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## **Enhancing Volunteer Experiences: Using *communitas* to improve engagement and commitment**

**Dr Ross Curran**

**Professor Babak Taheri**

### **Abstract**

This research explores the interplay between brand image, *communitas*, volunteer work engagement and affective commitment to develop understanding of the importance of fostering *communitas* experiences within voluntary organisations and communicating these to volunteers. The research draws on a survey of 1248 active Scout volunteers in Scotland, structural equation modelling using SmartPLS3 was used to develop a new theoretical model which measured both brand image and work engagement as second-order constructs. The findings indicate brand image has a positive relationship with *communitas*, work engagement, and affective commitment amongst volunteers, and that *communitas* and work engagement positively mediate the relationship between brand image and volunteer affective commitment. Consequently, we suggest non-profit managers should facilitate and deliver powerful *communitas* experiences for volunteers to enhance their engagement and affective commitment by emphasising *communitas* throughout volunteering programmes.

**Keywords:** *Communitas*, Volunteers, Engagement, Brand Image, Commitment

优化志愿者经历:利用共同体来提高参与和协作

## 摘要

本研究探讨品牌形象、共同体、志愿工作参与与情感协作之间的相互作用，以理解在义工组织内培养共同体经历的重要性，并将这些经验传达给义工。该研究基于对苏格兰1248名活跃童子军志愿者的调查，使用SmartPLS3进行结构方程建模，建立了一个新的理论模型，将品牌形象和工作参与度作为二级结构进行测量。结果表明，品牌形象与志愿者的协作共同性、工作敬业度、情感协作之间存在正向关系，协作共同性和工作敬业度对品牌形象与志愿者情感协作之间的关系具有正向调节作用。因此，我们建议非牟利机构的管理人员应协助及提供强大的共同体经验予义工，透过在义工活动中强调共同体的重要性，加强他们的参与及情感协作。

关键词:共同体，志愿者，参与度，品牌形象，协作

## **Introduction**

Volunteering research continues to highlight the power of social-based motivations for volunteering (Kitney, Stanway & Ryan, 2018; Musick & Wilson, 2008), and the provision of platforms for socialising is consequently considered a powerful aspect of volunteering's appeal. The value of the social element of volunteering is enhanced given ongoing changes in modern lifestyles and work patterns (Putnam, 2000). Fewer people are choosing to marry and more are living alone (Yeung & Cheung, 2015), they have fewer children (Harbert, 2012), and are increasingly likely to form relationships through online mediums rather than traditional means (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). While there is evidence to suggest that relationships of some significance can be established and maintained online, there is general consensus that these technological social surrogates cannot replace or equal the benefits of genuine, physical social interaction (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). In their professional lives, employees are increasingly transient in pursuit of successful careers (Zogby, 2009), further reducing their locally available social opportunities. While technological development affords many the apparent benefits of homeworking, this growing trend further curtails opportunities for social interaction within the population (Dockery & Bawa, 2014; Mann & Holdsworth, 2003). Taken together, these developments represent significant changes to the way people live, socialise and work, and pose an opportunity for voluntary organisations - which are reliant on people coming together in social situations - to facilitate enhanced social interaction to attract, motivate, and more effectively retain their volunteers.

Cognizant of an ever more isolated society's reliance upon an increasingly demoralized and overstretched non-profit sector, coupled with a general increase in levels of social, interactional deprivation within society, there is an opportunity for nonprofit managers to consider reshaping their organisations into vessels of community, through which, emphasis could continue to be placed upon helping beneficiaries, but also - through attuned and attentive

management – significantly benefit its volunteer workforce. Despite debate around the proliferation of private sector management practices within the nonprofit sector (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011), their application is increasing (Blery, Katseli, & Tsara, 2010; Ewing & Napoli, 2005; Kylander & Stone, 2012; Lülfs & Hahn, 2013). This trend is supported by research suggesting that the experiences individuals have while volunteering contribute significantly to their continuation or cessation of volunteering activity (Hustinx 2010; Willems & Dury, 2017), thus highlighting the need to further develop understanding of volunteer experiences, and how these can be effectively managed.

Communitas represents a concept predominantly considered within experiential consumption settings (McGinnis, Gentry, & Gao, 2008), it's applicability and salience within the volunteer context has been only tacitly considered (Thompson, Gannon, Curran, & Taheri, 2017; Wallace, 2006). Thus, this research contributes to closing this gap to determine whether communitas, with its characteristics of camaraderie and an intense social bonding (Turner, 1969), could represent a potential avenue of research that may enhance volunteer workforce morale and offer wider benefits to society. Consequently, we respond to McGinnis et al. (2008) and Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry Jr's (1989) call to develop understanding of communitas by exploring its contribution to volunteering experiences in nonprofit organisations. Furthermore, building on untested suggestions within the literature, we also examine communitas' interplay with brand image (conceptualized as second-order), volunteer engagement (conceptualized as second-order), and affective commitment, within UK Scout volunteers by developing and testing a new theoretical model that develops understanding of how the volunteer experience can be more effectively managed to enhance volunteer affective commitment.

Having considered the impact of declining levels of social interaction and potential opportunities for the nonprofit sector, as well as articulating the theoretical and contextual gap in research covering this area, the paper aims to explore the potential of communitas in the

non-profit sector and its implications for management. The paper is organised as follows: Derived from the literature, the authors present a three-stage conceptual model anchored on *communitas*, but affected by brand image and resultant levels of volunteer work engagement and affective commitment. The next section is empirical; the methodological approach is presented and having tested the theoretical model, results of the survey are offered. Finally, the authors synthesize lines of argument, and offer conclusions. Implications for nonprofit marketing are considered and the limitations of the study are highlighted. Finally, avenues of further research are identified.

### **Literature review and hypotheses development**

Although the social aspect of volunteering has been noted as an influential motivating factor (Wilson, 2012), and potentially important contributor to individual's attitudes and engagement towards an organisation or experience (Hopkinson & Pujari, 1999; Trocchia and Berkowitz 1999), *communitas*, relating to volunteers represents a substantial departure from current research strands given its more intense, yet fleeting occurrence (Sharpe, 2005; Turner, 1969). Building on calls to investigate the importance of community, and togetherness as 'linking value' (Cova, 1997), *communitas*, along with brand image, volunteer work engagement and affective commitment are now explored, before the resultant hypotheses are presented.

#### ***Communitas***

*Communitas* experiences manifest when

‘...people of different backgrounds and places within the social order communicate and bond with one another without considering one's social standing...’ (McGinnis et al., 2008 p. 76)

Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) emphasise the importance that *communitas* experiences remain characterised by a sense of unity, where income, reputation, and education are

inconsequential, but togetherness is paramount. Thus, in a nonprofit context, where volunteers from different social and professional strata can come together, the *communitas* concept holds particular relevance. Furthermore, *communitas* experiences are most likely to occur within liminal space (Turner, 1967) where an individual is regarded as 'Betwixt and between' (Turner, 1964) social structures, or indeed liminoid spaces - which are derived at an individual's own volition – mandating consideration of *communitas* amongst volunteers.

Essentially, *communitas* involves the stripping away of social divides, and stimulates shared recognition of common humanity (Deegan, 1998; Sapir, Dori, & Ellis, 2016). Furthermore, *communitas* has demonstrated pertinence to situations where those participating in the *communitas* experience consider it of high value, significance, or even sacrosanct (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993). The resultant intense sense of community and camaraderie – exacerbated through *communitas*' anti-structure characteristics (Reader, 2007) - can stimulate intense social bonding (Belk et al., 1989), which could hold particular harnessable value to an under pressure nonprofit sector. While literature quantitatively exploring *communitas* within a voluntary context remains scarce, there has been some progress towards establishing its relevance in various experience-heavy contexts (e.g., Maccarthy, O'Neill, & Williams, 2006; McGinnis et al., 2008), that advance seminal contributions from Turner (1969). Turner's original exploration of *communitas* conceptualised it as multi-layered consisting of: *existential* (described as sudden, mutual camaraderie), *normative* (a formally stimulated *communitas* experience), and *ideological* (relating to broader societal models conducive to normative *communitas*). Although Turner's writings were anthropologically informed, he adopted the *communitas* term from an existing substantial title on urban planning (see Goodman & Goodman, 1947), thus it is important to emphasise that *communitas* is distinct from the notion of community, which pertains to structure and social organisation (Di Giovine, 2011).

Consequently, towards exploring *communitas* and consumption relationships, the three level concept was synthesized (Belk et al., 1989), thus stimulating research interest in new contexts. As a consequence, *communitas* has been considered in nightclubbing (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013; Taheri, Gori, O’Gorman, Hogg, & Farrington, 2016) skydiving (Celsi et al., 1993) scuba-diving (Maccarthy et al., 2006), whitewater rafting and Kayaking (Arnould & Price, 1993; Hopkinson & Pujari, 1999), motorbike subculture (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), traditional dancing (O’Conner, 1997), and in golfing contexts (McGinnis et al., 2008). Furthermore, *Communitas* has been suggested to be an ingredient for successful PhD student experiences, as the community spirit it evokes is suggested to contribute to engagement and performance (Trocchia & Bekowitz, 1999). The feelings of belonging, and togetherness derived through *communitas* allow individuals to enhance self-confidence, and is conducive to feelings of security and comfort (McGinnis et al., 2012). McGinnis et al., (2012) demonstrate a relationship between these outcomes of *communitas*, and enduring involvement of consumers in prolonged service experiences, while Maccarthy et al., (2006) suggest that *communitas* can influence experiential satisfaction, thus highlighting its under-researched role in experiential consumption.

### ***Brand image***

The proliferation, and growing acceptance within nonprofit oriented branding research demonstrates the importance of projecting an appropriate brand image to volunteers, beneficiaries, and donors (Hankinson, 2001; Mort et al., 2007; Stebbins & Hartman, 2013). Bennett and Gabriel (2003) note brand image to consist of a consciously manufactured mix of compassion, dynamism, idealism, focus towards beneficiaries, and maintaining a non-political stance, noting donor behaviour to be strongly influenced by charity brand image. Brand image has been associated with elements of trust, positive effects on donor intention, and aiding the recruitment of volunteers (Randle et al., 2013). An advantage of brand image is its ability to



separate symbolic and functional brand associations (Aaker, 1991; Michel & Rieunier, 2012). Symbolic associations can manifest in nonprofit organisations through perspectives held by volunteers or prospective volunteers of a host or potential host organisation (Michel & Rieunier, 2012). These perspectives can range from interpretations of the organisations traits, values, and elicited emotions (Aaker, 1991; Hankinson, 2001; Michel & Rieunier, 2012). Functional associations derivable through brand image in a nonprofit context, constitute communication of core characteristics, its mission and offerings (Michel & Rieunier, 2012). Following Michel and Rieuniers' (2012) suggestion, brand image was conceptualised as a higher order multidimensional construct (in non-profit context) comprising of four dimensions including: usefulness, efficiency, affect and dynamism.

Together, volunteer's interpretations of brand image determine positive or negative perspectives towards that organisation (Michel & Rieunier, 2012). Nevertheless, brand image research in a nonprofit context remains limited, especially when compared with other aspects of branding (Michel & Rieunier, 2012). Kylander and Stone (2012, p. 39) note that 'a nonprofit brand is most powerful when the organisation's internal identity and external image are aligned with each other and with its values and mission'. Reflecting on these benefits of complementarity between the essence of the organisation, and its projected brand, necessitates consideration of the *communitas* experience, and subsequent communication of these experiences (both actual and prospective), to external brand audiences, a notion supported by the broader literature (De Roeck et al., 2013). Given both the increasing competitiveness of the non-profit sector (Maier et al., 2016), coupled with the decline in social interaction outlined above, the potential traction derivable of a *communitas* oriented marketing strategy, and suggestions within the literature, we hypothesise:

*H1: Organisational brand image has a positive relationship with communitas.*

### ***Work engagement***

Work engagement, distinguished by the associated enthusiastic, and energy laden approach employees have towards work holds an increased pertinence within the non-profit sector (Selander, 2015). Following Vecina et al. (2011) and Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) recommendation, work engagement was conceptualised as a higher order multidimensional construct comprising of three dimensions including: vigor, dedication and absorption. Conceptualised as a positive, internal mental state towards designated tasks, work engagement consists of *vigor*; pertaining to an energetic approach to work, *absorption*; concerned with concentration and well-being, and finally *dedication*; pertaining to notions of pride and endurance (Banihani & Syed, 2016; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker 2002; Vecina Chacón, Sueiro, & Barrón, 2012). Yet, in the case of volunteers, the work engagement concept has seen limited application (Thompson et al., 2017; Vecina et al., 2012).

Work engagement has also received critique, most commonly regarding its similarity to concepts such as burnout, workaholism and job involvement (Cole et al., 2012), as well as debate regarding the independence of its three constituent elements as opposed to one overarching element (Cole et al., 2012; Sonnentag, 2003). Nevertheless, Vecina et al. (2012) contest the accumulated three factor structure of engagement is valid, finding its three factor conceptualisation to have explanatory power towards volunteer satisfaction, and consequent continuation of volunteering behaviour, adding to the weight of the evidence (González-Romá et al., 2006; Shuck, 2011; Vecina et al., 2012). Following this, we argue that work engagement should be conceptualised as an aggregated construct simply because dropping any dimension(s) of the construct alters its conceptual meaning.

Engagement can generate several benefits such as heightened productivity, increased profit and healthier, less frequently absent employees more open to helping behaviour and more likely to stay in a their position, suggesting work engagement is as valuable within a voluntary

context as a private sector setting (Vecina et al., 2012). Vecina et al. (2012) along with Thompson et al. (2017) demonstrate the applicability of work engagement, operationalised for the volunteer context, in predicting volunteer satisfaction and their subsequent sustainment of volunteer roles. Predicated on commonality of outcome, parallels between enduring involvement, and work engagement are evident. Enduring involvement is described by McGinnis et al. (2008 p. 75) as ‘...a long-term enthusiasm for a particular activity’, which speaks to our understanding of work engagement, particularly its dedication element. Furthermore, enduring involvement is concerned with the possession of an immersive mental state whereby one identifies with particular activities (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; McGinnis et al., 2008), representing similar ideas as those conveyed through work engagement’s vigour and absorption elements. Work engagement has also been shown to have a positive relationship with job embeddedness, which, in common with affective commitment, suggests a likelihood to continue involvement with an organisation (Arasli et al., 2017). Furthermore, a relationship between *communitas* and volunteer work engagement was suggested amongst transient volunteers (Thompson et al., 2017). Predicated on this, and the prior demonstration of a reliable work engagement measure in the voluntary context, while mindful of Kylander and Stone’s (2012) call for alignment between organisational offerings, and projected brand image, we further hypothesise:

*H2: Communitas has a positive relationship with work engagement.*

*H3: Organisational brand image has a positive relationship with work engagement.*

*H4: Communitas mediates the relationship between organisational brand image and work engagement.*

### *Affective commitment*

Evaluations of commitment can be usefully indicative of employee retention (Meyer & Allen 1997; Panaccio et al., 2014), success (Packard 2010; Stride & Higgs, 2013), happiness (Meyer et al., 2002) and perceived support (Moideenkutty et al., 2001), thus ensuring understanding of commitment is particularly useful to organisations. Scholars have also highlighted commitment's importance to the non-profit sector, for example Wilson (2012, p. 195) asserts 'The principal function of the volunteer role is to inspire effort and commitment while at the same time limiting compassion', a stance supported by research attesting to the relationship between high commitment levels and reductions in volunteer's decisions to leave an organisation (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007; Jenner 1984; Miller et al., 1990).

Meyer and Allen (1984) present an empirically supported three-factor conceptualisation of commitment as multi-dimensional, comprising affective (connection to the organisation), normative (obligation to the organisation), and continuance levels (evaluation of costs and benefits of committing) (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer et al., 1993; Meyer et al., 2002). Previous research of Spanish volunteers has suggested enhanced higher levels of volunteer engagement contribute to subsequent volunteer emotional commitment (Vecina et al., 2012), affective commitment has also been suggested to relate to volunteer perceptions of organisational support (Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015), self-esteem of volunteers (McCormick & Donohue, 2016) and trustee performance (Preston & Brown, 2004). Consequently, focusing on affective commitment is justified through a suggested higher salience to non-profit sector organisations than either normative or continuance commitment (Dawley et al., 2005; Stride & Higgs, 2013), its broader underpinning application (Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015; Hager, 2014; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Stride & Higgs, 2013), and previously determined association with other elements of the theoretical model under investigation (Vecina et al., 2012).

Relating to levels of emotional connection between an organisation and employee, affective commitment constitutes the sum of employee-organisation identity fusion (Dawley et al., 2005; Sheldon, 1971) as well as a perception of ties towards a host organisation (Buchanan, 1974; Dawley et al., 2005). More broadly, affective commitment can be viewed as an individual's desire to support an organisation with which they identify (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Park & Kim, 2013). Affective commitment can occur as a result of structural, personal, and work experience characteristics (Domínguez-Falcón, Martín-Santana, & De Saá-Pérez, 2017; Dunham et al., 1994; Meyer & Allen, 1991), leading to suggestions the construct represents '...the most crucial organisational commitment.' (Park & Kim 2013, p. 102). Structural characteristics can include the systems and processes embedded within an organisation, such as bureaucracy and management structure (Brooke et al., 1988; Meyer and Allen 1991; Morris and Steers 1980). Research suggests employees are predisposed to possess different levels of affective commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Mowday et al., 1979), although this can be influenced through work ethic, engagement, a desire to achieve success, and a preference for autonomy (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Morris & Snyder, 1979; Steers, 1977).

*H5: Organisational brand image has a positive relationship with affective commitment.*

Characteristics of a work-role can also impact affective commitment (Dunham et al., 1994; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Meyer and Allen (1991, p. 70) note commitment '...develops as the result of experiences that satisfy employees' needs and/or are compatible with their values', and that work experiences influence work commitment in two ways; through employee feelings of mental and physical comfort, and feelings of effectiveness and assurance of work related tasks (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Previous research associating volunteer engagement and commitment (Vecina et al., 2012), and literature intimating a previously unexplored relationship between outcomes of *communitas* and commitment (e.g. workforce camaraderie, support, strong organisational justice) (Bishop et al., 2000; Chênevert et al., 2015; De Gilder,

2003; Meyer et al., 2002; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Taheri et al., 2016), suggest that affective commitment can be enhanced by factors such as work ethic and desire (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Morris & Snyder, 1979; Steers, 1977). Consequently, given work engagement's relationship with commitment (Vecina et al., 2012), and the ability of *communitas* to foster a desire to return to and repeat *communitas* experiences we hypothesise that:

*H6: Work engagement has a positive relationship with affective commitment.*

*H7: Communitas has a positive relationship with affective commitment.*

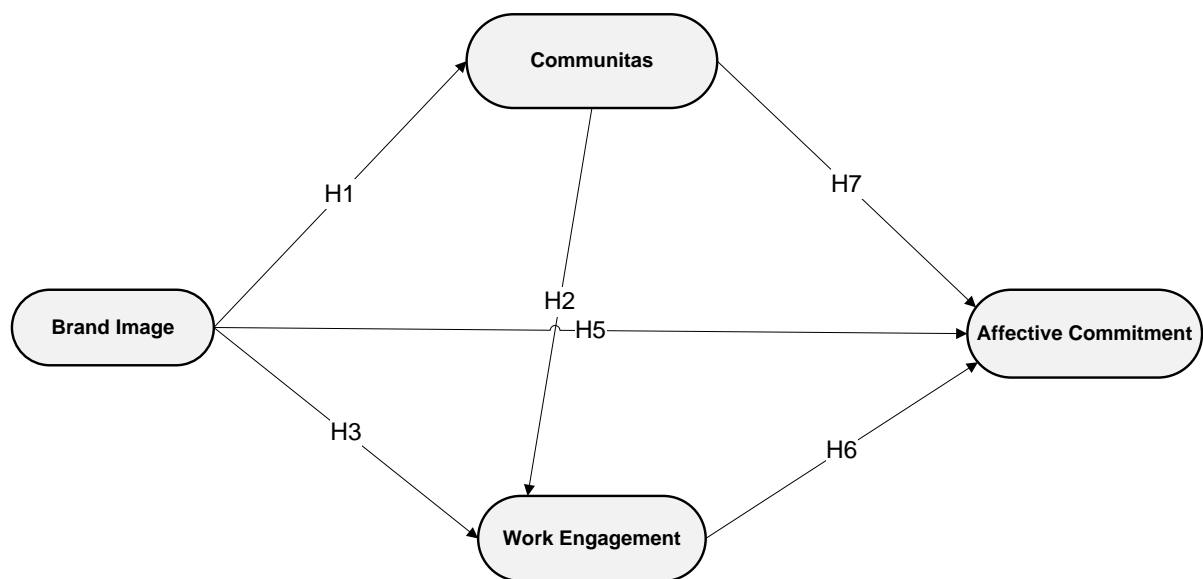
The literature suggests work engagement may perform a mediation role between brand image and affective commitment. This is predicated upon work engagement's ability to contribute to satisfying volunteer expectations (as informed by externally projected brand image (Kylander & Stone, 2012), through generating vigorous absorbing experiences that require volunteer dedication and result in subsequent commitment (Vecina et al., 2012). Additionally, corporate culture, and internal processes are suggested to impact upon affective commitment, consequently, *communitas* experiences are likely to further stimulate this (Domínguez-Falcón et al., 2017). *Communitas* is also suggested to act as a mediator between brand image, and affective commitment. The literature attests to the positive contribution *communitas* experiences have on individuals undertaking a variety of experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Goulding et al., 2013; Hopkinson & Pujari, 1999; Taheri et al., 2016), which, upon consideration of the importance of external and internal brand alignment (Kylander & Stone, 2012) suggests a potential mediation relationship. Consequently, we hypothesise:

*H8: Work engagement mediates the relationship between organisational brand image and affective commitment.*

*H9: Communitas mediates the relationship between organisational brand image and affective commitment.*

Derived from the literature review and hypotheses presented above, Figure 1 below conveys a graphical representation of the proposed relationships explored in this research and around which empirical analysis is guided:

### Tables and Figures



H4: Brand Image → Communitas → Work Engagement  
H8: Brand Image → Work Engagement → Affective Commitment  
H9: Brand Image → Communitas → Affective Commitment

**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework

### Methodology

#### *Sample*

The Scouts represent a long-established voluntary organisation. Founded by British military veteran Robert Baden-Powell the Scouts held their first camp in 1907. A core tenet of Scouting involves bringing together volunteers, and Scouts from around the world for meetings known as Jamboree's outdoor activities, as well as regularly held local meetings (The Scout Association, 2006). These events promote social interaction amongst over 400,000 UK

members every year (The Scout Association, 2015a), and 31 million members in over 216 countries and overseas territories (The Scout Association, 2015b).

The Scottish Scouts are engaged in extensive marketing activity (The Scout Association, 2017c), and claim to offer volunteers an inspiring, adventurous, and rewarding volunteer experience. The Scouts therefore represent an appropriate sample for our study. The questionnaire was distributed via the Scouts internal mailing system in late May 2011, this allowed for a large number of responses to be managed in a resource, and time effective manner (The Scout Association, 2015d). The questionnaire was only available online, consequently, individuals with limited internet access or IT skills may have encountered difficulty responding. Responses were anonymous, and given the inclusion of the opportunity for responders to enter a prize draw, coupled with endorsement of the survey by senior Scout management, 1248 complete, usable questionnaires were completed, yielding a sample size of 19%. A good response rate was expected given responders were current, active Scout volunteers and hence stakeholders in the organisation.

**Table 1** shows the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents demonstrating the Scouts to be an organisation comprising volunteers of a variety of ages, gender, and educational backgrounds. The diversity of the sample was regarded as a strength rather than a weakness, as *communitas* transcends typical social structures and barriers (Di Giovine, 2011).

**Table 1.**  
Demographic information of the sample

Variable	Category	N	Valid %
Age	18-25	112	9
	26-35	161	12.9
	36-45	284	22.8
	46-55	403	32.3
	56-64	175	14
	65+	113	9.1
Gender	Male	714	57.2



	Female	483	38.7
	Other	50	4
Marital Status			
	Married	771	61.8
	Single	340	27.2
	Widowed	26	2.1
	Divorced	111	8.9
Education			
	GCSE/Standard Grade/ O Levels/ School Leaving Certificate	144	11.5
	Scottish Higher/A- Levels/ College Diploma	364	29.2
	Ordinary Degree/Graduate Certificate	179	14.3
	Honours Degree/Graduate Diploma	381	30.5
	Masters Degree	135	10.8
	Doctorate	35	2.8
	None	10	0.8

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### ***Measurement***

To ensure the content validity, items of the constructs were adapted from existing scales. Brand image and work engagement were conceptualised as a second-order reflective construct, measured through their underlying dimensions. MacKenzie et al. (2005, p. 715) argue that a higher-order measurement ‘faithfully represents all of the conceptual distinctions that the researcher believes are important, and it provides the most powerful means of testing and evaluating the construct’. Measurements for dimensions of brand image were taken from Michel and Rieunier (2012) including: efficiency (5 items), usefulness (3 items), affect (4 items) and dynamism (2 items). Similarly, the work engagement construct consists of three dimensions including: dedication (3 items), vigour (3 items) and absorption (3 items) which were adapted from Vecina et al. (2011) and Schaufeli et al. (2002). Six items comprising the communitas construct came from McGinnis et al. (2012), which was grounded upon Belk et al.’s (1989) conceptualisation, but operationalised for the context of the Scouts. Finally, eight

items were adapted from Meyer and Allen (1991) for the affective commitment scale which has been successfully applied on numerous occasions (Astakhova, 2016; Lee et al., 2001; Meyer et al., 2012) and was operationalised for the Scouting context in this study. Informants rated each statement for the above measures on Likert-scales ranging from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating *strongly disagree* and 7 *strongly agree*.

### ***Analysis***

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used as the method of analysis for the research model for variety of reasons. First, it is suitable for the early stages of theory building and adding new constructs that have not received enough research attention previously (Garson, 2016; Wells, Taheri, Gregory-Smith, & Manika, 2016). This research tests the *communitas* concept, which has only been tacitly considered within research relating to volunteers. Second, “PLS-SEM's statistical properties provide very robust model estimations with data that have normal as well as extremely nonnormal (i.e., skewness and/or kurtosis) distributional properties” (Hair et al., 2017, p. 22). Here, Z-scores for skewness and kurtosis were considered for each item with IBM-SPSS (version 23) and were tested against acceptable values, which are between -3 and +3 (Field, 2005; Mardia, 1970). The result indicated that the assumption of normality is violated. Third, it can be exhibited in both formative (i.e., the indicator's cause the construct) and reflective (i.e., causality is from the construct to its indicators) modes as well as higher-order models (Hair et al., 2017; Taheri, Jafari, & O'Gorman, 2014). Both reflective and higher-order constructs were used to test the conceptual model. Finally, it is appropriate when the structural model is complex and contains a large number of indicators (Garson, 2016; Hair et al., 2017; Wetzels, Odekerken-Schroder, & van Oppen). Wetzels et al. (2009, p.190) argue “model complexity does not pose as severe a restriction to PLS path-modelling as covariance-based SEM, since PLS path-modelling at any moment only estimates a subset of parameters”. Here, the structural model includes 36

indicators and mix of reflective and higher-order constructs. Both the measurement and structural model were analysed within SmartPLS 3.2.4 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2014). The non-parametric bootstrapping technique was tested with 1248 cases, 5000 subsamples (Hair et al., 2017).

As all the data come from a single-reported questionnaire, common method variance (CMV) can cause systematic measurement error and bias in the estimation of the relationship amongst theoretical constructs (Liang, Saraf, Hu, & Xue, 2007; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Respondents were informed that responses were anonymous, minimising social desirability bias and helping uncover respondent's true feelings. Dependent and independent constructs were placed in different parts of the questionnaire. The reliance on previously validated constructs and the opinion of academics with expertise on questionnaire design contributed to reduced item ambiguity and biased responses. Two statistical tests were used to ascertain the extent of CMV. The first step is the Harman one-factor test, subjecting all the questionnaire items to principal component factor analysis. Principal component analysis (PCA) (with varimax rotation) on the questionnaire items presented the existence of 7 distinctive factors ( $F_1: 9.041$ ;  $F_2: 4.115$ ;  $F_3: 2.803$ ;  $F_4: 2.002$ ;  $F_5: 1.704$ ;  $F_6: 1.211$ ;  $F_7: 1.023$ ) with eigenvalue greater than 1, yielding 68.711% of the total variance with the first factor accounting for only 34 percent of the total variance (i.e., less than 50% which did not describe most of the variance). Therefore, CMV was not biasing the findings. Second, a common method factor was announced to the structured model in PLS-SEM step by step (Liang et al., 2007), finding that all loadings of the indicators to the common method factor were non-significant. The average variance of the indicators explained by the corresponding construct of interest was 62.6%, while the average method-based variance was 1.1%, yielding a ratio of 57:1. Thus, CMV is not a concern for the study.

The measurement model was also analysed by testing its reflective constructs reliability, convergent validity and discriminate validity (Hair et al., 2017; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). **Table 2** presents reliability and convergent validity of first-order constructs. For all first-order constructs, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and composite reliability (CR) reached values above the suggested thresholds of 0.7, respectively, for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2010). Factor loading and average variance extracted (AVE) were above the required threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2010). To assess whether constructs differed adequately, two approaches were used: (1) the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion was used to test discriminant validity, which requires a construct's AVE to be larger than the square of its largest correlation with any construct (**Table 3**). The correlation amongst constructs were well below the 0.70 threshold, thus this result met this requirement. (2) Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015) heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) approach was used. If the HTMT value is below the recommended threshold of 0.85, discriminant validity should be established between constructs. In this study, HTMT values of the constructs ranged from 0.377 to 0.721. All appeared to support the reliability and validity of the first-order constructs.

**Table 2.**  
Assessment of the measurement model

Description of Items	Loadings*	$\alpha$	AVE	CR
<i>Brand image dimension 1- Usefulness</i>		0.750	0.668	0.858
The Scouts are indispensable.	0.765			
The Scouts are useful.	0.861			
The Scouts are civic minded.	0.823			
<i>Brand image dimension 2- Efficiency</i>		0.820	0.583	0.874
The Scouts are efficient.	0.813			
The Scouts are serious.	0.679			
The Scouts are well managed.	0.825			
The Scouts provide an excellent service to beneficiaries.	0.734			
The Scouts use assets wisely.	0.758			
<i>Brand image dimension 3- Affect</i>		0.926	0.817	0.947
The Scouts are friendly.	0.909			
The Scouts are generous.	0.912			
The Scouts are warm.	0.886			
The Scouts are engaging.				
<i>Brand image dimension 4- Dynamism</i>		0.848	0.868	0.929
The Scouts are modern.	0.931			

The Scouts are innovative.	0.933			
<i>Work engagement dimension 1- Dedication</i>		0.822	0.738	0.894
I am enthusiastic about my volunteer work.	0.882			
My volunteer work inspires me.	0.852			
I am proud of the volunteer work I do.	0.842			
<i>Work engagement dimension 2- Absorption</i>		0.741	0.583	0.897
I feel happy when I am working intensely.	0.845			
I am immersed in my work.	0.710			
I get carried away when I am working.	0.729			
<i>Work engagement dimension 3- Vigour</i>		0.802	0.717	0.883
When volunteering, I feel strong and vigorous.	0.819			
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to my volunteer work.	0.845			
At my volunteer work, I feel bursting with energy.	0.874			
<i>Communitas</i>		0.900	0.668	0.923
When I volunteer, I feel a sense of camaraderie.	0.794			
When I volunteer, I feel a bond with my fellow volunteers that I could not experience away from volunteering.	0.739			
When I volunteer, I feel a sense of belonging with other volunteers.	0.860			
When I volunteer, I feel a sense of harmony with the other volunteers.	0.825			
When I volunteer, I feel a sense of sharing with the people there.	0.862			
Volunteering really allows me to get to know my fellow volunteers.	0.818			
<i>Affective commitment</i>		0.781	0.583	0.783
I do not feel like 'part of the family' at the Scouts.	0.779			
I would be very happy to spend many years in the Scouts if it were allowed.	0.771			
I enjoy discussing the Scouts with people outside it.	0.741			
I really feel as if the Scouts problems are my own.	0.612			
If I were to relocate to another community, I think I could easily become as attached to another voluntary organisation as I am to this one.	0.613			
I do not feel 'emotionally attached' to the Scouts.	0.806			
The Scouts have a great deal of personal meaning to me.	0.799			
I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to the Scouts.	0.669			

Notes: Significant at  $*t > 3.29$  at  $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.**  
Correlation matrix

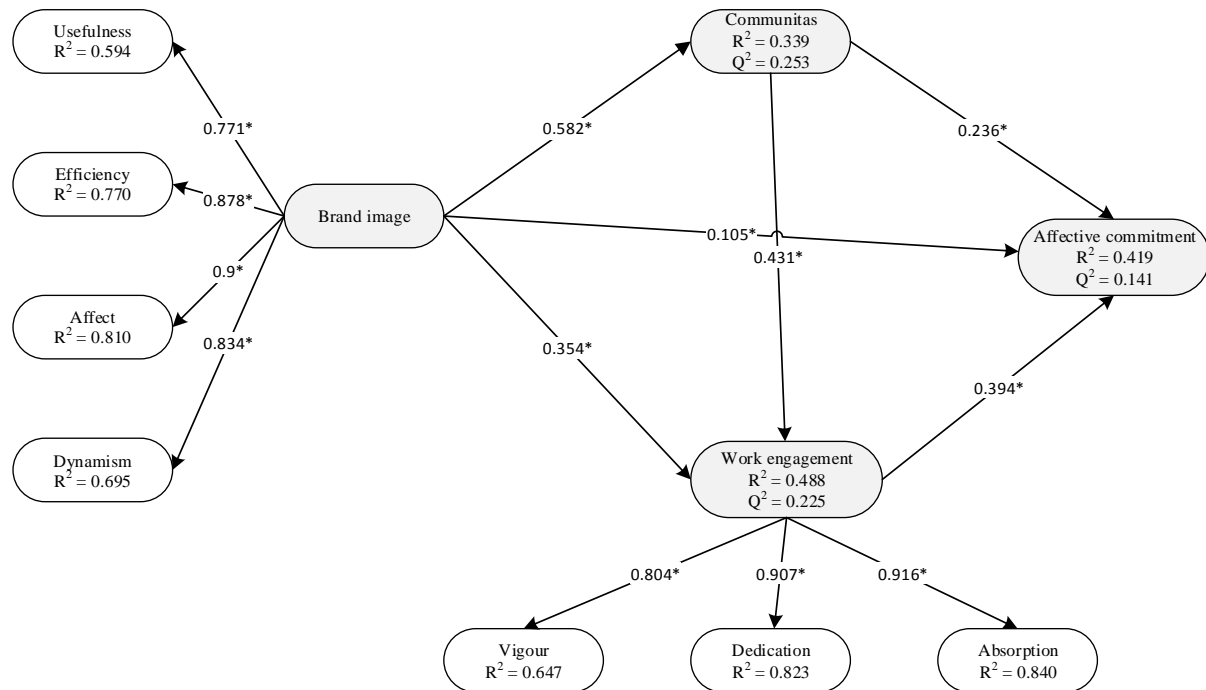
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
(1) Communitas	<b>0.81</b>										
(2) Usefulness	0.41	<b>0.81</b>									
(3) Work Engagement	0.63	0.43	<b>n/a</b>								
(4) Absorption	0.58	0.41	0.51	<b>0.76</b>							
(5) Affect	0.51	0.56	0.55	0.51	<b>0.90</b>						

(6) Brand image	0.58	0.67	0.60	0.55	0.60	n/a						
	2	1	5	8	0							
(7) Affective commitment	0.54	0.34	0.60	0.57	0.46	0.48	<b>0.76</b>					
	8	0	8	1	8	0	<b>4</b>					
(8) Dedication	0.57	0.41	0.40	0.51	0.53	0.56	0.57	<b>0.85</b>				
	7	0	7	2	3	6	6	<b>9</b>				
(9) Dynamism	0.53	0.53	0.53	0.48	0.53	0.53	0.45	0.52	<b>0.93</b>			
	0	0	2	9	3	4	9	3	<b>2</b>			
(10) Efficiency	0.51	0.64	0.51	0.46	0.55	0.57	0.36	0.45	0.63	<b>0.76</b>		
	4	1	5	6	9	8	2	4	7	<b>4</b>		
(11) Vigour	0.51	0.31	0.50	0.60	0.41	0.46	0.44	0.53	0.37	0.43	<b>0.84</b>	
	1	5	4	7	2	1	6	8	8	6	<b>7</b>	

**Notes:** Square root of AVE is on the diagonal; Square root of AVE value for work engagement and brand heritage constructs are absent as these two constructs were operationalised as a higher-order model, with AVEs only relevant to their dimensions.

To confirm brand image and work engagement constructs, three-stage assessment approach was employed (Becker, Klein, and Wetzels, 2012; Maxwell-Stuart, Taheri, Paterson, O’Gorman, & Jackson 2016). First, PCA was used to confirm brand image and work engagement as second-order constructs. PCA showed that all item loadings are above the minimum required threshold ( $\geq 0.5$ ), under their respective factors. Second, as shown in **Table 2**, CR, Cronbach’s alpha, and AVE were above threshold values. Third, repeated measures approach for estimation of the hierarchal component models (HCMs) in PLS-SEM was used (Becker et al., 2012; Maxwell-Stuart et al., 2016). In practice, all items of brand image and work engagement constructs were assigned reflectively to their respective dimensions. All items were assigned reflectively to the second order constructs. Finally, the relationship between the second-order constructs and its first-order constructs were specified to be reflective. As shown in **Figure 2**, the relationship between the brand image and work engagement constructs and their underlying first-order constructs are significant and the  $R^2$  of each dimension is superior to recommend value of 0.5, yielding that these two second-order constructs explain more than 50% of the variance in their respective first-order constructs (Hair

et al., 2017). Therefore, the results confirmed that brand image is a second-order construct represented reflectively by four first-order dimensions. Similarly, work engagement is a second-order construct with three underlying dimensions.



**Figure 2.** PLS-SEM model.

Prior to testing the hypotheses, effect size ( $f^2$ ), predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) were assessed (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2017; Luxton et al., 2017). Following Khalilzadeh and Tasci (2017)'s recommendation, Cohen's effect sizes ( $f^2$ ) signifies 0.01 for small, 0.06 for medium, and 0.14 for large effects within structural equation modelling approach. Table 4 shows  $f^2$  effect size for the significant direct paths in the inner model. The result indicates the majority of direct paths have medium and large effect size for direct relationships.

**Table 4.**  
Effect size of direct paths.

Direct Paths	Path coefficient	<i>P</i> value	$f^2$	Effect size
Brand image → Communitas	0.582	$p < 0.001$	0.247	Large
Communitas → Work engagement	0.431	$p < 0.001$	0.161	Large
Brand image → Work engagement	0.354	$p < 0.001$	0.110	Medium

Brand image → Affective commitment	0.105	$p < 0.001$	0.050	Small
Communitas → Affective commitment	0.236	$p < 0.001$	0.097	Medium
Work engagement → Affective commitment	0.394	$p < 0.001$	0.123	Medium

Based on the blindfolding procedure,  $Q^2$  shows how well data can be reconstructed empirically using the model and the PLS-SEM parameters.  $Q^2$  value should be greater than 0. As shown in **Figure 2**,  $Q^2$  for endogenous variables display acceptable predictive relevance. The SRMR value for the model was 0.069, which is less than the recommended value of 0.08 (Henseler et al., 2015).

### **Results**

The model explains 34 per cent of communitas, 49 per cent of work engagement and 42 per cent of affective commitment. As shown in **Figure 2** and **Table 4**, organisational brand image was found to have a direct association with communitas (H1:  $\beta = 0.582$ ,  $t = 23.062$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), work engagement (H2:  $\beta = 0.354$ ,  $t = 12.400$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and affective commitment (H5:  $\beta = 0.105$ ,  $t = 13.181$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). These relationships support H1, H2 and H5 and a range of existing literature which intimates such findings, but had not explicitly explored them empirically (Kylander & Stone, 2012; Michel & Rieunier, 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Taheri et al., 2016; Turner, 1969; Vecina et al., 2012). Communitas was found to have a direct relationship with work engagement (H2:  $\beta = 0.431$ ,  $t = 15.855$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and affective commitment (H7:  $\beta = 0.236$ ,  $t = 6.323$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). This finding echoes suggestions within the literature that communitas can generally motivate and inspire individuals, and is considered a desirable experience (Di Giovine, 2011; Wallace, 2006; McGinnis et al., 2008). Work engagement was found to have a direct relationship with affective commitment (H5:  $\beta = 0.394$ ,  $t = 12.132$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), in accordance with previous studies (Vecina et al., 2012).

Following Williams and MacKinnon (2008) and Maxwell-Stuart et al.'s (2016) recommendation, mediation analyses with the bootstrapping method was conducted. 95%



confidence interval (CI) of the parameter estimates based on 5,000 times resampling was used. The results indicated an indirect effect of organisational brand image on work engagement through *communitas* (H4: indirect effect = 0.251;  $t = 12.335$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; CI = [0.215, 0.288]). Since the direct effect was significant, the findings indicate that *communitas* partially mediated the impact of organisational brand image on work engagement, concurring with suggestions in the literature (Curran, Taheri, MacIntosh & O’Gorman, 2016; Kylander & Stone, 2012; Padgett & Allen 1997; Vecina et al., 2012). The findings showed that organisational brand image indirectly influences affective commitment through work engagement (H8: indirect effect = 0.376;  $t = 14.044$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; CI = [0.326, 0.427]), echoing intimations associating affective commitment and work engagement communicated through the literature (Kylander & Stone, 2012; Vecina, 2011; 2012). Finally, organisational brand image indirectly influences affective commitment through *communitas* (H9: indirect effect = 0.170;  $t = 15.705$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; CI = [0.133, 0.205]). Since the direct effect was significant, the results reveal that *communitas* partially mediates the impact of organisational brand image on affective commitment. Although this relationship is not explicitly empirically supported in the prior literature, it does speak to suggestions that *communitas* experiences result in a desire to repeat or sustain access to *communitas* opportunities (Arnould & Price, 1993; Padgett & Allen, 1997). Evidence from Kylander and Stone (2012) suggesting optimum alignment between external and internal brand image also contributes to supporting this mediation.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Declining levels of staff and volunteer morale (Third Sector, 2015), along-with alarming rates of literal social deprivation amongst wider society (Harbert, 2012; Putnam, 2000) represent significant challenges to the non-profit sector. This is exacerbated by increasing competition within the sector for resources, consequently, fostering feelings of community, belonging, and camaraderie within voluntary organisations is of growing importance. Thus, through

empirically highlighting the relevance and value of *communitas* to a non-profit sector challenged by volunteer recruitment and retention this study contributes to understanding of volunteer motivations through identifying *communitas*' role in creating more committed volunteers. This study also contributes through deepening understanding of the relationship between brand image, work engagement, affective commitment and *communitas*. While *communitas* has received limited qualitative consideration in the volunteer context (Wallace, 2006), its relationship with brand image, and affective commitment had not been previously explored. Thus, by answering calls from the literature to explore these concepts further, and within a new context, our study contributes to understanding in this area of non-profit, experiential marketing and represents an initial point of departure for subsequent research.

The empirically supported model highlights the previously overlooked capacity for *communitas* experiences to contribute to the engagement and affective commitment of volunteers. Stemming from this, the research suggests that voluntary organisations promoting and facilitating *communitas* experiences have potential to establish a more vigorous, dedicated, and absorbed workforce. As Vecina et al. (2012) note, enhanced volunteer work engagement results in lower rates of turnover, suggesting *communitas* experiences could represent a valuable asset to voluntary organisations. Furthermore, evidence of a direct relationship between brand image and volunteer work engagement emphasise the importance of brand image to non-profit organisations, reiterating Kylander and Stone's (2012) argument to ensure congruence between external and internal brand image.

Brand image's relationship to *communitas* represents another avenue of interest, perhaps suggestive of complementarity between the projected brand image and the actual volunteer experience with the Scouts. Furthermore, it intimates the influence brand image has in facilitating *communitas* rich experiences themselves, suggesting it is the promotion of these

which evokes a more relaxed psychological state amongst volunteers conducive to *communitas* stimulation.

The findings also contribute to understanding of affective commitment in the non-profit sector. First, the empirically supported relationship intimated but not empirically tested in the literature between *communitas* and affective commitment finds support from the data. Second, our study adds support to the findings of previous studies (Vecina et al. 2012), which suggest more engaged volunteers become more committed to their host organisations. Consequently, through highlighting new drivers of affective commitment, the case for cultivating and delivering *communitas*-rich, and engaging volunteer experiences within non-profit organisations is supported. Furthermore, these findings serve to highlight the importance of the volunteer experience, in particular the need for volunteer managers to embed experience enhancing elements into their volunteers' service with non-profit organisations to help sustain longer-term volunteer partnerships.

Taken together, our study demonstrates through the development of a new empirical model the increase in volunteer work engagement attainable through facilitation of *communitas* experiences, and notes the important role of brand image in preparing and priming volunteers for such experiences, thus representing a useful, and overdue contribution to theoretical understanding of *communitas* in relation to marketing in voluntary organisations. Cognisant of this, we argue voluntary organisations should strive to serve as vehicles for social interaction which catalyse increasing interaction and strengthen the bonds between their volunteers, as well as the wider communities they serve.

### ***Managerial Implications***

Our study generates several implications for managers of volunteers that can help them capitalise on the power *communitas* can yield for a non-profit organisation. The empirically tested model suggests non-profit organisations can benefit from fostering *communitas* amongst their volunteers (communicated through prior brand image) to enhance their engagement in volunteer work and subsequent commitment to the volunteer organisation. Practical steps realising these benefits are now presented.

First, marketing managers in voluntary organisations should place greater emphasis on developing and communicating *communitas* experiences. This could be achieved through augmenting the design of volunteer programmes to support bonding and social opportunities, altering volunteer work environments for example by revisiting office or volunteering event layouts and ensuring ample communication of expectations to engage with other volunteers at interview and induction stages. They may also organise events in the volunteer organisation that help remove traditional social barriers. For example, team building events designed to require a broad range of skills, and calibrating teams to include a variety of demographics amongst members. Such efforts to equalise the status and position of a volunteer cohort could be conducive to facilitating *communitas* experiences.

Second, volunteer managers should ensure their organisation's marketing literature allows for the projection of a brand image in-line with its offerings, and conducive to the stimulation of *communitas*, amongst volunteers as well as prospective volunteers. Further, management should ensure close alignment with the internal organisational reality and the externally projected expectations of volunteering with an organisation communicated through the brand image. To this end, marketing literature should incorporate and emphasise *communitas* themes to push back against declining morale in voluntary organisations, while encouraging isolated members of society to use volunteering as a means of social interaction.

However, management should carefully pilot such campaigns to avoid alienating prospective volunteers.

Third, it remains of paramount importance for an element of ongoing market research to be undertaken within volunteer organisations to monitor the morale of volunteers and the frequency of *communitas* experiences occurring. However, caution should be taken to avoid perceptions amongst volunteers that *communitas* is being over-fabricated, indeed, *communitas* is at its most powerful when occurring as naturally as possible, hence managers should integrate the organic nature of *communitas* into the expectations they set for such experiences amongst volunteers.

### ***Limitations and further research***

There were several limitations to our study. The survey tool used in the research was only distributed to one voluntary organisation's members, as opposed to multiple, and utilised a cross-sectional design. Conducting the study among several voluntary organisations would have enhanced its generalisability. Thus, we would like to invite our colleagues to apply the model to other research settings and also recommend they adopt a longitudinal design approach. Furthermore, this study utilized both brand image and work engagement as second-order conceptualizations. Although these were statistically demonstrated to be representative of their respective indicators, future studies may wish to build on this aspect of the study, and further apply the second-order conceptualizations used.

Finally, this research operationalised *communitas* for a volunteer context. Despite the scale demonstrating good reliability and validity, additional research is required to fully support its use. These limitations aside, this study serves as a useful and original contribution, and as a point of departure for subsequent research exploring the importance of *communitas* and brand image in the voluntary sector.

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