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Exploring the volunteer experience–perseverance–organisational sustainability nexus in Australia’s community heritage sector: a case study of the Embroiderers’ Guild, Queensland

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ABSTRACT

A majority of Australia’s community heritage sector is made up of organisations which are fully volunteer-managed. As such, volunteer experience is critical to the organisational sustainability of community heritage organisations. Drawing on qualitative methods including interviews, observations and an arts-based workshop with eight volunteers at the Embroiderers’ Guild, Queensland, this article examines how volunteers’ lived experiences within leisure-oriented institutions like the Guild shape not only their own fulfilment but also the long-term viability of the organisation their volunteering sustains. We analyse the data in relation to the cultural, social and affective dimensions of volunteering at the Guild. The article extends the serious leisure perspective by demonstrating that perseverance is produced through a dynamic interaction between individual rewards and institutional routines and material demands that enable rich leisure experiences and require sustained, high-level commitment. Perseverance is a co-produced phenomenon that is integral to organisational sustainability, but it is inherently fragile because it relies heavily on the continued goodwill, skill and investment of volunteers.

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Introduction

Australia’s community heritage sector is made up almost entirely of organisations which are volunteer-managed, with no paid staff (Cantillon & Baker, 2025; Winkworth, 2011). These volunteers play a critical role in caring for, exhibiting and interpreting a significant ‘portion of the nation’s tangible and intangible heritage’, with volunteer-run organisations central to the preservation and promotion of local history (Perkin, 2013, p. 119; see also Wessell & Thorpe, 2023). Community heritage organisations (CHOs) cease operation if their volunteer pool is exhausted, placing at risk the diversity and accessibility of the country’s historical record (Baker & Cantillon, 2020; Young, 2006). As such, it is worth considering the relationship between volunteer experience and the organisational

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sustainability of CHOs. Foregrounding these dynamics within leisure studies is crucial, given long-standing disciplinary interests in the cultural, social and identity-making capacities of voluntary leisure participation (see, e.g. Lockstone-Binney et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2013), of which heritage volunteering is a part (Edwards, 2005; Graham, 2004; Orr, 2006).

Drawing on a qualitative case study of the Embroiderers' Guild, Queensland (henceforth referred to as the Guild), the article sets out to develop a detailed understanding of how volunteers' lived experiences within a leisure-oriented institution like the Guild shape individual fulfilment and the long-term viability of the organisation. The article asks the question: what is the connection between volunteer experience, perseverance and organisational sustainability? In doing so, it complements existing literature on Australia's voluntary and third sector which highlights the importance of organisational culture for volunteer retention, management position uptake and viable institutional futures (Holtrop et al., 2026; Mees et al., 2016; Mex, 2021). Our article approaches these concerns through a leisure studies lens to foreground the experiential and meaning-making dimensions of volunteering that underpin sustained participation and organisational viability in, specifically, CHOs.

Established in 1968 and located in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley in the Australian state of Queensland, the Guild offers an interesting case study to begin answering the article's driving question. The Guild strives to 'promote, preserve and encourage the art of embroidery, for the enjoyment of its members and the general public' (The Embroiderers' Guild, Queensland Inc., n.d.). It houses an extensive archive and library as well as offering stitching workshops that support the continuation of embroidery as living heritage. The Guild has approximately 250 members, with 60–80 of these women volunteering in some capacity to assist with the everyday running of the organisation. Though volunteer numbers are strong, membership of the Guild is declining, and so organisational sustainability is of concern to those on its governance committee. The Guild provides a rich setting in which craft-based leisure, community belonging and embodied, intangible heritage practices intersect with the pressures of sustaining a volunteer-based organisation. This positioning aligns with scholarship on craft and living heritage which highlights volunteer engagement as relational and affective, often motivated by a personal history with the object of preservation (Løkka & Hjemdahl, 2025). This positioning also reflects documented demographic data for Australian heritage organisations which indicate volunteers are more often women (Volunteering Australia, 2021) and predominantly older adults (de Villiers et al., 2017).

The article begins with an overview of two conceptual frameworks that inform our investigation into the relationship between volunteer experience and the long-term viability of the Guild: Stebbins' (1982, 1996, 2004, 2014, 2025) Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) and Baker and Huber's (2013) typology of DIY institutions. These frameworks provide a lens through which to understand how organisational sustainability is connected to volunteers' desires to persevere despite challenges they may face in their work. The SLP's focus on rewards and costs offers insight into volunteer commitment to the organisation, while Baker and Huber's typology highlights how different organisational functions provide the setting for volunteer perseverance. Following the overview of the frameworks, the article outlines the data collection methods. The findings section then begins with a consideration of key cultural, social and affective functions of

the Guild, such as the ways skills and knowledge are shared, developed, accessed and applied; the sense of community and friendship; and the welcoming atmosphere and affordance of wonder. By bringing together the two frameworks, we find that volunteer perseverance is co-produced through the interplay of individual motivations and organisational conditions. Volunteer perseverance is a critical, albeit fragile, component of organisational sustainability, yet perseverance may also mask structural vulnerabilities. We conclude with a reflection on the article's limitations and potential future research directions, as well as an acknowledgement that the reproduction of the career volunteering model may be under threat from contemporary socio-cultural conditions facing CHOs.

Serious leisure volunteering and the structural functions of community heritage organisations

Serious leisure perspective

The SLP seeks to 'define, describe, and interrelate' serious, casual and project-based leisure, each of which can include volunteering (Stebbins, 1982, p. 253). Serious leisure is distinguished by six characteristics: perseverance despite hardship, career orientation, development of specialised skills, durable personal and social benefits, a distinctive ethos, and strong identification with the pursuit (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). Importantly, seriousness is conceptualised not in terms of 'gravity, solemnity, joylessness, distress, and anxiety', but instead as an 'earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness' attached to the leisure activity (Stebbins, 1982, p. 258). This framing positions serious leisure as an identity-based commitment rather than a personal burden, shaping how volunteer persistence in leisure pursuits is theorised within the SLP.

Stebbins defines volunteering as freely undertaken, non-remunerated activity designed to be personally and/or socially helpful (Stebbins, 2004, p. 201). While 'not all leisure volunteering is serious leisure', forms of volunteering that generate 'special careers and distinctive sets of rewards' fit this category (Orr, 2006, p. 200). Serious leisure volunteering is marked by 'continuous and substantial helping' and by volunteers' commitment, altruistic motivations (Stebbins, 2004, p. 202) and preference for volunteering as a valued use of time (Edwards, 2005). The work on serious leisure volunteers positions them as self-directed actors who derive meaning, identity and satisfaction from sustained participation, a stance that has been highly influential but also criticised for underplaying organisational structures and constraints (Orr, 2006; Veal, 2017). Critiques also focus on the emphasis on individual identity at the expense of the social (Lee, 2020) and how politics of difference in relation to gender, class and race limit the pursuit of serious leisure (Gallant et al., 2013). Such critiques, which bring into question who can sustain a long-term commitment to volunteering, are highly relevant for a study of a CHO which is sustained exclusively by a volunteer cohort of older women.

Through continued involvement, volunteers may progress from 'delegated tasks' (Stebbins, 1982, p. 265) to more specialised, responsibility-laden roles (Orr, 2006). As volunteers become more entwined with the organisation – and thus become more serious – they 'acquir[e], over time, certain skills, knowledge [and/or] training' that 'contributes to the sense of an evolving [leisure] career' (Elkington

& Stebbins, 2014, p. 87), experiencing a mix of rewards and challenges as they persevere in their pursuit. Stebbins (1996, 2004, 2025) identifies three types of rewards: personal (e.g. self-actualisation), social (e.g. group contribution) and abstract (e.g. thrills). Research in CHOs by Cantillon and Baker (2020a, 2020b) shows volunteers are rewarded by opportunities to apply expertise, contribute to the common good, experience meaningful interactions with visitors and gain recognition for safeguarding heritage.

Costs, while less developed in the literature (Gallant et al., 2013), are noted to be highly context-specific (Stebbins, 2014) and include disappointments, dislikes and tensions (Lamont et al., 2014, 2015). In CHOs, disappointments may arise from unreliable collaborators or unsuccessful grant applications, while dislikes can stem from volunteer shortages, ineffective leadership or interpersonal conflict (Cantillon & Baker, 2020b). Tensions include temporal pressures, organisational frictions and challenges relating to knowledge gaps or volunteer well-being (Cantillon & Baker, 2020b). Costs are 'the catalyst for a need to persevere' (Lamont et al., 2015, p. 647), with adverse experiences potentially 'imped[ing] participation' (p. 646) or limiting a volunteer's capacity 'to reach an acceptable level of fulfillment' (Stebbins, 2016, p. 3). For Stebbins (2016), perseverance involves persisting in a leisure activity despite costs, with a view to overcoming challenges encountered. But perseverance also underpins the persistence to acquire or improve skills needed to gain fulfilment from participation (Stebbins, 2016). Recent scholarship on CHOs has highlighted how organisational conditions – such as governance cultures, workload distribution and resource scarcity – can intensify costs (see, e.g. Cantillon & Baker, 2025), suggesting that perseverance is at once an individual concern and an outcome shaped by organisational ecologies.

The SLP's emphasis on individual experience provides a powerful vocabulary for understanding why volunteers in heritage institutions persist. Lee et al. (2021, p. 612) note that the durable benefits outlined in the SLP 'contribute to leisure identity and commitment, which in turn contribute to perseverance and the display of personal effort'. Application of the SLP to heritage volunteering has generated rich insights into how meaningful work manifests (Carnicelli et al., 2021; Orr, 2006; Yang, 2015). However, in relation to CHOs, the literature is yet to establish a clear link between volunteer experiences and organisational sustainability. The focus on the individual in the SLP (Gallant et al., 2013) has resulted in limited attention being paid to organisational structures, dependencies and labour conditions that mediate how volunteer perseverance contributes to (or undermines) long-term institutional viability. Given that perseverance is central to serious leisure (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014), understanding why volunteers persist despite costs is essential. Recognising that rewards and costs shape or inhibit continued engagement (Lamont et al., 2014; Stebbins, 2016) points to the need to consider how organisational practices and cultures support, constrain or rely upon volunteer perseverance and how these dynamics intersect with the long-term viability of CHOs. This article therefore extends SLP scholarship by examining the organisational implications of volunteer experience, situating individual perseverance within broader questions of institutional capacity, continuity and sustainability.

Functions of DIY institutions

To understand how organisational structures and practices are implicated in the relationship between volunteer experience and perseverance, the article draws on Baker and Huber's (2013) typology of do-it-yourself (DIY) institutions. DIY institutions are closely aligned with CHOs, referring to primarily volunteer-managed places for 'preservation, archiving and display that exist outside the bounds of "official" or "national" projects of collection and heritage management' (Baker & Huber, 2013, p. 513). Though the development of Baker and Huber's (2013) typology drew on empirical research with volunteer-managed organisations focused on the preservation of popular music, the DIY institutions of their study share a number of core characteristics with CHOs focused on other subjects – whether crafts like embroidery or large technologies like trains – which support the transferability of the typology across differently constituted heritage foci. Such organisations can be considered a 'common practice field' (Rydbeck et al., 2023), with organisational commonalities including the reliance on volunteer labour, commitment to cultural preservation, community-oriented governance structures, and affective forms of participation (Baker & Cantillon, 2020), which cut across institutional types: from the archives, museums and halls of fame of Baker and Huber's (2013) research, to libraries, galleries, heritage centres, historical societies and places like the Guild which incorporate libraries and archives combined with an emphasis on the preservation of craft as living heritage. While still needing to be attentive to organisational nuances in its application, Baker and Huber's (2013) typology offers a way to understand how CHOs, as institutional forms, structure the conditions under which volunteers experience meaning, rewards, tensions and perseverance. Their typology identifies three core structural functions that DIY institutions serve for their communities of interest: cultural, social and affective. These functions offer a valuable complement to the SLP by highlighting how the organisational environment – rather than solely individual motivations – produces the conditions that sustain volunteers' participation.

The cultural function describes how CHOs 'serve as repositories for culture' by documenting, preserving and making accessible material artefacts and practices (Baker & Huber, 2013, pp. 518–519). This function aligns closely with the skill development and learning emphasised in serious leisure. The 'significant personal effort' volunteers invest in acquiring 'specialised skills, knowledge or training' (Gallant, 2017, p. 439) not only provides opportunities for self-actualisation and self-expression (Stebbins, 1996) but also generates a sense of progression within a volunteer career. Importantly, the cultural function anchors this individual development within institutional practices – cataloguing, curating, conserving, educating – that both require and reinforce volunteer expertise, thereby linking personal rewards to organisational capacity.

The social function of CHOs centres on 'collective identity' and the 'community forming around the collective learning and enactment of tasks related to cultural preservation' (Baker & Huber, 2013, p. 520). This element of the typology is closely aligned with the social rewards of serious leisure, including 'associating with others' and participating in a shared 'social world' (Stebbins, 2010, p. 20). Baker and Huber (2013, p. 522) highlight how CHOs foster 'strong social bonds' through welcoming atmospheres and shared endeavours. These socialities, however, also expose volunteers to costs including conflicts, interpersonal tensions and organisational frictions. As Baker and

Huber (2013, p. 522) argue, social cohesion ‘is essential to sustainability’, but it is also fragile, shaped by workload distribution, governance practices and volunteer demographics. Thus, the social function foregrounds the organisational dynamics that condition both the rewards and the costs of volunteering.

The affective function of CHOs captures the emotional and sensory dimensions of participation. CHOs provide ‘spatial and temporal proximity’ to artefacts (Baker & Huber, 2013, p. 523), enabling volunteers to cultivate affective attachments to collections. This function aligns with Stebbins’ (1996, 2004, 2025) personal and abstract rewards, particularly the ‘thrills’ associated with moments of excitement or deep connection. Baker and Huber (2013, pp. 524–525) describe the ‘thrill of proximity’ – the sense of privilege and wonder volunteers experience through direct engagement with the collection. Such affective intensities can reinforce identity, provide emotional sustenance and strengthen volunteers’ commitment to cultural preservation, thereby bolstering perseverance even in the face of adversity. Yet, affect can also heighten disappointment, frustration or burnout when organisational conditions limit access, progress or preservation outcomes. Affect has been argued to be implicit in the SLP, leaving serious leisure’s emotional dimensions underdeveloped (Mansourian, 2026). Mansourian (2026) has sought to make affective dimensions more explicit through the concept of ‘passionate pastime’, which offers a shift away from the SLP’s focus on activity through an ‘experience-oriented perspective’ (see also Gallant et al., 2013) that emphasises different phases of individual engagement in leisure. In Baker and Huber’s (2013) typology, however, the affective function underscores how emotional investments are structurally mediated by organisational ecologies, shaping both the pleasures and pressures of heritage volunteering.

Methodology

Research design and case study approach

A qualitative case study approach was utilised to foster in-depth understanding of the volunteer experience–perseverance–organisational sustainability nexus. This approach enabled close engagement with the lived experiences of volunteers within a single CHO and facilitated the generation of a rich, multi-layered dataset. Within this approach, interviews, an arts-based zine-making workshop and participant observation at the Guild enabled the collection of data across multiple instances of interaction and reflection.

Participants

Eight volunteers at the Guild participated in the research, all retired women over the age of 60 who learned embroidery at a young age and who hold, or have held, responsibilities for the CHO’s management and service delivery. Length of membership of the Guild ranged from 6 to 30+ years. Ethical clearance for the research was provided by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref. No.: 2025/199), with all participants giving informed consent to be included in the project. As participants are key figures in the Guild, the project recognises they are likely to be identifiable.

Participants agreed to have their real names used in the reporting of the research. This is consistent with previous studies on the sector which found volunteers seek to be identified in order for their important work in safeguarding heritage to be recognised (e.g. Baker, 2018).

Five participants – Deb, Sally, Roz, Trish and Pauline – took part in interviews. Deb is a past President of the Guild, sits on numerous committees and has been a member for over 30 years. Sally, who was President for the duration of this research, has been a member of the Guild for 7 years. Trish, a former Guild treasurer, was membership registrar at the time of the research and, together with Roz, takes on the role of Convenor 1 day a month, which entails opening and closing the Guild, preparing morning teas and welcoming members. They joined the Guild 6 years ago. Pauline, one of the librarians, has been part of the Guild for 20 years.

The three zine-making workshop participants were Carla, Joanne and Joanne. Carla has been a member of the Guild for 13 years and is currently on the Management Committee. Joanne has convened multiple biennial exhibitions during her Guild membership, while Joanne has been a dedicated member since 2000, often working on collaborative projects with local libraries.

Data collection

Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and focused on the Guild's objectives, funding, management and governance, volunteer numbers and characteristics, accessibility, and strengths and weaknesses that may impact long-term viability and subjective experiences of volunteering. These interviews, conducted by Emily, provide detailed accounts of participants' experiences of volunteering and their perspectives on the organisational sustainability of the Guild.

Zine-making workshop

The zine-making workshop conducted by Emily and Zel invited participants to reflect creatively on their experiences in the Guild. Zine-making workshops offer a space where participants can talk about the organisation's past, learn from experiences in the present and express hopes for the future (Baker et al., 2024; Zhuo, 2024). Compared to interviews and observations, arts-based methods such as zine-making provide participants greater agency in the production of knowledge, tapping into emotions, memories, imagination and embodied experiences rather than only intellect (Finley, 2008). The written content in zine pages produced by participants, as well as the audio recording of the workshop, provide valuable data on how organisational sustainability is conceived, the relationships between different facets of organisational sustainability, and the rewards and costs of volunteering.

Participant observation

A two-month period of participant observation at the Guild by Emily enabled close engagement with the everyday practices, routines and interactions that shape volunteer experiences. This fieldwork included attending regular Guild days; observing activities such as stitching, morning teas and informal knowledge-sharing; and

participating in the social life of the organisation. Emily took up embroidery during this period, with Guild members encouraging her development of beginner-level stitching, providing guidance on techniques. Field notes formed an additional source of data, capturing observations of the Guild's cultural, social and affective functions in practice and providing contextual insight to support the interpretation of interview and workshop data. During this time at the Guild, a greater number of volunteers were encountered, putting the contributions of the interviewees and workshop participants in context.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a theory-informed thematic approach guided by the article's conceptual frameworks. A set of pre-determined codes related to the project's conceptual focus – rewards, costs, perseverance and cultural, social and affective functions – were applied to the data set. These codes, derived from the SLP and the typology of DIY institutions, were utilised to reflect the study's aim to examine the relationship between volunteer experience and organisational sustainability. Coding was undertaken manually by Emily, with data from interviews, the zine-making workshop (including both textual and verbal materials), and participant observation field notes coded across the same framework. Codes were then clustered according to dominant themes, resulting in three primary thematic groupings: cultural functions associated with skills and knowledge; social functions connected to a sense of community and friendship; affective functions associated with the welcoming atmosphere and volunteers' sense of wonderment.

While the use of pre-determined codes reflects a deductive orientation, the analysis remained agile with coding audits by Sarah and Zel taking an abductive approach which involved being attentive to new patterns and nuances emerging from the data (see Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The integration of multiple data sources enabled the themes to be corroborated across different forms of evidence, with the coding audits highlighting points of convergence and divergence in how participants articulated their experiences. Participant observation data, in particular, provided contextual grounding for interpreting interview accounts and workshop discussions, allowing the analysis to connect volunteers' reported experiences with observed practices.

Reflexivity

This research was conducted as part of the Australian Research Council-funded project, 'Co-creating a sustainable future for the community heritage sector', which seeks to support the ongoing viability of Australia's CHOs through the development of resources that will assist volunteers to work towards organisational sustainability goals (see Cantillon & Baker, 2025). The all-women research team is considerably younger than the Guild's volunteer base, which emphasised the importance of Emily's direct engagement with participants and the day-to-day activities of this CHO through a period of participant observation. This close engagement facilitated the development of rapport and helped foster a more nuanced understanding of the Guild's practices and culture. The fieldwork did not negate the need for ongoing reflexive attention to the researchers' role in shaping the research process and interpretation of data. To support that process,

participants were provided with an opportunity to review, comment on and amend the interview and workshop transcripts and, in analysing and presenting findings, care was taken to foreground participants' perspectives while situating these within the broader conceptual and organisational context of the project.

The cultural, social and affective functions of the Guild

The findings are organised around the cultural, social and affective versions of the Guild, with each function comprising a set of interrelated sub-themes. Table 1 provides an overview of these themes and their relationships to key concepts from the SLP, while also highlighting the analytical insights and tensions that emerge from the data.

Experiences of the Guild's cultural functions

Sharing expertise

Guild membership provides access to a network of highly skilled embroiderers – the organisation's 'human-type resources' (Joanne) – with expertise shared through informal, everyday interactions. Deb highlights how this environment distinguishes the Guild's offer from online learning providers: 'you don't have to be in a class situation [...] If you sat down and you said to me, "aww, look, I can't figure out how to do this", we'll show you'. This is a distributed model of knowledge-sharing, where it is not just the Guild's tutors but all members who contribute to the skill development of others. Members describe satisfaction in witnessing others develop a 'talent' for embroidery, while also emphasising the importance of ensuring all members feel like they have something to offer and do 'not feel undervalued' (Deb). The practice of helping others by sharing expertise sustains individual engagement by supporting personally meaningful experiences (Trish). Sharing expertise also helps sustain the Guild's collective knowledge base, enabling the ongoing reproduction of embroidery skills in ways that attract and retain members and volunteers and contribute to organisational capacity.

Developing skills

Skill development at the Guild is structured through both formal classes and informal, peer-supported learning, creating multiple entry points for participation. 'Start Stitching' classes introduce beginners to embroidery and are run by 'members who share their skills' (Deb). More advanced offerings draw on tutors with a 'real depth of knowledge' (Sally). Participants emphasise that these opportunities to learn are central to the Guild's value (Deb, Joanne, Pauline, Roz, Trish), enabling members to experiment and refine their practice – 'you try [a class] and you think "I don't like the feel of the thread" ... and you move on [to a class with a different technique]' (Joanne). This flexibility is underpinned by a supportive ethos in which differences in abilities are embraced rather than judged (Trish), and where encouragement from tutors and peers sustains engagement. As Carla notes, creativity and the 'mindfulness that comes from working with your hands' are actively nurtured, while mistakes are normalised as part of the learning process. Positive feedback and recognition – compliments (Roz, Trish) and 'standout moments' such as others asking to photograph pieces (Pauline) – help members to feel valued and build the confidence needed to persist in developing their skills (Deb, Carla).

Table 1. Overview of findings.

Organisational function	Sub-themes	SLP concepts	Illustrative empirical examples	Analytical insights/tensions
CULTURAL	Sharing expertise	Personal rewards – self-expression, self-image; Social rewards – group accomplishment, contributions to group maintenance/ development	Informal skill sharing; satisfaction in helping others	Knowledge sharing operates as both individual reward and collective necessity, sustaining the Guild's knowledge base while reinforcing volunteer identity
	Developing skills	Personal rewards – self-actualisation; Social rewards – contributions to group maintenance/ development; Costs – disappointments	Stitching classes; progression into governance roles; confidence-building	Skill development extends beyond craft to organisational capacity-building, blurring boundaries between leisure and labour
	Accessing knowledge	Personal rewards – personal enrichment, self-actualisation; Social rewards – contributions to group maintenance/development	Specialist library; shared resources; rare materials	Access to a curated collection enhances meaningful engagement, but also relies on sustained and specialist volunteer labour to maintain these resources
	Applying know-how	Personal rewards – self-expression, self-image; Social rewards – contributions to group maintenance/ development	Use of professional skills in Guild roles	The Guild depends on transferable professional expertise, highlighting a tension between volunteering and unpaid skilled labour
SOCIAL	Sense of community	Personal rewards – personal enrichment, self-gratification; Social rewards – social attraction; Costs – tensions	Regular attendance; morning tea rituals; sense of purpose; managing conflict – avoidance or professionalism	Routine social practices underpin ongoing participation, demonstrating how perseverance is socially embedded Conflict is actively managed and minimised, suggesting perseverance involves ongoing negotiation of interpersonal costs
	A place for friendship Welcoming atmosphere	Personal rewards – personal enrichment; Social reward – social attraction Personal rewards – personal enrichment; Social rewards – social attraction; Costs – dislikes	Close friendships; social interaction central to participation Guild as welcoming and calming; atmosphere varies by day	Sociality is central to value creation, sometimes outweighing the craft itself as the primary motivation Affective atmospheres are collectively produced and fragile, shaping both attraction to and continuity of participation
AFFECTIVE	A sense of wonderment	Social rewards – group accomplishment; Abstract rewards – thrills	Engagement with archival materials; fascination with historical textile fragments; archive as the essence of the Guild; commitment to preservation	Encounters with heritage objects generate a deep sense of reward, reinforcing commitment through connection to the past and contribution to legacy

Skill development extends beyond embroidery practice to encompass the organisational competencies required to sustain the Guild. Participants explain that moving into roles such as convenor, registrar or exhibition organiser may initially be daunting (Trish) but ultimately lead to a 'sense of achievement and growth' (Joanne) through the 'excellent support' provided by other members. As Deb explains, volunteers are actively invited into such roles and reassured that 'we're all there to help them', with learning taking place collaboratively and through ongoing guidance. As such, individual development is closely aligned with organisational needs: as members acquire skills, they also assume responsibility for the Guild's operations. Skill development therefore functions as a personal reward and as a mechanism through which the Guild reproduces its capacity to operate, illustrating how leisure participation becomes entangled with unpaid, skilled labour.

Accessing knowledge

Access to specialist knowledge is central to the Guild's mission to 'promote embroidery' and keep the craft 'alive' (Sally), with the library functioning as a key site through which this is realised. Members describe the collection as extensive and highly valued, encompassing everything from introductory texts to books on specialised Norwegian (Hardanger) and Japanese (sashiko) techniques. Participants repeatedly emphasise the availability and quality of the collection – 'access to the library is a joy' (Joanne), 'we've got a wonderful library here' (Trish) – with Sally noting that 'no matter what you think you might want to learn about, it's there'. This concentration of knowledge supports ongoing skill development and facilitates informal circulation, as members share patterns and ideas discovered in books, thereby extending the Guild's collective expertise.

Access to this resource is, however, contingent upon sustained volunteer labour. Overseen by members with professional expertise in librarianship, the library is carefully curated and maintained. Pauline expresses pride in having 'made quite a good collection' that is kept up to date. In this sense, the library operates as both reward and responsibility: members derive significant benefit from access to the specialist knowledge it holds, yet ongoing availability depends on the continued commitment of volunteers with library backgrounds to manage, expand and activate the collection. Accessing knowledge therefore emerges as an individual benefit of membership while also being a collectively produced capacity that underpins the Guild's cultural function and long-term sustainability.

Applying know-how

The Guild also provides an outlet for members to apply skills developed through prior employment, extending participation beyond embroidery practice into the operational life of the organisation. Participants describe how attributes such as being 'methodical' and having 'attention to detail' (Deb) translate directly into volunteer roles, with prior professional expertise shaping how the Guild functions. Pauline, for example, frames her work in the library as a continuation of her previous career: 'Finding, keeping up with the latest books available, I'm still doing that'. Similarly, Trish links her role as Treasurer to her background in banking, while Deb highlights more general competencies: 'I am very good at time management and fairly obsessive, because it [was] my career so I tend to do things properly'. In these accounts, the application of know-how is experienced as highly

satisfying, aligning with the social reward of ‘contributi[ng to the] development of the group’ (Stebbins, 2004, p. 204), while also enabling the Guild to deliver a high standard of organisational practice.

The transfer of expertise underscores the Guild’s reliance on unpaid, skilled labour. Roles requiring, or at the very least benefiting from, professional-level competencies are sustained through volunteers’ willingness to redeploy their former occupational skills in a leisure context. Applying know-how therefore reveals a productive tension between volunteering and skilled labour: what participants frame as contribution and enjoyment simultaneously constitutes essential organisational work. Here, we see the Guild’s operational capacity being dependent on the continued availability of members able and willing to mobilise their expertise in support of the CHOs mission.

Experiences of the Guild’s social functions

Sense of community

Participants consistently describe the Guild as providing a strong ‘sense of community’, which Sally suggests is ‘why people come, because they feel that they ... can be part of something’. This sense of belonging is structured through regular routines of attendance and interaction, with members emphasising the importance of having a consistent place to socialise. As Carla notes, ‘meeting up regularly is such an important part of social interaction’, while Pauline highlights weekly attendance offers a ‘sense of purpose’ and a reason to get ‘out of [the] house’. The Guild’s multiple opening days enable frequent participation – ‘we can come three, possibly four times a week’ (Joanne) – embedding engagement within everyday life and making attendance both habitual and socially meaningful.

Rituals such as morning tea play a central role in sustaining this sense of community. Described by Joanne as ‘a bonding thing’, these gatherings provide a regular opportunity to share updates and maintain relationships, echoing Baker’s (2018) observations of the importance of informal spaces like kitchens and tearooms within CHOs for fostering connection. Pauline comments that ‘the Thursday girls, we like our morning tea’, underscoring the attachment volunteers have to these rituals. Routine practices create predictable structures through which relationships are maintained over time, helping to mitigate loneliness and reinforcing members’ sense of belonging to a shared social world.

Participants do, however, acknowledge the presence of interpersonal tensions, including ‘clashing opinions’ and past instances of ‘stitch police’, but consistently downplay their significance. As Pauline reflects, ‘there may have been some problems before ... but that was nothing, really’, while Roz emphasises the Guild as a place where members can ‘bring fresh ideas’ and be heard. These accounts suggest that cohesion is actively produced: tensions are managed through organisational norms of ‘professional[ism]’ (Pauline) and through flexible patterns of attendance that allow members to avoid conflict if necessary. Perseverance emerges here as both individual commitment and socially organised practice, sustained through routine, ritual and the ongoing negotiation of interpersonal differences.

A place for friendship

Friendship is a central dimension of participation at the Guild, with almost all participants emphasising the importance of the relationships they have formed. For Trish, a key benefit is ‘making new friends’, while Sally highlights the enjoyment of ‘meeting new people’. These connections are fostered through the caring environment surrounding embroidery practice, where the ‘support given by everyone’ (Carla) and ‘knowing that you’re not judged’ (Roz) encourage participation. Volunteers suggest that human connection can take precedence over the craft itself – Roz reflects, ‘it’s not always about the stitching, it’s about that companionship’, while Deb jokes ‘I’m lucky if I do [embroidery] here’ given the time she spends on organisational activities and socialising. As such, the Guild functions as a site of creative practice and as a space of relational engagement where fellowship becomes a primary motivation for attendance.

These friendships play a significant role in sustaining engagement, particularly in contexts where embroidery may otherwise be a solitary activity. Participants describe the Guild as a source of emotional support and connection, with one member rejoining after COVID-19 lockdowns because she ‘need[ed] connection’ (Deb) and another volunteer mentioning to Emily that ‘there could be a volcano outside and I wouldn’t care – my people are right here’. Such accounts highlight how the social environment of the Guild transforms participation into a shared experience that reinforces attachment to the organisation.

Friendships formed at the Guild extend beyond its physical space, becoming embedded in members’ everyday lives. Carla describes her Guild ‘friendship group’ as ‘an important social part’ of her life, while Roz emphasises the durability of these connections: ‘we don’t forget about you[,] you’re not forgotten’. This extends to practices of care, such as maintaining contact with members who are ‘too old and frail to stitch’ by meeting for lunch so that ‘we’re still all in the loop’ (Roz). Friendship operates as an individual reward and a collective resource, sustaining participation through social ties that endure even as members’ capacity to engage in embroidery changes. The Guild’s social function emerges as constitutive rather than ancillary, with relationality underpinning the experience of volunteering and the long-term viability of this CHO.

Experiences of the Guild’s affective functions

Welcoming atmospheres

The affective atmosphere of the Guild is central to how volunteers experience their participation, shaping the emotional tenor of their engagement and the durability of their commitment. Participants consistently describe the Guild as welcoming and comforting, emphasising the sense of ease, safety and emotional grounding it affords. Deb characterises the environment as one where members can ‘find some inner peace’. At the same time, participants highlight that this atmosphere varies depending on who is present; as Trish observes, there is a ‘different atmosphere on different days’, suggesting that feelings of belonging are actively produced through shifting interpersonal dynamics. These accounts indicate that the Guild’s atmosphere is not a passive backdrop for participation. Instead, it emerges as a collectively sustained condition for engagement, with the calming environment linked to routine practices and ongoing volunteer contributions that shape how members interact with the

institution. While the atmosphere can reinforce member attachment to the Guild, its variability also points to the fragility of the environment: the affective conditions that support participation are contingent on the presence and practices of members. As such, the atmosphere is a resource for and a potential vulnerability within the Guild's organisational sustainability.

A sense of wonderment

A sense of wonder permeates volunteers' interactions with the Guild's collection, infusing their labour with curiosity, reverence and delight. Access to the archive enables members to encounter embroidery from the past in ways that cultivate a felt connection with earlier stitchers, with these experiences described as both a privilege and a thrill. Deb's account of opening a box of textile fragments donated decades earlier illustrates this vividly: initially dismissed as insignificant, the fragments revealed 'about ten different techniques', prompting reflection that they represent irreplaceable histories that 'would [otherwise] be completely lost'. Encounters such as these demonstrate how the archive transforms the mundane into the meaningful, reinforcing the value of preservation work.

This sense of wonder also informs curatorial decisions about what gets retained and how it is understood. As Deb explains, objects that initially appear 'horrible' or 'disgusting' can take on new significance when contextualised, as in the case of wartime fabric that speaks to the constraints faced by earlier embroiderers. Other participants similarly describe the collection as something to be 'cherished and protected' as it is a reflection of the preservation efforts of past members who represent the 'soul' of the organisation (Joanne). The ability to see and touch historic pieces – rather than having them 'locked up and put away' (Trish) – fuels creative motivation and provides a sense of connection to volunteers from previous decades. In this way, affective engagement with the archive extends beyond appreciation to situate practice in the context of legacy. These accounts suggest that wonderment operates as a potent affective reward, aligning with the thrills identified in the SLP while also situating such experiences within a longitudinal organisational context whereby members invest in legacy-creating labour that positions them as custodians of a shared heritage.

Discussion

This article extends the SLP by demonstrating that volunteers' durable perseverance in the Guild is shaped by organisational dynamics. The SLP positions perseverance as an important characteristic of a serious leisure career (Stebbins, 2016), underpinned by personal identity and commitment (Lee et al., 2021). Our findings suggest that such persistence is produced through organisational conditions. Reframed through Baker and Huber's (2013) typology, perseverance emerges as an interplay of individual reward-seeking, social experiences (Lee, 2020), institutional routines and material demands. Perseverance is therefore best understood as an emergent property of the Guild's organisational ecology rather than an individual trait or collective orientation. Baker and Huber's (2013) typology offers a productive lens for thinking through the types of questions about serious leisure posed by Gallant et al. (2013) – who is in a position to volunteer and, in the face of challenges, who has the capacity to persevere? The findings

call for a shift towards more relational and institutional approaches to understanding serious leisure careers, particularly in contexts where leisure is embedded within systems dependent on unpaid labour. Perseverance is, then, situated as an effect of participation that emerges through organisational conditions which scaffold engagement and mediate rewards and costs.

The findings highlight that volunteers' long-term commitment – manifested through, for example, the labour-intensive stewardship of the archive, the management of finances and the teaching of classes – is framed by them in terms of enjoyment, fulfilment and contribution. Volunteers' commitment to undertaking the essential organisational work of the Guild is shown to be underpinned by a sense of belonging and contribution to legacy, where affective engagements sustain participation through reinforcing connections to the organisation's mission and history. This experience aligns with scholarship in heritage studies that emphasises the centrality of affect in shaping engagement with the past (see, e.g. Smith, Wetherell & Campbell 2018; Tolia-Kelly, Waterton & Watson 2017). In particular, work on community archives has underscored how emotional attachment, sensory encounters and a sense of connection all play a key role as motivating factors for heritage participation and the care for historical objects and practices (Caswell, 2020). In the SLP, emotion is captured in the durable benefits associated with the rewards of personal enrichment and self-gratification (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). However, the SLP has tended to treat affect as an outcome of participation rather than as a structuring condition of engagement (Mansourian, 2026). The DIY institutions lens, on the other hand, positions affect as a key mechanism through which perseverance is generated and maintained by volunteer-managed heritage organisations.

By bringing the SLP into dialogue with the typology of DIY institutions, this article demonstrates how volunteer perseverance is shaped at the intersection of individual motivations and organisational structures. This combined framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of how volunteer experience contributes to organisational sustainability. However, we are also cognisant that combining these frameworks may risk privileging volunteer perseverance and the functional coherence of organisations in ways that obscure internal tensions and uneven conditions for participation. While gendered participation is evident, the combined framework has continued to mask other characteristics that can shape (non-)participation and distribution of labour, for example, with the data failing to capture impacts of ethnicity, class, sexuality and so on. This is particularly significant in light of feminist critiques of the SLP, which argue that its emphasis on career-like commitment risks reproducing gendered and classed assumptions about access and participation in terms of who has the time and capacity to sustain such intensive involvement in leisure activities (Gallant et al., 2013). Yet, bringing the SLP into dialogue with the typology of DIY institutions has made visible the organisational infrastructure that underpins serious leisure, and in doing so has highlighted how a reliance on the SLP alone risks obscuring the institutional conditions that make serious leisure careers possible.

Finally, the findings illuminate how volunteer perseverance functions as a critical stabiliser for the Guild's operations, establishing a clear nexus between experience and organisational sustainability. However, while perseverance masks vulnerabilities to institutional viability, it does not remove them. The Guild's reliance on the deep commitment of an ageing cohort of women highlights structural fragility, particularly in relation to

knowledge transfer and the labour required to maintain its established practices. A model of organisational sustainability that relies heavily on the continued goodwill, skill and investment of a small group of highly committed volunteers is therefore inherently precarious. The Guild demonstrates that perseverance is a collective resource whose durability is inseparable from the organisational structures that support it, but whose maintenance is dependent on broader social and economic conditions. Such conditions include the shift in volunteering demographics (Innes et al., 2025), which now normalise the management of volunteer-run organisations such as CHOs as the responsibility of ageing retirees and, for the Guild, the framing of crafts like embroidery as women's work (Johnson, 2024), which has implications for those who participate. This raises a broader question about who is able to maintain commitment to serious leisure careers in contemporary conditions, where rising living costs, extended working lives and precarious labour markets increasingly limit peoples' capacity to engage in long term, intensive forms of leisure-cum-labour participation (Veal, 2017, 2021).

Conclusion

Through the case study of the Guild, this article has established a volunteer experience–perseverance–organisational sustainability nexus in CHOs. In the analysis, perseverance has emerged as a co-produced phenomenon, forged through the interplay of meaningful personal rewards and the organisational structures that support members to negotiate the costs of participation. The article demonstrates how volunteers' commitment to the Guild is underpinned by a sense of belonging and contribution to legacy, and how these are sustained through labour-intensive activities that help maintain the Guild's cultural, social and affective functions. In doing so, our consideration of the volunteer experience–perseverance–organisational sustainability nexus serves to nuance the SLP and extend Baker and Huber's typology by positioning CHO environments as actively produced through rewarding, labour-intensive practices that sustain volunteer perseverance, with direct consequences for the long-term viability of these heritage institutions.

While the article's findings arise from a single case study, our conclusions are contextualised through a larger comparative project examining the organisational sustainability of CHOs from across Australia (Cantillon & Baker, 2025) and previous research looking at leisure-focused CHOs from Europe, North America and Australasia (Baker, 2018; Baker & Cantillon, 2020). This broader context supports the relevance of the findings; however, the study is nonetheless limited by its focus on one organisation. The homogeneity of the participant group – predominantly comprising long-serving, retired women in positions of organisational responsibility – means that the perspectives of newer volunteers, less engaged members, or those who have stopped attending the Guild, including men who once volunteered, are not captured. As such, the findings speak most directly to the experiences of highly committed volunteers and may not fully represent the diversity of participation that can be found within CHOs more broadly.

The findings point to a number of practical implications for CHOs seeking to promote conditions for volunteer engagement that will contribute to long-term organisational sustainability. CHOs can plan for viable futures through developing strategic approaches to governance, resourcing, volunteer experience and community engagement (see Cantillon & Baker, 2025), and the result might be the provision of better conditions for

volunteer perseverance. Supporting volunteer perseverance requires attention to skill development and provision of opportunities for meaningful contribution – factors that deliver a sense of personal fulfilment aligned with the SLP's focus on rewards. But also required is a consideration of social and affective conditions of the organisation that make ongoing involvement appealing – fostering welcoming and inclusive environments, maintaining routines and spaces for social connection, and ensuring access to resources that enable volunteers to connect with organisational purpose and legacy. As the case study of the Guild suggests, such efforts need to be balanced with strategies that address organisational capacity and succession in recognition that a reliance on a small number of highly committed volunteers may not be sustainable in the long term.

More broadly, the findings raise a question of whether the reproduction of serious-leisure-career-style volunteering is even possible under the contemporary conditions facing volunteer-led community-based organisations – demographic changes, shifting work-life patterns and increasing precarity in the volunteering landscape (McDermott, 2024) make it difficult for CHOs to recruit and retain volunteers with the time, skills and long-term commitment required to sustain their operations. Future research could explore how these dynamics play out across different types of organisations that are volunteer-managed with no paid staff, including other CHOs which have more diverse volunteer bases, varying levels of resourcing or alternative governance structures. Further work is needed to examine the experiences of less-engaged volunteers or former volunteers who could not be retained in order to better understand barriers to perseverance. There is also a need to explore how CHOs would benefit from external support to deliver the types of experiences that contribute to volunteers' propensity for perseverance and, in turn, promote organisational sustainability.

While significant gaps in understanding remain, the insights emerging from this article matter because of the potential relevance to considerations of the organisational sustainability of volunteer-managed organisations in Australia. Volunteer perseverance absorbs organisational pressures but also masks significant structural vulnerabilities, including declining memberships and an ageing volunteer cohort, both of which contribute to intensifying labour experiences. What this case study of the volunteer experience–perseverance–organisational sustainability nexus suggests is that career volunteering is a problematic model on which to build viable organisational futures.

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