



Sustaining Volunteer First-Aid Capacity in Hong Kong: A Qualitative Interview Study of Role Identity, Mobilisation, Training, and Retention in S Organization

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Abstract. This qualitative study explored participation and retention mechanisms in S Organization, a Hong Kong volunteer first-aid group. Three active volunteers were recruited via snowball sampling and interviewed online between April and October 2025. Transcripts were analysed using NVivo-supported thematic analysis, yielding five key themes. First, volunteers differed in whether they experienced their role as identity-building (rooted in mission) or primarily instrumental. Second, fast digital mobilisation enabled access, but first-come-first-served sign-ups fostered competition and social distance. Third, cross-agency collaboration was routinised through repeated drills, with volunteers viewing their role as "side-by-side" rather than auxiliary. Fourth, training combined self-study, workshops, and simulations but remained relatively open rather than tiered by level. Fifth, while satisfaction was generally high, time constraints and opportunity scarcity reduced participation intensity without prompting formal exit. These findings inform improvements in opportunity allocation, recognition systems, and retention support design.

Keywords: Volunteer first aid; Mobilisation; Retention; Thematic analysis; Hong Kong

1 Introduction

A catastrophic residential fire in Hong Kong on 26 November 2025, which ultimately claimed 168 lives, highlighted the intense demands placed on the city's prehospital response capacity during major emergencies. Beyond public debate on building safety, this event underscored a critical but less visible issue: how Hong Kong sustains surge-ready first-aid support through auxiliary and volunteer contributions. This question is particularly relevant to S Organization, a volunteer first-aid provider, as understanding how its volunteers join, become operational, and remain engaged is fundamentally a preparedness and resilience issue.

Prior research offers three robust insights: volunteering is driven by multiple coexisting motives¹⁻³; sustained engagement depends on the interaction between

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individual motives and organisational context⁴⁻⁶, and emergency volunteering introduces distinctive pressures that shape retention⁷⁻⁹. However, less is known about the process mechanism linking joining, training-to-readiness, and sustained commitment within Hong Kong's volunteer first-aid organisations, where empirical evidence at the organisational level remains limited.

To address this gap, this qualitative study examines volunteer participation and retention in S Organization, asking: (RQ1) What motivates entry and how do motivations evolve? (RQ2) How do training, duty arrangements, and social dynamics shape competence and commitment? (RQ3) What barriers and supports most influence retention, and what implications follow for sustaining volunteer capacity in Hong Kong?

2 Methods

2.1 Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured in-depth interviews with volunteers from S Organization¹⁰⁻¹². Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria were currently active volunteers and completion of core training. In total, N = 3 volunteers were interviewed online between April 2025 and October 2025, with interview durations ranging from 16 min 44 s to 58 min 54 s (Unit A: 58:54; Unit B: 16:44; Unit C: 21:03). To protect confidentiality, internal units are anonymised as Unit A, Unit B, and Unit C, and participants are labelled P1–P3. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were de-identified prior to analysis.

2.2 Data Analysis

Transcripts were imported into NVivo and analysed using an iterative coding process consistent with thematic analysis¹³⁻¹⁵. Coding proceeded in two phases: (1) initial/open coding to generate descriptive nodes capturing recurrent concepts (e.g., entry motives, training experiences, duty stressors), followed by (2) focused coding to consolidate nodes into higher-order themes that explain mechanisms of participation and retention. Throughout analysis, analytic memos documented code definitions, theme boundaries, and disconfirming cases to enhance transparency and credibility.

2.3 Results Reporting

Findings are presented thematically. For each theme, the Results section reports: (a) a one- to two-sentence analytic claim; (b) NVivo-derived evidence indicators (e.g., number of participants mentioning the theme, coding reference counts, and/or contrasts across Unit A–C or tenure groups); and (c) representative verbatim quotations presented as standalone paragraphs, linked to participant identifiers (e.g.,

P3, Unit B). This structure makes explicit the evidence chain from transcript excerpts to thematic claims.

3 Results

3.1 Theme 1: Role identity and “what it means to serve”

Participants framed volunteering as more than “doing tasks.” Over time, the role became an identity—being someone who can respond—linked to pride, professionalism, and public responsibility. At the same time, one participant kept a more instrumental understanding of the role, focusing on practical service delivery rather than identity-building. Identity-building (role meaning / responsibility / pride) was prominent in P1 and P2, while P3 emphasised task-logic and operational efficiency (service points / workload distribution / practical effectiveness).

“I am a regular volunteer... I joined through the school youth division, and I’ve been here for about three years (P1).” “Through certificates... volunteers can develop a sense of mission and responsibility toward society (P1).” “I don’t think we are only in an assisting role... we are walking side by side [with other forces] because our first-aid knowledge can be stronger in some contexts(P2).” “There are too many [first-aid] posts set up... we may have 45 people stationed, but only one or two points are actually working (P3).”

Role identity appears to be a retention-relevant mechanism: when volunteering is experienced as a valued identity (responder competence + social responsibility), participation is more meaningfully sustained. However, the presence of a pragmatic orientation (task-first framing) suggests that retention strategies should not assume identity formation is universal.

3.2 Theme 2: Joining and Mobilisation as a Mix of Channels, Triggers, and Incentives

Mobilisation was described as highly dependent on communication channels (fast dissemination and rapid sign-up) and incentive structures (certificates, recognition, progression). Two participants portrayed mobilisation as efficient, largely because mobile messaging allows immediate visibility and action. Another participant stressed that mobilisation can produce friction when opportunities feel scarce or unevenly accessible. Shared codes included recruitment/joining pathway, mobilisation channel, and incentives. Divergent codes included “efficient/fast” versus “competition/friction” and “unequal access.”

“It’s quite efficient... everyone has a phone, so we get information immediately... in the group chat we can see [an event] and sign up right away (P2).” “The volunteer programme has many rewards... certificates... helpful when applying for government departments like the police or fire service (P2).” “Some services are announced in a group... people who want to accumulate hours have to ‘grab’ them... if your ‘hand speed’ is not fast, you gradually feel distance from the team (P1).”

Mobilisation capacity is strengthened by fast channels and clear incentives, but the “first-come-first-served” dynamic can inadvertently create perceptions of unfairness—an underappreciated participation barrier with implications for equitable retention.

3.3 Theme 3: Cross-agency Coordination and Perceived Positioning under Pressure

Participants described cross-agency collaboration as routine and structurally guided, especially regarding ambulance operations and joint exercises. Collaboration was not experienced as merely subordinate: participants emphasised complementary expertise and joint responsibility. However, collaboration remained dependent on institutional boundaries and command arrangements. Shared codes included collaboration with government departments, joint drills, command/structure, and role positioning (auxiliary vs. partner).

“For sudden incidents... [the organisation] is under the Security Bureau... and the ambulances are managed in relation to the Fire Services’ ambulance stations... often cooperating rather than handling major incidents alone (P1).” “We often cooperate with the Civil Aid Service and the Fire Services, so drills are joint simulation exercises (P2).” “I don’t think we are only an assisting role... we are a role that goes side by side (P2).”

Collaboration is experienced as situated coordination shaped by command structure, joint routines (drills), and perceived professional contribution. The “partner” framing—rather than “auxiliary”—is important because it reinforces role identity and legitimises volunteer effort in high-stakes contexts.

3.4 Theme 4: Training as the Bridge from Willingness to Operational Confidence

All participants treated training as central to competence and legitimacy. Training was described as a combination of self-paced online learning and face-to-face workshops with written tests and scenario-based drills. At the same time, participants noted that training is generally open to all and not strictly stratified by individual skill level. Shared codes included training modes, assessment, simulations/drills, and skill development; divergence centred on whether training should be more tiered or more selectively structured.

“We have first-aid skills training... [and] a three-year learning progression... and we also learn things like psychological counselling (P3).” “Online courses exist, but mostly self-study... the main part is offline workshops... there is a written test and simulation training... using mannequins for skill assessment (P3).” “There isn’t a strong requirement limiting individuals by level... the courses are open for everyone to attend (P3).” “There is practical training, but also a written test (P1).”

Training functions as a conversion mechanism that turns motivation into credible readiness. However, the “open-to-all” model suggests potential trade-offs: inclusiveness and access are high, but tailoring by experience level may be limited.

3.5 Theme 5: Satisfaction, Stressors, and Perceived Support

Two participants expressed strong satisfaction rooted in service meaning and the preference that “few injuries occur,” framing the work as inherently worthwhile. Stressors were described less as emotional trauma and more as operational and organisational pressures (e.g., time constraints, competition for slots/hours). The organisation’s flexibility (non-compulsory participation) was described as a key buffer against pressure. Codes clustered around satisfaction/meaning, pressure sources (time/workload/slot competition), and organisational flexibility.

“I don’t think there is anything I’m dissatisfied with... we provide first-aid for people in need... and we also don’t hope many people get injured... so we are very satisfied with our work (P1).” “They won’t force you... they consider that we are a volunteer team (P1).” “People don’t necessarily ‘quit’; they participate when an activity fits them... those with full-time jobs and side work may become less active over time (P2).” “To accumulate hours you have to ‘grab’ opportunities... if you’re not fast enough you feel distanced (P1).”

Volunteers’ experience hinges on whether meaning and flexibility outweigh participation frictions. Organisational design choices that unintentionally intensify scarcity (e.g., competitive sign-ups) may erode belonging and long-term engagement even when overall satisfaction with “helping” remains high.

4 Discussion

4.1 Summary of Key Findings

This qualitative study examined volunteer participation in S Organization across five operational domains, yielding four overarching findings. First, role meaning is heterogeneous: some volunteers experience the role as identity-building and socially meaningful, while others adopt a more instrumental, task-oriented perspective focused on operational efficiency. Second, mobilisation is digitally enabled and fast but can feel competitive, as first-come-first-served sign-ups create perceived distance and reduced belonging for those unable to secure shifts. Third, collaboration is routinised through joint drills and structural coordination, with volunteers positioning their competence as “side-by-side” rather than purely auxiliary. Fourth, training functions as a competence pipeline but remains relatively open and less stratified by level; retention is buffered by flexibility but threatened by time constraints, with pressure manifesting as reduced participation intensity rather than formal exit.

4.2 Dialogue with Prior Research

The finding that volunteers articulate multiple role meanings aligns with the functionalist account of volunteering, which posits that individuals pursue volunteering for coexisting functions. In our data, identity-building narratives sit alongside pragmatic task-centred narratives, explaining why uniform retention practices may have uneven effects across volunteers. The tendency to reduce

participation rather than formally withdraw supports interactionist perspectives, suggesting retention problems manifest as "quiet disengagement" shaped by the interaction of personal circumstances and organisational structures. The theme of mobilisation friction—competition for service slots and feelings of distance—adds to emergency-volunteer research by identifying structural demotivators such as perceived fairness. This emerges strongly in S Organization due to the combination of demand for service-hour accumulation and limited, time-sensitive opportunities. Responding to identified evidence gaps in Hong Kong EMS research, our findings offer organisation-level qualitative evidence on how training, collaboration routines, and mobilisation design are experienced by volunteers, and how these experiences plausibly shape sustainability¹⁶⁻²⁰.

4.3 Contributions, Strengths, and Limitations

This research has three strengths. First, it provides Hong Kong-specific, organisation-level evidence on how a volunteer first-aid organisation sustains readiness through mobilisation, training, and collaboration. Second, it offers a mechanism-oriented account, linking a process chain from mobilisation to retention and identifying opportunity scarcity as an under-discussed demotivator. Third, it uses a transparent qualitative approach with traceable thematic analysis.

This research has three limitations. First, the small sample (N=3) and snowball sampling limit transferability; future work should expand size and diversify recruitment. Second, the single-organisation scope may reflect specific practices; comparative designs across Hong Kong organisations are needed. Third, self-report data and limited triangulation call for future studies to incorporate document analysis and observation.

4.4 Practical and Policy Implications

First, opportunity allocation should be redesigned using a hybrid system (e.g., rotation or lottery) to reduce perceived unfairness. Second, recognition should be broadened beyond "hours" to include skill badges and role progression, thereby reducing unhealthy competition. Third, training should adopt tiered modules and strengthen feedback loops to improve competence fit. Fourth, inter-agency learning routines should be institutionalised through formal debriefs and joint drills to reinforce competence. Finally, flexibility should be treated as retention infrastructure by offering predictable scheduling options to accommodate volunteers' variable life demands²¹⁻²³.

5 Conclusion

This study concludes that sustaining volunteer first-aid capacity is a systems problem shaped by role identity, training pipelines, and opportunity allocation. In S Organization, fast digital mobilisation enhances responsiveness, but competitive

first-come-first-served access can erode belonging and reduce participation without triggering formal exit. At the citywide level, preparedness depends on institutional design—fair shift distribution, diversified recognition, tiered training, and routinised inter-agency learning—that converts willingness into sustained surge capability. Volunteer organisations thus function as civic infrastructure, whose stability materially affects Hong Kong's ability to absorb shocks and protect life when major incidents occur.

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