

Article

Exploring Motivations and Benefits of Volunteering: The Perspectives of High School Students in Selected Australian Islamic Schools

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Abstract: Substantial research in educational and non-educational contexts demonstrates the importance and value of volunteering broadly and among young people specifically. However, there is no research that explores volunteering from the perspectives of students in Australian Islamic schools. To fill this gap, this paper explores the motivations for, and benefits of, volunteering from the perspectives of high school students in three Australian Islamic schools (AIS). The research utilised a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore the lived experience of these students vis-à-vis volunteering. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 (13 male and 13 female) high school students (HSS) (year 10 to 12) at three AIS across three states. The findings demonstrate that students were motivated to volunteer because of intrinsic religious reasons, self-satisfaction and development, altruism, knowledge and skill-based enhancement, social motives, employment-based motives, and inspiring parents' motive. The benefits include individual and societal development, enhanced involvement and belonging within mainstream society, and countering Islamophobia.

Keywords: Australian Islamic schools; high school students; volunteering; motivation; religion; education; Islamophobia



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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on understanding the motivations for and benefits of volunteering from the perspective of 26 high school students (HSS) at three (3) Australian Islamic schools (AIS). Australian Islamic schools were first established in 1983 (Nathie 2021) when Muslim parents began to look for an alternative education system that could protect their children's religious identity and tradition (Abdalla et al. 2018; Memon 2013). Australian Islamic schools are a member of the independent schools sector and “operate within the bounds of state and territory and Australian government legislation” including the curriculum (ISA 2022). There are 1187 Australian independent schools including 47 Islamic schools with about 40,561 full-time students (ISA 2022).

Islamic schools have passed the “establishment” and “integration” phases and several scholars have called for “renewal” of Islamic schools (Abdalla et al. 2018; Memon et al. 2021). The meaning of this renewal (Arabic—*tajdid*) is a “recognition of a rich Islamic educational heritage that responds to the demands of time and place” and that “can be subjected to examination and re-examination of what is to be taught, why and how it should be taught”, etc., in ways that can bridge the “significant disconnect between Islamic educational theory and Islamic schooling practice towards articulating and enacting a model of educational practice that is distinctly “Islamic” (Abdalla et al. 2022).

Given the strong emphasis of Islam on charity, compassion and helping others, coupled with the articulated (stated) vision of many Islamic schools to produce active Muslim citizens, a focus on volunteering seems to be a necessary part of the renewal process. However, there is paucity of research on volunteering in Islamic schools in Western nations and Australia specifically. The paper aims to fill this gap through a qualitative methodology

and uses six motivational functions of Clary et al. (1998) as a theoretical framework. The structure of the paper is as follows: the literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, limitations, and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Meaning of Volunteering

The definition of volunteering changes to reflect the evolving ways volunteers are contributing to the society (Healey 2020). Volunteering is viewed as “time” offered for the public good (Volunteering Australia 2005; Wilson and Musick 1997) by or to individuals or organisations (Millette and Gagné 2008; Wilson and Musick 1997) willingly without materialistic reward (Kragt and Holtrop 2019) in order to shape community inclusion (Wilson 2000). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as cited in Walsh and Black (2015) defines volunteering as “the provision of unpaid help willingly undertaken in the form of time, service or skills, to an organisation or group” (p. 9). Volunteering Australia as quoted by Healey (2020) perceive volunteering to be the “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain” (p. 3). Despite the ambiguity in defining volunteering, this research will use the description of volunteering by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018), that is:

a wide range of activities, including formal activities (which take place within organisations, institutions and agencies) and informal activities (which take place outside the context of a formal organisation and structured volunteering activities). Volunteering can also include activism, donated employee time, some concept of reciprocity (including reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses), on-line volunteering, spontaneous volunteering (such as community response to an emergency), corporate volunteering and social enterprise.

2.2. The Concept of Volunteering in Islam

Considering the educational Islamic context of this study, it is crucial to explain the way in which volunteering is perceived from an Islamic perspective. While the value of volunteering is significantly highlighted in all religions (Muukkonen 2020), volunteering is seen as a form of charity (*sadaqa*) (Sahri et al. 2016). Volunteering is a “fundamental principal of Islamic ethics and Islamic practice” (Keskin and Yucel 2020, p. 22) and refers to every action a person performs to help or benefit others (including animals) seeking reward from God only (Peucker and Kayikci 2020; Sahri et al. 2016). More specifically, volunteering in Islam is directly attached to *‘ibadah* (worship) where Muslims seek to purify their souls and validate their life practice (Sahri et al. 2016). To understand the connection between volunteering and *‘ibadah*, “the philosophy of *ibadah* in Islam [...] can be in a form of social interventions, physical helps and facilitates, counselling, teaching or any intensive efforts towards social contributions” (p. 222). Clearly, Islam promotes universal communities based on treating individuals equally regardless of their belief, complexion or appearance (Laher and Khan 2011). This approach of inclusivity while volunteering is well presented in the Qur’an, starting from the home and reaching the wider community:

They ask thee what they should spend (In charity). Say: Whatever ye spend that is good, is for parents and kindred and orphans and those in want and for wayfarers. And whatever ye do that is good,—(Allah) knows it well” (Qur’an, 2:215).

Volunteering helps nurture the sense of *iman* (belief) and *taqwa* (piety) among Muslims and invigorates them to be civically responsible and actively contribute to their wider society (Cebecioglu 2019).

2.3. Motivation for and Benefits of Volunteering

There are several motivations underlying the engagement of young people in volunteering (McAteer et al. 2021). Previous research reported that young people are motivated to volunteer to acquire different types of “marketable skills” (Thoits 2021), because of

recognising the value of volunteering (Musick and Wilson 2007), to fulfil religious purpose (Hyassat et al. 2016), for altruistic reasons to help others in need, to nurture personal growth and to attain self-enhancement (Thoits 2021). Furthermore, the need to serve and support the community and to gain new sets of skills was reported (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2008).

Parents can be a source of motivation for young people to volunteer (Eccles and Barber 1999; Ellis 2003; Ramaekers et al. 2021; White 2021) and families can influence the civic development and engagement of their children (Wilkenfeld et al. 2010). White (2021) notes that children are likely inclined to participate in volunteering activities if they grow observing their parents' participation and appreciation of humanitarian values. In addition, adolescents with active volunteering parents are likely to follow their parents' steps and volunteer (Quaranta and Dotti Sani 2016; Ramaekers et al. 2021).

Volunteering is often motivated by altruism (Olsen et al. 2020) which involves contributing time, energy, and resources solely to help others (Gage and Thapa 2012). Volunteers may also want to show empathy for those in need (Dionigi et al. 2020) and reduce feeling the guilt for being more providential than others (Clary et al. 1998; Martin et al. 2019). This, in turn, can help the volunteer to learn empathy and avoid selfishness (Andreoni et al. 2017).

Volunteering can also help individuals gain new skills and knowledge (Peucker and Kayikci 2020). Volunteers can learn communication, social, leadership, interpersonal skills and teamworking skills (Dempsey-Brench and Shantz 2021; Francis 2011) and broaden their understanding of other cultures and religions (Jardim and Marques da Silva 2018). Further, young people may also use volunteering to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses (Butt et al. 2017).

Other research highlighted the connection between wellbeing and volunteering participation (Coventry et al. 2019; Mao and Normand 2022). It was noted that people volunteer to minimise their depression feelings and mental health issues, thus boosting their self/life satisfaction (Lawton et al. 2020).

Young people tend to volunteer to enhance future employability (Gage and Thapa 2012) by having the opportunity to gain professional skills (Dempsey-Brench and Shantz 2021) and explore various job options (Francis 2011; Thoits 2021). Young people believe that volunteering experiences can improve their resumes and make them more attractive to employers (Butt et al. 2017; Cristillo 2009).

Young people volunteer for social reasons, such as expanding their social network and making new friends (Martin et al. 2019; Stuart et al. 2020) by exposing them to new ideas and community groups (Henderson et al. 2013). Adolescents may be attracted to volunteering to strengthen friendship bonds (Bang et al. 2020), improve social interaction and expand their social network through volunteering which may increase their likelihood to volunteer more (McGinley et al. 2010). Further, developing political and social awareness for better citizenship practice also motivates young people to sustain their active volunteering participation after school (Martin et al. 2019).

Religious beliefs are a significant motivator for volunteering due to the emphasis on giving back (Petrovic et al. 2018), and religious individuals tend to volunteer more frequently than non-religious individuals (Sallam et al. 2018; Yanisch 2021). Volunteering is viewed as a charitable act driven by a sense of religious responsibility to help others (Hyassat et al. 2016; Kumar 2018). In the US, religious institutions and worship places have a higher rate of volunteering engagement among adolescents (65%) compared to schools (40%) (Sundeen and Raskoff 1994).

The previous backdrop on the motivational factors for volunteering has benefited from Clary et al. (1998) who proposed six motivational functions that may serve people's diverse motivations for volunteering. Clary et al. (1998, pp. 1517–18) argued that people may be inclined to volunteer to:

1. "express values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns";
2. gain understanding by earning different patterns of knowledge, experiences and skills;

3. enhance different psychological functions including self-satisfaction, self-confidence, self-worth and self-esteem;
4. attain essential skills that may predict future career or boost existing skills;
5. build a social and friendship network by interacting with others favorably;
6. discipline oneself and feel the compassion for those who are less fortunate or to simply minimise negative feelings of the self—a protective function.

Volunteering has positive effects on people, organisations and societies and can improve health, social welfare, justice, education and social inclusion (Cloke et al. 2007; Gray and Stevenson 2020; Holdsworth 2010; Luque-Suárez et al. 2021; Rochester 2006). Furthermore, volunteering can also contribute to fighting exclusion, activating citizenship, and enhancing community cohesion (Butt et al. 2017; Piper and Piper 2000). Additionally, volunteering provides opportunities to fight depression, enhance mental and physical well-being (Bang et al. 2020), improve confidence (Bang et al. 2020), self-esteem (Kulik 2017), self and life satisfaction (Lawton et al. 2020).

Volunteering can positively impact young people's social wellbeing (Magnani and Zhu 2018), quality of life (Mao and Normand 2022), expand their knowledge on the surrounding world (Jardim and Marques da Silva 2018) and increase their intention to volunteer later in their lives (Hart et al. 2007).

Moving forward, volunteering helps young people develop civic responsibilities (Henderson et al. 2013; Roose and Harris 2015), improve academic achievement and future education (Durlak et al. 2010) and enhance their resumes (Holdsworth 2010; Tansey and Gonzalez-Perez 2006).

2.4. Volunteering in Faith-Based Schools

The educational context plays a vital role in constructing and nurturing volunteering (Wu and Tsai 2018), and education is a key motive among youth towards volunteering (Brown et al. 2003; Muir et al. 2009). In the last two decades, volunteering has been supported within educational institutions around the world with youth groups being the most encouraged to engage in volunteering (Egerton 2002; Henderson et al. 2013). Spring et al. (2006) noted that volunteering has become progressively integrated into educational curriculum; thus, a well-prepared educational institution can create an inviting atmosphere for young volunteers. Therefore, educational institutions have embedded service-learning programs in their courses and have been effectively committed to encouraging students to be involved in some types of volunteering (Cammack and Melton 2021; Cohen and Kinsey 1993; Markus et al. 1993; O'Brien 1993). Furthermore, educational institutions can motivate and promote volunteering through professional training requirements and extracurricular activities and clubs (Moorfoot et al. 2015; Sundeen and Raskoff 1994). In addition, student volunteering can be expanded off campus to the wider society to construct a bridge between schools, universities and the wider community which may contribute to predict future volunteering among students (Finlay and Murray 2005; Moorfoot et al. 2015; Smith et al. 2010). This backdrop is seamlessly extending this relationship between volunteering and religiosity to faith-based schools or schools with faith emphasis.

Educational and religious institutions promote volunteering to create a productive, equitable and more inclusive society (Hill and den Dulk 2013). This makes religion and education primary factors in informing volunteering in the context of schools (Hill and den Dulk 2013; Pennings et al. 2011; Wolf 2007). Therefore, the type of school can play different roles in boosting civic engagement and volunteering among students and may predict sustainable volunteering after school (Hill and den Dulk 2013; Musick and Wilson 2007). A growing body of research has investigated that the context of a school plays an active role in adolescence engagement in volunteering during their school life (Hill and den Dulk 2013). School context is seemingly associated with developing positive community and desirable educational outcomes (Pennings et al. 2011; Rymarz 2012). Pennings et al. (2011) articulated that students who attended schools with faith emphasis are more likely to be involved in volunteering activities. For example, students who received their education

in Protestant schools were more inclined to volunteer and be involved in civic activities (Henderson et al. 2013; Wilson and Musick 1999). These results are consistent with other research which reported that students who attend Catholic and Protestant schools display a higher rate of volunteering and more desire to continue volunteering after high school compared to students who attend non-Catholic or Protestant schools (Hill and den Dulk 2013; McLellan and Youniss 2003). Further, Pennings et al. (2011) discovered that religious emphasis at school drives student volunteering participation. Consequently, education and religion are listed above civic engagement in predicting different forms of participation in public life, and their impact is described to be permanent; moreover, engagement in civic activities can inform sustainability to adulthood (Dudley and Gitelson 2002; Hill and den Dulk 2013). However, other existing literature reports that young people volunteer because of the charitable nature and spiritual reward, whether within faith-based or non-faith-based schools (Brown et al. 2019; Dekker and Halman 2003; Fényes et al. 2021; Healey 2020; Hustinx et al. 2014). From here, adolescents appear to gravitate to volunteering mostly within educational and religious or faith-based settings (worship places or faith based-schools) (Aijazi and Angeles 2014; Dudley and Gitelson 2002; Wald and Wilcox 2006), showing strong religious motive to contribute to their community and altruistically help others in need (Gibson 2008). In turn, no literature studied student volunteering in Australian Islamic schools.

2.5. Volunteering in Islamic schools

The increasing demand of Muslim parents for an educational system that can protect children's Islamic identity, values and faith has contributed to the emergence of Islamic schools in Western countries (Abdalla et al. 2018; Brifkani 2021). Nowadays, Western countries are witnessing an increase in the number of Islamic schools with 300 schools in the USA (Brifkani 2021), 152 schools in the UK (Hammad and Shah 2019) and 49 schools in Australia (Selim and Abdalla 2022).

Although one can speculate that student volunteering exists in Islamic schools in Western space, there is a scarcity of empirical research that explores the phenomenon in this context. Research that explored student volunteering in the US Islamic schools is rare. For example, Cristillo (2009) notes that American Islamic schools encourage students to be civically involved with their community. Some schools have made completing certain hours of serving community a requirement for graduation. Cristillo (2008, 2009) further reports variant participation of students in volunteering activities including but not limited to helping at local hospitals, governments, sport clubs, organisations and different community service programs. Students also participated in initiatives that aim to expand their help to international space. For example, the "Key Club",¹ which is concerned to help countries suffering crisis. Similarly, Shaw (2005) emphasized that US Islamic schools influence student volunteering participation through adopting Islamic ethos that encourages charitable deeds and volunteering to help those who are vulnerable and needy.

Clearly, there is a gap in the literature focusing on volunteering from the perspectives of students in Islamic schools. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the motivational factors for and benefits of volunteering from the perspectives of HSS at AIS.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study is concerned with the "interpretation of reality" (Rasid et al. 2021), and thus uses a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of participants (Creswell and Poth 2016; Ellis 2016). The phenomenological approach is employed to explore the motivational factors for volunteering and its benefits for HSS from selected AIS. To achieve this aim, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. The thematic analysis of the gathered data distinctively provided the bona fide and the genuine reasons to stimulate their inclination to volunteer.

3.1. This Study

Robust research investigated the topic of volunteerism including motivations, benefits, challenges and types of volunteering activities and definition. However, little research considered examining the motivational factors among the cohort of high school students in secular schools broadly with very limited research about student volunteering in Islamic schools in the Western context. Yet, studying the phenomenon of student volunteering in the Australian Islamic schools in general and specifically the motivational factors behind students volunteering remains to be unfolded. This phenomenological study endeavored to explore the learner voice on the motivational factors leading to volunteerism. The interviews produced in-depth understanding on what motivates HSS at AIS to volunteer within their respective school, Muslim community and the plural Australian community. This study is navigated by the following research question: What are the key motivational factors for volunteering among HSS at AIS?

3.2. Participating Schools

High school students were selected from three Islamic schools across the three Australian states of New South Wales (NSW), Victoria (VIC) and South Australia (SA). The three schools consisted of almost similar profiles as they belonged to the same sector, have the same school type, the year range of students and they are all co-educational. All schools were ethnically mixed. Participating schools are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participating schools (2020).

Description	School A	School B	School C
School sector	Non-government	Non-government	Non-government
School type	Co-educational	Co-educational	Co-educational
Year range	R–12	Prep–12	K–12
Location	Adelaide	Melbourne	Sydney
Student enrolment	482	994	2834

3.3. Participants

Purposeful or purposive sampling and phenomenological research are married suitably. Therefore, purposive sampling was employed in this study to recruit participants who have volunteering experience (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007) or possess sound knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al. 2015). Purposive sampling is suitable for small participant groups (Tongco 2007) and is a common technique to use with phenomenological research (Rasid et al. 2021). This technique was employed to recruit 26 HSS enrolled in years 10 to 12 in an Islamic school in Australia (see Tables 2 and 3). Students gender was equally distributed, see Table 4. Those participants were selected because they have participated in volunteering activities and have the characteristics needed for the study (Palinkas et al. 2015): to be enrolled in an Islamic school in grade 10, 11 and 12. A total of 26 interviews were conducted with selected students to investigate the motives behind their volunteering involvement and ways it aligns or differs from the mainstream motivational factors.

Table 2. Numbers of participating high school students.

Students	School A	School B	School C
Male	3	5	5
Female	3	5	5
Year level	10 and 11	10, 11 and 12	10
Total	6	10	10

Table 3. Year level distribution by school.

School	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
School A			
Male students	1	2	0
Female students	0	3	0
School B			
Male students	2	2	1
Female students	2	1	2
School C			
Male students	5	0	0
Female students	5	0	0
Total	15	8	3

Table 4. Gender distribution by school.

Gender	School A	School B	School C	Total
Male students	3	5	5	13
Female students	3	5	5	13
Total	6	10	10	26

3.4. Data Collection

The data in this phenomenological study were gathered from semi-structured interviews where open-end questions helped us obtain in depth data from students about the aspects that mainly motivate them to volunteer (Brinkmann 2014). Examples of questions that were asked include: “What would motivate you to be a volunteer or participate in volunteering?” How do you think students can benefit from participating in volunteer activities? All interviews were conducted towards the end of year 2018. The authors have established good communication channels with the selected schools for the study during attending conferences concerning the Islamic schools in Australia. This offered them the opportunity to meet school principals and initially explain the research objectives and purpose. The principals of selected schools showed interest on the topic and provided verbal and written approval. After ethics approval was obtained from the University of South Australia (UniSA), an Information Letter and Consent Form were sent to schools via email. Once all consent forms were received, the data collection phase started immediately. Before initiating the interviews, the consent process was explicitly elaborated with participants regarding the purpose of the research, the way it is to be conducted and the possible research outcomes. In addition, school and student names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. We assigned each school and student a code to protect their identity and confidentiality. Each school was assigned a letter code, namely school A, school B and school C, and each student was assigned a number, for example, S1, S2, S3. If the statement is from student 1 at school B, their acronym will be BS1.

The participants were also informed of their respected rights to participate in the study or decline, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences (Dalton and McVilly 2004). The audio-recorded semi-structured interviews allowed us to collect rich data and provide an opportunity to follow up on interesting points in addition to the possibility of re-drafting the asked questions multiple times in a way that would be easier for participants to understand (Bryman et al. 2008; Dawson 2007).

3.5. Data Analysis

The inductive thematic analysis steps detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed to read into the data sets emerging from the 26 audio recorded semi-structured

interviews with HSS at AIS to examine the motivational factors behind their involvement in volunteering within school, Muslim community and the wider Australian community. According to [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), thematic analysis is “a qualitative analytic method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (p. 79).

This study adopted the six-step guide by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) to produce a systematic analysis for the gathered data: (1) thorough familiarisation with the verbatim transcription of interviews to establish a bedrock underlying basic layout of data segments for possible patterns. An initial Microsoft word table was created to record notes to be revisited during coding process. This step allowed us to formulate an “early stage of analysis” which provided our understanding to available data emerging from the interviews ([Braun and Clarke 2012](#)). (2) After a thorough read and reread of transcribed data, manual initial codes started formulating to present interesting segments, reading the phenomenon under investigation meaningfully. These codes were drafted in the Microsoft word table in colours and utilised to help identifying potential themes for the next step. Table was created according to research question comprising student responses to organise colour-coded segments accordingly to eventually produce a wide thematic map that is subject to reduction or amendment at later stage ([Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012](#)). Consequently, produced codes were discussed thoroughly among authors for suggestions and recommendations. (3) This step is “refocusing the analysis at the broader level of themes rather than the codes” ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#), p. 89). The analysis of the codes was initiated by sorting each group of codes along with the extracted data that share the same interest or focus into potential and overarching themes. This step required another Microsoft word table to suitably organise and match the collated codes into “theme-piles” ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)). (4) Initial candidate themes were identified and ready for review to clarify data coherence for each theme. We then started refining these themes by revisiting and reading the extracted data for each theme to validate their coherent relationship and pattern. During this step, we intended to revise reading the gathered data to first validate the emerging themes and test their representation of data and second to allow searching for any additional codes that might have been left unnoticed and require reconsideration until satisfactory thematic map was reached ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)). This process articulated better outlook on the coherent relationship between these themes as well as the narrative flow of the storytelling. (5) Final themes were satisfactorily refined and identified and were organised in a “coherent and internal consistent account” ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)). Each theme appeared to tell its narrative in connection with the whole story that the data set conveys.

Accordingly, the refined themes represented the segments of data sets and the naming of the themes provided concise essence for what each theme is about or captures. (6) As final themes were refined and identified, they were utilised to provide a thoroughly interwoven story inspired by the data set. At this point, it exceeded the description nature and turned into controversial analysis that responds to research questions and purposes that articulate the aspects that motivate HSS at AIS to participate in volunteering activities.

3.6. Limitations

This study was limited to few Australian Islamic schools and senior students only. Therefore, the study cannot be generalised to other schools or primary students. Further studies on this will be required. The research findings cannot also be generalised for Islamic schools in other countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada or other English-speaking contexts where Muslims may form the minority of the population. Another limitation is the focus on Muslim learners in Islamic schools. Future studies can explore the motivations and benefits of volunteering among Muslim learners in non-Muslim schools.

4. Findings

The thematic analysis of findings in this study is inspired collectively by the six motivational factors proposed by Clary et al. (1998), identified in the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI), namely values, understanding, enhancement, career, social and protective functions. The analysis produced multiple themes explaining thoroughly the motivational factors underlying the participation of HSS at AIS in volunteering activities within their schools, Muslim community, and the wide Australian community. Seven key themes emerged, giving power to the religious/spiritual motivations. Students were also inclined to volunteer for the sake of personal development, because of altruistic reasons, to gain knowledge and new skills, for social reasons, to prepare for future career and because of inspiring parents.

4.1. Theme 1: Religious/Spiritual Motivations

Most students were clear about the role of religious/spiritual incentives in stimulating their motivation to participate in volunteer activities. They preconceived their involvement in volunteering to please God and win His divine reward as well as to strengthen their religious belief.

Student BS8 voiced the relation between volunteering and strengthening the spiritual religious belief:

I feel like when I volunteer, it like gains my spiritual as a Muslim, my Imaan [belief] grows more and more. So that's what I think. I think if a Muslim student keeps volunteering and participates, their [belief] will grow over time and it will just benefit their spiritual level.

Student CS3 emphasised:

honestly, I straightaway think of my religion, God will reward me for helping out . . . , so, yeah I mostly think of my religion when it comes to volunteering.

Other students were inclined to volunteer to please God and refine their spiritual growth. Student BS6 explained in depth:

I feel like that feeling of contentment and happiness that counts as spiritual because it is your own spiritual growth with Allah's reward and other growth is like material goods when you'll get a good job or get good Uni applications, but I think the spiritual matters more [emphasis added].

Student BS7 added that the more you volunteer, the more of God's blessing will be upon you:

as a Muslim probably not even just the *hasanat* [good deed reward] but just knowing that your God is pleased with you regardless if he throws you in hell or puts you in heaven.

Further elaboration on the religious/spiritual motivation was directed toward winning the divine reward from God. Student CS1 exclusively expressed the motive to volunteer in the following way: "the thing that drives me most would be the reward from God from Allah, that is the nicest thing".

Student BS2's motivation to volunteer is "the ultimate reward from Allah SWT for helping others in need".

Student BS2 explained motivation to volunteer as an investment for the Hereafter when Muslims will be rewarded for their good deeds:

one of the main motives [to volunteer] is when I get something that we need to do. . . . first thing I think to myself is, would this benefit me in Al-akhirah [the Hereafter] or give me a good deed? How is it going to help me with that kind of thing?

4.2. Theme 2: Altruism

The majority of participants appeared to be motivated to participate in volunteer activities for altruistic reasons. That became evident when they stated that their involvement can be driven by helping others and contributing to improve society. Student AS3 asserted that they “want to help people . . . so just to help others and make the society better.” Student BS8 is driven by “how much it helps other people, and you get motivated as you keep going. It’s rewarding and it’s something that everyone should do”. Student BS10 is simply motivated thus: “for me, just helping people that’s my driving factor and to make their life easier”. Some students were inclined to serve a good cause of helping others for the sake of help only and nothing else. Student CS2 explained the motive to volunteer “to just support the cause that I had to help out, just to simply help out the people that needed it . . . just to help”. Students also were driven by the sense of empathy toward others in need and contribute to their quality of life. Student BS3 expressed the motive to volunteer in the following way:

I think the motive for me was looking at the people who are below us [less fortunate/people in need or vulnerable] like people who are poor and suffering, especially in our country. . . . another motive for me is probably being dedicated to it and being dedicated to helping people to make them better as people in society.

4.3. Theme 3: Social Motives

Students highlighted social needs as a driving motive for their participation in in volunteering. They were driven by the need to expand their social network and friendships as well as by the concern of changing the misconceived societal image of Islam in a secular space. Students wanted to meet new people and make new friends. What motivates student AS6 is to “mostly get to know new people, people I don’t know so I can make new friends”. Similarly, student CS3 was driven by “gaining the friendship of people”. Other students were motivated by need to create social awareness by building a bridge between communities, as student CS4 elaborated:

just way to do something to the community and also to bring friends in. So, from an old school, and also this school, my friends weren’t as aware as I was to the Islamic communities for whatever reason. So, I’d be the first person that invite them. If I can get my friends to see how the Islamic communities are, then that will do the same with difference and then it would cause like a chain effect, because more people to know about it and just to raise awareness, that’s probably the main goal.

Students showed big concern and motivation to volunteer within mainstream society to promote the social image of Islam and debunk some stereotypes and prejudices about Muslims. Student AS1 was keen to volunteer because “it gives them [students] observation on the wider community. . . . Australian community can know that Muslims can help, and they are good people”. Student AS2 wanted to help change the misperceived image of Islam: “that’s why a lot of my stuff I do like is Islamic-based, because I don’t know, just the negative image of Islam which makes me want to change people’s mind about it so that is why I help”. This requires young Muslims to be ambassadors for Islam as student BS2 advocates: “wherever whenever I go somewhere, I just like to make myself look good for the Islamic community”. Similarly, student BS10 wanted “to change the world’s perspective on Islam. . . . I want to make that my mission”. Student CS3 wanted “to be able to express my religion. I want to defeat those stereotypes when it comes to the hijab, that’s my personal goal”. Furthermore, student BS4 stated:

I’ve seen people who were targeting Muslims. . . . some people think different things about Islam and some people are even afraid of niqab [face covering]. So, volunteering would break this misconception because people might even come to help us and would realise that Muslims are actually good people.

Students were inclined to volunteer to nurture social inclusion and improve their sense of belonging. Student AS2 argues that “by getting some of the students to help with the outside community, I think it gives them that sense of belonging and they also feel like oh we are part of Australia too”. Moreover, student BS5 added the reason of being able to “bring awareness to the students that they’re part of a bigger group [the wide Australian community]”.

4.4. Theme 4: Knowledge and Skill Development Motivations

The majority of students stated that they volunteer for the sake of attaining knowledge and gain/develop different sets of personal and professional skills. Student AS6 showed motivation to volunteer “to learn new things, maybe about something that I didn’t know”. Furthermore, student AS3 wanted to learn about other religions: “I like to explore Christianity and other religions”. Learning about other cultures is also a type of knowledge students wanted to acquire through volunteering, because “it is good to getting to know cultures other than your own”. Student AS5 elaborated further:

you expose yourself to different cultures or different beliefs of people, so it gives a good feel. . . . it’s not just you or your community and there are other communities that have their own way and different rituals and beliefs.

Student CS3 also highlighted the importance of volunteering participation in the transition to the world after school:

it really builds a great opportunity to have like much more experience. . . . it is not only about an academic level. . . . you also want to have that sort of understanding of the real world. . . . understanding of how to deal with people because that is ultimately what you’re going to be doing once you leave school.

Students were also driven by the desire to acquire new or improve different skills including social, communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills. For instance, student AS1 wanted to

get to know other people, talking and communicating to have a better communication skills and experience. . . . it helps my social skills. . . . became a better person and being more mature and accepting responsibility. . . . learning how to work with other people better.

Furthermore, some students wanted to improve their interpersonal skills such as patience. For example, student AS4 wanted to “learn to be more patient” and student CS4 wanted to have the

ability to problem solve, or your ability to find the right solution for the right time. . . . allows you to think more before you do something. . . . and like how you deal with different situations in different times.

Other students explained their motivation to volunteer for the sake of improving future employability chances by enhancing their resume and acquiring professional skills and experiences. For example, student BS2 revealed that “there is a motive of always wanting to get something on your resume”. Student BS6 confirmed that “it is good for the resume and everything in Uni [university] applications and job applications”. Furthermore, student AS5 explains:

when people are looking to employ people, they are more inclined to choose someone that has volunteered in the previous years than someone who has no experience with volunteering as lots of benefits come with volunteering, so they know he can work well with a group, he can talk to customers or whatever the job may be.

Moreover, many students perceived volunteering as a pathway to employment and aimed to gain various sets of skills that may aid filling future career. Volunteering can help students “learn the skills and they learn new things about what the job or the volunteering

was about" (student AS6), "learn a little bit more of practical skills" (student BS1), learn "skills that I didn't realize that I needed or skills that I didn't know I didn't have" (student CS7) and "an eye-opening and it show me what the career was about and you know the pros and cons" (student AS5) about work environment. More specifically, student AS5 said:

also, for my career choice, I want be a dentist, so with that you need to do interview once you completed the right ATAR, so volunteering and extracurricular activities can help me with the interview by having some stuff to talk about in depth.

4.5. Theme 5: Psychological Self-Enhancement Motives

Many students were inclined to volunteer to improve different psychological functions including self-satisfaction, self-confidence, and self-esteem. For example, student CS1 believes that volunteering "makes you feel very good . . . because you know that you did for the sake of the community . . . it just makes you feel happy personally". Student BS6 emphasised "the feeling of satisfaction if you've helped someone else, you've changed their life for the better. I like the feeling you get from it; it gives you happiness and contentment".

Student CS3 explained the reason behind volunteering:

you want to build up your confidence. . . . you want to build up your self-esteem. . . . you want to build up your personality. . . . you don't want to be too confined in your own little area. . . . you want to go out there. . . . that way you can just build up your personality, be a better person and feel like you're a better person.

So, volunteering "gives you a better sense of confidence and self-esteem because you are feeling good about yourself" (Student AS2). This is because volunteering helps "how you'd be learning about yourself first, where your strengths [and] your weaknesses are, this is what I can do, this is what I can't do".

Volunteering reduces the feelings of selfishness and self-centeredness. Student AS2 thought that volunteering "teaches you to be giving and not to be selfish or less self-centred may be . . . ". Volunteering can improve the sense of empathy and responsibility towards others who are less fortunate. Student BS9 explains:

I think it is very eye-opening. For example, once you actually go and see how the homeless people are living, it gives you a different perspective . . . when I first did feed the homeless, I was really touched, it was just on my mind the whole time, the way they would come and approach you and ask for food . . . It gives you a very new perspective of life and it makes you a lot more grateful and thankful for what you have.

Furthermore, students volunteer because they want to improve their wellbeing and mental health. Student BS4 described the motivation to volunteer as "just improving myself mentally and socially". Students also volunteer because of the moral value of volunteering. Student BS7 volunteers "because it [volunteering] is just seen as morally acceptable behaviour and it just makes you feel good after like seeing the results of it".

4.6. Theme 6: Inspiring Parents' Motives

Few students see their motivation driven by the inspiration of their parents or family, because children naturally are influenced by the teachings of their parents then mimic their actions and learn from them about the value of giving and helping others, especially from an Islamic perspective. For example,

if I say I wanna volunteer here or do this, then she might say like *ma shaa Allah* [Arabic for praising someone] that is good encouraging me, or would mention a *Hadith* or something like that about volunteering. (Student AS6)

Student AS6 was inclined to volunteer because "they [parents] teach you [me] about helping others and respect, that is where helping and volunteering started". It is simple:

“my parents also taught me the values of helping other people” (student AS1) and they “teach you that it is an Islamic value to help people (student AS6).

Student BS4 was influenced by parents’ volunteering behaviour as “they were really in the community, and they helped a lot. I saw them volunteering and I just kind of helped and then I just became involved”. Similarly, student CS4’s motive “was my father because my father had been volunteering for a long time. I mean, he used to take me to events since I was about 8 years old” and “because I know it does, please my parents a lot . . . just to know the appreciation from my parents that I’m helping out”. This explains the importance of parents’ blessing for young Muslims because they always combine their parents’ blessings with Allah’s blessings upon them.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the motivational factors for volunteering among senior students at AIS. Our findings indicate several motives underlie the involvement of HSS at AIS in various activities. These findings add to the existing literature in recognising religion as a motive for volunteering (Peucker 2020a; von Essen et al. 2015), volunteering for altruistic reasons (Clary et al. 1998; Olsen et al. 2020), social needs (Bang et al. 2020; Patrick et al. 2022), understanding the world and acquiring new skills (Martin et al. 2019; Thoits 2021), psychological self-enhancement (Stuart et al. 2020) and influence by parents or family (Dawson et al. 2019; Ellis 2003; White 2021).

Our findings suggest that religion/spirituality is a prominent motivational factor for volunteering. This comes in line with a consensus of previous research showing consistency on the vital relationship between religion and volunteering (Al Saraidi et al. 2020; Hill and den Dulk 2013; Hustinx et al. 2014; Hyassat et al. 2016; Peucker and Kayikci 2020). It is stated that faith can be a primary motive for people’s involvement in volunteerism (Denning 2021b) if they have strong faith and are mostly engaged within faith-based organisations (Denning 2021a), which localizes religiosity to be a “key determinant of charitable giving” (Ariza-Montes et al. 2018, p. 91).

However, and despite the perception on volunteering as “a form of social activism rather than religious or moral duty”, the nexus between religiosity and the keenness to actively participate in volunteerism is indelible (Domaradzki and Walkowiak 2021). While this study confirms the relationship between religion and volunteering, it is bringing a different level of religious motivation presented in a spiritual incentive to volunteer. Combining religion with spirituality is not necessarily valid in all cases in a secular world (Okun et al. 2015). On the other hand, spirituality is part of religiosity among Muslims and from the perspective of our participants. That is why students tend to make religious/spiritual incentive the centre of their discussion on what mainly motivates them to volunteer. They see their volunteering participation valuable because it pleases God and helps in obtaining His divine reward. Therefore, their incentive was “the reward from God”, that “brings you closer to Allah (SWT); they felt “obligated to do it . . . because Hadith and Quran say that” and they “want to follow that”. In addition, they volunteer for the pleasure of God and to deepen “my Imaan (belief) [to] grow more and more . . . ” to “benefit me in Alaakhirah (the Hereafter)”.

This type of profound and deep religiosity/spirituality connection was not presented in previous research. However, this is not odd when discussing volunteering from an Islamic perspective because Muslim children are taught the value of giving and charity in Islam from early age. They treat charity as a fundamental Islamic value and principle considering charity one of the five pillars of Islam (Azmi et al. 2018). These Islamic teachings on the importance of charity inform the validity of religion as a unique and distinguished motive to volunteer among Muslims (Sahri et al. 2016).

Our data demonstrated that individuals may volunteer to learn ways to discipline oneself by showing empathy to those who are less fortunate than them:

once you actually go and see how the homeless people are living, it gives you a different perspective. . . . when I first did feed the homeless, I was really touched,

it was just on my mind the whole time, the way they would come and approach you and ask for food. . . . It gives you a very new perspective of life and it makes you a lot more grateful and thankful for what you have.

This aligns with [Batson and Shaw \(1991\)](#)'s empathy altruism model, which asserts that having the sense of empathy toward who are less fortunate informs prosocial behaviour. Further, other research identified the role of empathy in enticing individual volunteering behaviour ([Luengo Kanacri et al. 2016](#)). It is important to note that the literature suggests that linking moral behaviour (such as volunteering) to religion is not always validated ([von Essen et al. 2015](#)). However, our participants insisted on pairing the two every time they spoke about aspects that motivate them to volunteer and help others. This is because they associate every good deed with the teaching of Islam, attaining the pleasure of God and the long-term investment in the Hereafter. They clearly could not separate their moral behaviour and volunteering from the influence of their religious belief and practice. This student explains that thus "I straightaway think of my religion, God will reward me for helping out, so, yeah I mostly think of my religion when it comes to volunteering". Again, this is not surprising because charitable attitude is significantly linked to Islamic religiosity ([Chetioui et al. 2022](#)).

Previous research highlighted the impact of Islamophobia on the vital lives of young Muslims ([Fewtrell 2018](#); [Iner et al. 2022](#)) and their involvement with mainstream societies ([Finlay and Hopkins 2020](#); [Peucker 2019, 2020b](#)). This impact can be seen through the labialisation and stigmatisation of Islam and Muslims ([Colic-Peisker and Mikola 2022](#); [Rane et al. 2020](#)), being subject to discrimination ([Iner et al. 2019](#)) and different types of abuse ([Iner et al. 2022](#)). While the literature explained the impact of Islamophobia on Muslims, it did not explicitly link that to volunteering. Our study demonstrated that some students showed a level of fear associated with volunteering activities with the public in mainstream society when trying to avoid being subject to discrimination or Islamophobic abuse. However, this study suggests that volunteering and civic participation can be the impetus for combating Islamophobia. This is because students believe "what the media is teaching about Islamophobia isn't right"; therefore, they visualise their volunteering involvement with the mainstream society in the following way: "to an extent it will reduce Islamophobia". Many students consider Islamophobia to be motivating them to overcome their fears and hesitation and wear their determination as a suit to fight for the true Islam and sincere contribution of Muslims. This is because they must deal with the burden of being "stigmatised and labelled as a suspect community" ([Cherney and Murphy 2016](#), p. 480) by intensifying their engagement in civic and volunteering activities with mainstream society instead of living with fear ([Gendera et al. 2012](#); [Peucker 2021](#)). That is why our participants are more motivated to widen their participation: "that would lead to lots of improvements in the society". They want to "show the outside communities that lots of Muslims are volunteering" because, for example,

when the Australian community see a Muslim that wears hijab [head scarf] contributing to their community as well, it gives a better outlook on Muslims. . . . me being a Muslim girl, I want to show people how Islam really is and I wanna [want to] break stereotypes in society. . . . I want to be able to express my religion. I want to defeat those stereotypes when it comes to the hijab. That's my personal goal.

The importance of volunteering in countering Islamophobia may suggest the necessity for AIS to encourage and foster volunteering in more organised, structured and targeted ways. From the discussion above, the findings of this study identified an essential motivation for HSS at AIS to feel a sense of belonging within the mainstream Australian society despite persisting Islamophobia. Data suggested that volunteering engagement can contribute to nurturing their sense of belonging and debunking the misconception about Islam and Muslims. Young Muslims believe that this misconception is mainly caused by the lack of awareness and knowledge among non-Muslims about what Islam is and

the Muslim way of life (Bull and Rane 2019; Omar 2016). Therefore, students supported the notion that young Muslims need to “go out and help, then it [volunteering] should help bring better awareness of who we really are”. Students also count on volunteering to “bring awareness to the students that they’re part of a bigger group [the wide Australian community]”. Students believe that volunteering is “part of our identity” and that “by getting some of the students to help with the outside community I think it gives them that sense of belonging and they also feel like oh we are part of Australia too”. Further, there is a lack of literature explaining the relationship between volunteering and improving sense of belonging. Notwithstanding, the involvement of young people in inclusive social and political activities can contribute to enhancing their belonging and citizenship practice (Roose and Harris 2015) as well as strengthen their religious and civic identity (Peucker 2020a). It is possible, therefore, to speculate that volunteering can play an important role in countering the identity crisis and helping young Muslims to achieve their sense of belonging in mainstream society. Yet, it cannot be the sole responsibility of HSS alone to achieve this; a great deal of support and encouragement is required from their schools. Schools will need to nurture this type of motivation among students by educating them theoretically and practically on how to protect their identity and belong in a mainstream society.

Finally, it appears that the spiritual, altruistic, social and religious aspects of volunteering are closely interwoven with Islamic concepts of social justice and humanitarian principles. Students were very motivated about pleasing God; and the social justice aspects they identified (such as being ambassadors and good representative of Islam in the community) are intertwined with Qur’anic and Prophetic values of social harmony, public welfare, goodness/kindness, and unity.

6. Conclusions

This study reported that HSS at three Islamic schools were inclined to volunteer for religious, altruistic, and social reasons, to attain knowledge and skills, for psychological self-enhancement and because of inspiring parents. Participants seem to infuse their religious belief in almost all conversations about motivation to volunteer. The religious/spiritual reasons seemed to be a prominent motivation for volunteering, including seeking the pleasure of God, strengthening their belief and to invest into the Hereafter. Unlike previous research, this study identified countering Islamophobia as a motive for volunteering. The study also established the link between volunteering and students’ motivations to improve their sense of belonging, citizenship, and identity formation. The study sheds light on several important issues:

Firstly, understanding the motivations behind volunteering can help inform strategies to encourage greater participation among Muslim high school students (HSS) at Australian Islamic schools in community service activities. By identifying what motivates young people to volunteer, educators, policymakers, and community organizations can design programs that tap into these motivations and make volunteering more attractive and meaningful for young people.

Secondly, exploring the benefits of volunteering for Muslim youth can help to promote the positive impact of community service on individual development, social cohesion, and community building. This can be especially important in challenging negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslims and their contributions to Australian society.

Thirdly, understanding the relationship between motivations, benefits and volunteering participation can help to identify factors that may facilitate or hinder the participation of Muslim youth in volunteering activities such as Islamophobia. This can inform the development of targeted interventions that aim to increase the participation of Muslim youth in community service and promote their social and civic engagement. More specifically, it can be important in challenging stereotypes and misconceptions that may exist in wider society about Muslims and their level of engagement with the broader community.

Fourthly, the exploration of motivations and benefits for volunteering among HSS at AIS can contribute to the broader literature on youth volunteering and civic engagement

and can help inform policy and practice in the field of youth development more broadly. It can also provide understanding of the role that Islamic schools play in promoting volunteering and community engagement among their students. Further, it can provide insights into the ways in which religious faith and values may influence volunteering behaviour among Muslim youth.

Finally, understanding the participation of high school students at Australian Islamic schools in volunteering can contribute to the broader literature on youth volunteering and civic engagement, and can help inform policy and practice in the field of youth development more broadly.

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Note

¹ Key Club is “one of the oldest and largest service programs for high school students in the United States” (Cristillo 2009, p. 78).

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