
Education	Yes	158	281	5.56	.018
	No	72	82		
Building community	Yes	153	276	6.37	.012
	No	77	87		
Family importance	Yes	96	195	8.09	.004
	No	134	168		
Total		230	363		

Note. * $<.05$

Discussion

This multistate exploratory study provides crucial insights for 4-H and similar youth development organizations seeking to recruit, engage, and retain Gen Z volunteers. We extracted two sets of factors influencing the initial decision to volunteer and the decision to continue volunteering among Gen Zers with prior affiliation to 4-H. Among those factors, *personal values aligned* and *personal value congruence* emerged as the most significant influences across both stages. These two factors underscore the importance of organizational missions resonating with volunteers’ personal core values and connections, which aligns with the findings of Rice and Potts (2024). The factors influencing Gen Zers’ decisions to start volunteering are positively correlated with the factors influencing their decisions to continue, with the strongest link between *volunteer utilization and evaluation* at the consideration stage and *support, recognition, and evaluation* at the continuation stage. Furthermore, the positive correlations between initial and continued volunteering factors suggest a cohesive relationship in which effective recruitment, support, and value alignment strategies not only attract but also retain committed volunteers.

Nuance emerges when examining short-, medium-, and long-term volunteering preferences among Gen Z 4-H alumni, as not all emerging factors influencing volunteering decisions vary significantly across these preference groups. However, among the factors that do show significant variation, a trend seems to emerge showing the more individuals are motivated by these factors, the longer their preferred duration of volunteering. Personal values stand out as the only factor that varies significantly across all levels of volunteering preference, both when individuals consider starting and when they continue volunteering, which further emphasizes the significance that personal values play in influencing personal commitment to volunteering. In our 4-H alumni sample, Gen Zers who are strongly driven by their personal values while considering and even continuing are more likely to prefer long-term volunteer opportunities with an

organization. This trend could be studied aligning with Seemiller and Grace's (2017) observation, "community engagement opportunities that make a lasting impact on an underlying societal problem appeal more to Gen Z students than do short-term volunteer experiences that address the symptoms of that problem" (p. 23). Our study results also identify two additional factors *volunteer utilization and evaluation* and *personal readiness to commit* significantly vary among volunteering preferences related to duration. These insights suggest that deeper personal investment and alignment with organizational values are essential for long-term volunteer retention.

Cluster analysis further clarified heterogeneity in the survey data. Our purpose in clustering individuals with prior volunteering experience was twofold: first, to classify participants into groups based on the extent to which identified factors influenced their volunteering decisions, one group being highly influenced and the other relatively less so; and second, to examine how these two groups differ in their demographic characteristics and relate to their social and core values. Interestingly, our study findings revealed that grouping individuals based on the degree to which various factors influenced their volunteering decisions did not significantly differ by gender, race, or ethnicity. Furthermore, the extent to which different factors influenced participants' volunteering decisions was independent of participants' parental or guardian involvement in volunteering. Instead, it was closely associated with variables such as receiving a personal invitation to volunteer and having a previous relationship or contact with the organization; moreover, nearly 84% said a personal connection to the cause makes them more likely to volunteer. In short, Gen Z 4-H alumni who said these factors had less influence on their decision to start or continue volunteering were also less likely to prefer a personal invitation and less likely to have prior volunteer contact with the organization.

We further studied these clusters in relationship to individuals' social and core values affecting their volunteer choices. Interestingly, only three out of the 11 listed social and core value items (see Table 16 in Appendix A) were found to be significantly associated with these clusters. Not only did education and building community emerge as the top-ranked values influencing 4-H alumni's decisions to volunteer (Miner et al., 2025), they were also significantly linked to cluster membership. Values tied to stewardship of resources, patriotism, and social justice/rights were less influential. Although quality of life and quality of service ranked third and fifth, respectively, among the social and core values, they were not associated with cluster membership. In short, Gen Z 4-H alumni who place a high value on education, community-building, and family are more likely to be in the cluster that is strongly affected by the key factors shaping volunteering decisions. Accordingly, 4-H should seek Gen Z volunteers whose values align with the program and invite them personally, leveraging existing relationships when possible.

Implications

Grounded in the findings of this multistate study, Table 12 presents ISOTURE-aligned strategies to help 4-H and other youth-serving organizations engage Gen Z volunteers and enhance volunteer experiences. The implications drawn from our findings are consistent with those identified by Arnold et al. (2009), particularly in the areas of volunteer training, recognition, and evaluation. By aligning the volunteer program with the values, motivations, and preferences of this generation, organizations like 4-H can foster long-term commitment and impact in their communities. The findings from this multistate study offer a robust, data-driven foundation for organizations to refine and prioritize their volunteer engagement strategies. By prioritizing value-based recruitment, enhancing volunteer support systems, and tailoring opportunities based on commitment levels, organizations can effectively attract and retain volunteers, particularly from the Gen Z cohort.

Table 12

ISOTURE-Aligned Strategies to Engage Gen Z Volunteers in 4-H

<i>Identification</i>	Gen Z 4-H alumni appear to be far more likely to volunteer for causes with a personal connection, and personal value alignment is the strongest influence when considering and continuing to volunteer. Therefore, identifying potential volunteers among Gen Z should involve understanding their interests, values, and skills. It is essential to recognize what motivates them to volunteer, whether it is a passion for a specific cause, a desire for social connection, or personal growth. By understanding these factors, 4-H programs can target their recruitment and retention efforts more effectively.
<i>Selection</i>	Prior relationships and personal invitations influence volunteering decisions. Prioritizing personalized invites from 4-H club leaders or alumni could contribute to volunteer selection. Once potential volunteers are identified, organizations can use a selection process to match individuals with roles that align with their skills, interests, and values. This ensures that the volunteers are engaged in activities that resonate with them, increasing their commitment and satisfaction.
<i>Orientation</i>	Providing a comprehensive orientation process is crucial for Gen Z, as they appreciate clear guidelines and structure. 4-H program orientation sessions should introduce volunteers to the organization's mission, values, and expectations, while also addressing any questions or concerns they may have. This contributes to setting the stage for a positive volunteer experience.
<i>Training</i>	The study findings show Gen Z 4-H alumni value skill development and personal growth, but time and commitment constraints shape their volunteering decisions. 4-H should offer training programs to teach the necessary skills for their volunteer roles and provide opportunities to acquire new competencies. Keeping training sessions short, skill-focused, and accessible can make the experience more fulfilling and help volunteers see the tangible benefits of their service.
<i>Utilization</i>	Assigning meaningful tasks and responsibilities to Gen Z volunteers in 4-H is vital, especially for those who prefer long-term volunteer opportunities. They want to see that their contributions have a real impact on 4-H and the communities it serves. 4-H can keep them engaged and committed by giving them roles aligned with their skills and interests.
<i>Recognition</i>	The study results show that Gen Z 4-H alumni with volunteer experience appreciate recognition for their efforts. Organizations should implement recognition programs that highlight the contributions and achievements of volunteers. This can include social media shout-outs, awards, or other forms of recognition that spotlight contributions tied to their values and reinforce their sense of belonging and motivation to continue volunteering.
<i>Evaluation</i>	Regularly assessing the 4-H volunteer program's effectiveness and soliciting feedback from volunteers are essential. Factors influencing volunteering consideration and continuation are correlated. Therefore, a feedback loop should be integrated into the volunteer program to help 4-H make improvements, adapt to changing needs, and demonstrate that they value volunteers' input. It also provides an opportunity to address any concerns or issues that arise.

Study Limitations

The study design is susceptible to selection and sampling biases. Because our convenience-based sampling frame included Gen Z participants aged 18 or older, the findings may not generalize beyond this group. The inclusion of individuals with prior involvement in 4-H might have introduced sampling bias, further limiting the generalizability of the study findings beyond the 4-H Gen Z alumni subpopulation. We mainly relied on 4-H enrollment databases to create an email-based sampling frame, and the sample's

demographic distribution may not mirror the overall 4-H enrollment or the U.S. population. As this frame was incomplete, we used two survey distribution channels: direct emails to known contacts and shareable web links. Because the survey links could be forwarded and the total number of invitations could not be enumerated, we were unable to compute a response rate, limiting our ability to assess nonresponse bias.

Potential sources of survey coverage and sample frame error included incorrect email addresses, youth using their parents' or guardians' email addresses at the time of enrollment, which were no longer active or being accessed, and frequent changes in primary email contacts. These factors likely contributed to the low response rate. We observed a comparable trend related to low response rates in a similar study that relied on a 4-H alumni database (Worker et al., 2025). Study participants' prior engagement in 4-H community service projects or other volunteering experiences may have influenced their responses. We recognize that researchers who plan to adopt items related to emerging factors influencing volunteering decisions may observe lower Cronbach's alpha values in their samples. However, expanding each set of items with additional indicators will likely improve scale reliability and help better capture the underlying latent constructs (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). Replication using a broader, randomized sample of Gen Z across all age groups and demographic segments is recommended to reduce selection bias and strengthen generalizability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our study findings reveal an interconnected nature of factors influencing volunteering decisions and provide critical insights into understanding the volunteering preferences of Gen Z 4-H alumni, emphasizing the importance of personal connection, social values, and the varying impact of factors on volunteering decisions. Organizations like 4-H should effectively articulate their mission to newly joined volunteers and the training programs that focus on skill development and practical applications should be seen as personally valuable by Gen Zers. 4-H can utilize findings from the study to strategically direct their efforts in recruiting Gen Zers and foster long-term volunteer engagement. Targeted strategies should also consider Gen Z's career aspirations, desire for social capital, and the importance of emotional and relational recognitions and rewards. 4-H in the modern age should target college students to volunteer with programming (Winton et al., 2024) by boosting volunteer motivation and offering intangible incentives, such as recognition and personal fulfillment over expensive material rewards (Phillips & Phillips, 2010). Volunteers gain mastery through training in 4-H programs, which is positively related to the breadth of the training (Sarver et al., 2024). There is a need for volunteer training programs designed to promote inclusion and to create a safe environment for the onboarding process for young people. The key to organizational success in recruiting and retaining volunteers is building positive relationships and making volunteers feel valued within the organization (Arnold et al., 2009). 4-H should embed clear stories about education, community, and family impact into role descriptions and other communications. Furthermore, 4-H should maintain an alumni pipeline, engage alumni, club leaders, and peers to personally invite Gen Z volunteers, and continue designing meaningful roles for its volunteers. Additionally, factors that discourage Gen Zers from volunteering in 4-H, including those that influence volunteer turnover intentions (Miner et al., 2025; Winton et al., 2024), should be studied further.

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Appendix A

Table 13

Distribution of Respondents by Participating States (n=909)

Participating states	<i>f</i>	%
California	408	44.9
Idaho	289	31.8
New Mexico	131	14.4
Colorado	46	5.1
Utah	23	2.5
Wyoming	12	1.3

Table 14

Highest Level of Education of your Parent(S)/Guardian? (n=673)

Education	<i>f</i>	%
High School/GED	126	18.7
Vocational/Trade	26	3.9
2-year college	86	12.8
4-year college	248	36.8
Grad school	187	27.8

Table 15

Are You More Likely to Volunteer for a Cause or Organization That You Have a Personal Connection To? (e.g., 4-H, Breast Cancer walks, etc.) (n=698)

Choice	<i>f</i>	%
Yes	589	84.4
Maybe	90	12.9
No	19	2.7

Table 16

Social/Core Values Influencing the Choice to Volunteer in Highest to Lowest Order (n=910)

Social or core values	<i>f</i>	%*
1. Education	577	63.4
2. Building community	563	61.9
3. Quality of life	426	46.8
4. Family importance	388	42.6
5. Quality of service	302	33.2
6. Religious/spiritual	243	26.7
7. Protecting the vulnerable	233	25.6
8. Sustainability	225	24.7
9. Stewardship of resources	203	22.3
10. Patriotism	194	21.3
11. Social justice/rights	178	19.6

Note. *Represents percentage of total number of respondents (source: Miner et al., 2025)

Table 17*Do You Prefer to Be Invited Personally to Volunteer? (n=699)*

Options	<i>f</i>	%
Yes	229	32.8
Sort of	320	45.8
No	150	21.5

Table 18*Does Your Previous Relationship/Contact with the Organization Have a Role in Volunteering? (n=699)*

Options	<i>f</i>	%
Yes	470	67.2
Sort of	164	23.5
No	65	9.3