Emotional Exhaustion among Undergraduate Student Volunteers: A Conceptual Review from a Conservation of Resources Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Volunteering is widely institutionalized within higher education as a mechanism for promoting civic engagement, social responsibility, and holistic student development. Although its benefits are well established, growing evidence suggests that volunteer engagement may also entail unintended psychological costs, particularly among undergraduate students. One such consequence is emotional exhaustion, a core dimension of burnout characterized by emotional and physical depletion arising from sustained demands. This conceptual review synthesizes existing literature on emotional exhaustion among undergraduate student volunteers, integrating developmental, cultural, motivational, and organizational perspectives. Anchored in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the review examines causes, manifestations, and consequences of emotional exhaustion, as well as coping strategies and protective factors relevant to student volunteers. By drawing on international scholarship and Philippine-based studies, this paper identifies critical gaps in the literature and underscores the need for early recognition and preventive interventions. Implications for higher education institutions, volunteer organizations, and mental health practitioners are discussed, with emphasis on promoting sustainable volunteer engagement and student well-being.

Keywords: emotional exhaustion; undergraduate students; volunteerism; burnout; Conservation of Resources theory

Volunteering is commonly defined as an active and planned form of prosocial behavior involving the voluntary contribution of time, effort, and skills for the benefit of others without expectation of material reward (Caldwell et al., 2008; Deocaris & Llenares, 2015). Within higher education institutions, volunteering is frequently promoted as a means of cultivating civic responsibility, leadership, and professional competencies. For undergraduate students, volunteer participation provides opportunities to translate academic learning into practice while fostering personal growth and social engagement (Simha et al., 2011).

Despite these well-documented benefits, volunteering is not inherently free from psychological strain. Student volunteers are often exposed to emotionally demanding contexts, including work with marginalized or vulnerable populations, interpersonal conflict, high role expectations, and competing academic responsibilities. Such demands may heighten vulnerability to emotional exhaustion, particularly when coping resources are insufficient or poorly supported (Cantaert, 2021). Emotional exhaustion is widely recognized as the central and earliest dimension of burnout, frequently preceding more severe outcomes such as depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Undergraduate students occupy a critical developmental stage. According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, this period involves identity exploration and the pursuit of career goals, which can be stressful in itself. While volunteering may support meaning-making and identity formation, it may simultaneously exacerbate stress as students attempt to balance academic, organizational, social, and personal demands. As higher education institutions increasingly institutionalize volunteerism through service-learning programs, civic engagement requirements, and national policies, it becomes imperative to examine not only its benefits but also its potential psychological costs.

The present paper offers a conceptual review of emotional exhaustion among undergraduate student volunteers. Specifically, it synthesizes existing literature to (a) clarify how emotional exhaustion is

conceptualized, (b) identify key causes and consequences, (c) examine coping strategies and protective factors, and (d) situate these findings within the Conservation of Resources (COR) theoretical framework. By doing so, this review aims to contribute to a more balanced understanding of student volunteerism and to inform institutional and clinical efforts to promote sustainable engagement and psychological well-being.

Emotional Exhaustion: Conceptualization and Progression

Emotional exhaustion refers to a state of emotional and physical depletion resulting from prolonged exposure to excessive demands and chronic stressors (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). It is characterized by feelings of being emotionally overextended, drained of energy, and unable to meet ongoing demands effectively (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Lee & Akhtar, 2007). Unlike transient fatigue, emotional exhaustion encompasses emotional weariness, cognitive strain, and reduced capacity for sustained emotional engagement.

The progression of emotional exhaustion has been conceptualized as a stress-response trajectory consisting of three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. Initially, individuals mobilize energy to respond to stressors; however, when demands persist and coping resources remain inadequate, prolonged resistance eventually culminates in resource depletion and functional impairment (Schaffner, 2016). At this stage, individuals commonly report pervasive fatigue, emotional detachment, and diminished effectiveness.

A defining feature of emotional exhaustion is the tendency toward withdrawal and disengagement as self-protective responses. Individuals may distance themselves emotionally and socially in an attempt to conserve remaining resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). While such strategies may provide temporary relief, they often undermine access to social support and recovery opportunities, thereby perpetuating exhaustion. Importantly, emotional exhaustion is not confined to a single life domain; longitudinal evidence suggests that exhaustion experienced in one context may generalize to broader aspects of well-being over time (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012). The persistent nature of emotional exhaustion underscores the importance of early recognition and intervention. Without proper support and coping strategies, individuals may face long-term implications, including burnout and diminished overall life satisfaction.

Undergraduate Student Volunteers: Developmental and Contextual Considerations

Volunteer engagement frequently begins during adolescence and emerging adulthood, developmental periods characterized by identity exploration and increasing social responsibility. Classic and contemporary developmental frameworks place the upper boundary of adolescence at approximately age 24, corresponding to the typical age range of undergraduate students (Hall, 1904; Sawyer et al., 2008). During this stage, individuals seek meaningful roles that affirm personal values and future aspirations, rendering volunteerism particularly salient.

For undergraduate students, volunteering fulfills both altruistic and self-developmental functions. Empirical studies have associated volunteer participation with enhanced self-efficacy, leadership capacity, communication skills, resilience, and social connectedness (Claxton-Oldfield, 2016; Handy et al., 2010). In the Philippine context, volunteering is further embedded within collectivist cultural values such as *bayanihan, pakikipagkapwa*, and communal responsibility, contributing to its widespread prevalence among college students (Aguiling-Dalisay et al., 2004).

However, these same contextual and motivational factors may also heighten vulnerability to emotional exhaustion. Undergraduate volunteers frequently balance academic demands, organizational responsibilities, and social commitments (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Tosevski et al., 2010). As members of Generation Z, they are additionally exposed to stressors associated with constant digital connectivity, technostress, and fear of missing out (FOMO), all of which have been empirically linked to emotional exhaustion (Megha & Sharma, 2022; Buendicha-Mateos et al., 2022). Cultural expectations emphasizing obligation and social harmony may further discourage boundary-setting and promote emotional suppression, thereby increasing risk over time (De Cremer & Leonardelli, 2003; Smith et al., 2013; Benson et al., 2017).

Causes of Emotional Exhaustion in Student Volunteers

Workload and Organizational Factors

High workload and unfavorable organizational conditions are consistently identified as primary causes of emotional exhaustion across occupational and volunteer contexts (Michielsen et al., 2004; Kowalski et al., 2010; Bakker et al., 2000; Bogaert et al., 2017). Undergraduate student volunteers may encounter extended hours, role ambiguity, limited decision-making autonomy, and insufficient institutional support (Allen & Muller, 2013). When expectations are unclear or exceed available competencies and resources, students expend additional emotional and cognitive effort to meet demands, accelerating resource depletion (Xu et al., 2020).

Interpersonal demands constitute an additional source of strain (Bakker & Heuven, 2006). Volunteer roles often involve sustained interaction with supervisors, peers, and service recipients, as well as exposure to others' distress. Persistent interpersonal conflict, lack of recognition, and perceived powerlessness have been shown to exacerbate emotional exhaustion in helping roles (Zigarelli, 2000; Gawayen, 2023).

Stress and Perceived Demands

Chronic stress is a well-established precursor to emotional exhaustion; however, empirical evidence indicates that perceived stress plays a particularly salient role (Michielsen et al., 2004). Students who appraise demands as overwhelming or uncontrollable are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, regardless of objective workload. These findings underscore the importance of cognitive appraisal processes in the development of exhaustion.

Psychological and Individual Factors

Individual differences further shape susceptibility to emotional exhaustion. Personality traits such as neuroticism have been positively associated with exhaustion, whereas extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness appear to confer relative protection (Ghorpade et al., 2007; Michielsen et al., 2004; Morgan & de Bruin, 2010; Hudek-Knezevik et al., 2006). Difficulties in emotion regulation, including sustained emotional suppression, exacerbate emotional labor and deplete psychological resources (Strack et al., 2014).

Although altruistic motivation is generally associated with positive outcomes, it may paradoxically increase risk when accompanied by overcommitment and blurred boundaries. Student volunteers who invest deeply in helping others may experience heightened distress when outcomes fall short of expectations, contributing to emotional strain (De Cremer & Leonardelli, 2003; Smith et al., 2013; Benson et al., 2017).

Consequences of Emotional Exhaustion

The consequences of emotional exhaustion are multidimensional, affecting physical, psychological, social, and behavioral functioning. Physically, exhaustion manifests as chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, headaches, and compromised immune functioning (Glise et al., 2020; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Salvagoni et al., 2017). Psychologically, it is associated with irritability, emotional detachment, cognitive impairment, and reduced stress tolerance (Chen et al., 2020; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Zohar et al., 2003).

Emotional exhaustion demonstrates strong associations with depression and anxiety, with substantial empirical overlap reported between exhaustion and depressive symptomatology (Koutsimani et al., 2019; Bianchi et al., 2014). Longitudinal studies further suggest that emotional exhaustion may predict depressive symptoms over extended periods (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012), highlighting its relevance as an early indicator of more severe mental health concerns.

Among undergraduate students, emotional exhaustion carries significant academic implications. Exhausted students often report diminished concentration, impaired memory, procrastination, and academic disengagement, which may ultimately contribute to decreased performance and increased dropout risk (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014; Kroska et al., 2020; McIlveen et al., 2019). Socially, emotional exhaustion

may strain interpersonal relationships and promote withdrawal, further limiting access to supportive resources (Chen et al., 2020).

Prevalence of Emotional Exhaustion

In undergraduate populations, a meta-analysis of 20 studies estimated that 55.4% experience emotional exhaustion. (Rosales-Ricardo et al., 2021). In volunteer emergency medical service personnel, 92% scored high in emotional exhaustion (Essex & Scott, 2008). Medical students, who frequently participate in volunteer work as part of their training, also exhibit high levels of emotional exhaustion, particularly during their clinical years (Erschens et al., 2024).

Younger volunteers, such as students, are particularly vulnerable to emotional exhaustion, especially when driven by "growth motives" like career development. This unmet desire for skill enhancement often leads to increased stress and burnout (Aranda et al., 2019). Additionally, younger volunteers are more susceptible to emotional exhaustion because they are still developing effective coping strategies, which makes them less equipped to manage stress compared to older, more experienced volunteers (Chacón et al., 2007). When volunteers' motivations align with their personal values, they report lower levels of emotional exhaustion. Conversely, if their involvement is primarily driven by social pressure from family and friends, they may feel less committed, which can lead to a perception of their tasks as more exhausting and less engaging (Moreno-Jimenez & Villodres, 2010).

Research indicates that the more time student volunteers dedicate to their roles, the higher their levels of emotional exhaustion become (Moreno-Jimenez & Villodres, 2010). Moreover, a strong imbalance between compassion for others and self-care can result in oncology volunteers becoming overly involved in the lives of their patients, potentially leading to harmful behaviors (Meyer et al., 2018). Oftentimes, the individuals who experience exhaustion are highly idealistic about the way in which they can help others (Zigarelli, 2000). Interestingly, data suggest that both active and dropped-out volunteers report high levels of burnout, with those who have dropped out experiencing even higher emotional exhaustion levels compared to their active counterparts (Ripamonti et al., 2017).

Conservation of Resources Theory as an Integrative Framework
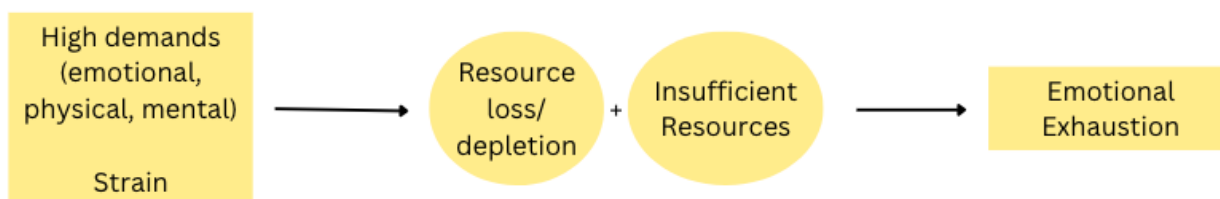
Conservation of Resources (COR) theory posits that individuals are motivated to acquire, maintain, and protect valued resources, including energy, emotional capacities, social support, and personal characteristics (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Stress arises when these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficient to meet situational demands. Notably, resource loss is more impactful than resource gain, rendering individuals particularly vulnerable once depletion begins.

Applied to undergraduate student volunteers, COR theory provides a coherent framework for understanding emotional exhaustion as the outcome of sustained resource imbalance. Academic pressures, volunteer demands, emotional labor, and cultural expectations collectively draw upon students' limited resource reserves. When opportunities for recovery and replenishment are inadequate, resource loss accelerates, culminating in emotional exhaustion.

COR theory also elucidates the cyclical nature of exhaustion. As resources diminish, students' capacity for self-care, emotional regulation, and social engagement deteriorates, further reducing access to replenishing resources. Preventive efforts must therefore address both demand reduction and systematic resource enhancement.

Coping Strategies and Protective Factors

Effective management of emotional exhaustion requires both the replenishment of depleted resources and the prevention of further resource loss. Restorative activities, including adequate sleep, physical exercise, leisure engagement, and intentional rest periods, are essential for recovery (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Boundary-setting and time management practices enable students to regulate demands and protect personal resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Cognitive and emotional strategies, such as mindfulness and cognitive reframing, have demonstrated efficacy in reducing emotional exhaustion by altering stress appraisals and enhancing emotional awareness (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Social support from family, peers, and mentors functions as a critical buffer, providing emotional validation and instrumental assistance (Essex & Scott, 2008; Kowalski et al., 2010).

Spirituality represents a complex coping resource. Positive religious coping may foster meaning and resilience, whereas negative religious coping—characterized by guilt or perceived abandonment—may intensify emotional exhaustion (Hussain, 2024; Captari et al., 2018). Additional protective factors include self-esteem, perceived competence, and a sense of personal control.

In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies, including emotional detachment, substance use, excessive overworking, and denial, may offer temporary relief but ultimately exacerbate emotional exhaustion and impede recovery (Essex & Scott, 2008; Lemaire & Wallace, 2010; Gawayen et al., 2023).

Implications and Future Directions

The findings synthesized in this review highlight the need for higher education institutions and volunteer organizations to adopt a balanced and evidence-informed approach to student volunteerism. Institutional efforts should prioritize realistic workload expectations, clear role definitions, adequate supervision, and accessible mental health resources. Training initiatives that emphasize boundary-setting, emotional awareness, and self-care may further mitigate risk.

Future research should extend empirical investigation into emotional exhaustion among student volunteers, particularly within non-Western and collectivist contexts. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs would be especially valuable in capturing the dynamic interplay between demands, resources, and well-being over time.

CONCLUSION

Volunteering remains a valuable and meaningful component of undergraduate education; however, it is not inherently protective against psychological strain. Emotional exhaustion represents a significant yet frequently overlooked consequence of student volunteerism, with implications extending beyond volunteer roles to academic functioning and overall well-being. Grounded in Conservation of Resources theory, this conceptual review elucidates the complex interplay of developmental, cultural, organizational, and individual factors that contribute to emotional exhaustion among undergraduate student volunteers. Early recognition and targeted preventive strategies are essential to promoting sustainable volunteer engagement and safeguarding student mental health.

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