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To cite this article: Bohan Liu, Yan (Danni) Liang & Daisy X. F. Fan (30 Nov 2025): Understanding community garden volunteers' well-being transformation: an exploratory study from a liminality perspective, Leisure Studies, DOI: [10.1080/02614367.2025.2594188](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2025.2594188)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2025.2594188>



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Published online: 30 Nov 2025.



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# Understanding community garden volunteers' well-being transformation: an exploratory study from a liminality perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Urban gardens offer a shared environment where volunteers engage in collective cultivation, bringing both physical and psychological benefits. This study explores the well-being transformations experienced by volunteers in a community garden in Southern England through the conceptual lens of liminality. Drawing on qualitative data from sixteen semi-structured interviews, the research investigates how temporary detachment from daily roles and immersion in a shared physical and social space contributes to transformative well-being. The findings reveal that community gardens function as liminal spaces where volunteers experience both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. The study contributes to the theory by advancing the application of liminality in urban leisure contexts and bridging it with well-being research. It offers a novel conceptual model that illustrates the cyclical nature of well-being development in liminal spaces. These insights extend current understanding in leisure studies, liminal experiences and environmental psychology while providing practical implications for community planning, volunteer management, and mental health promotion. The research underscores the transformative potential of community gardens and the importance of bringing sustainability that fosters both individual and collective flourishing.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 September 2024  
Accepted 17 November 2025

## KEYWORDS

Community garden;  
liminality; volunteer; hedonic  
well-beings; eudaimonic  
well-beings

## Introduction

Urban leisure spaces, including parks, gardens and other shared environments, have received growing scholarly attention for their potential to address urban life challenges, such as social fragmentation, health inequality and spatial exclusion (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Among these spaces, urban gardens occupy a distinct position as culturally meaningful and accessible sites of everyday life. In England, gardening holds significant cultural importance, symbolising identity, social status and motivations spanning sustainability, health, relaxation and creativity (Fox, 2017). Recent research highlights the psychological value of urban

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gardens, suggesting that these settings may influence people's moods and mental states (Fancello et al., 2023). Thus, examining how participation in leisure activities within urban gardens affects individuals' well-being is essential to understanding the transformative potential of urban leisure spaces.

An increasingly prevalent form of urban gardening is the community garden. Community gardens are shared spaces cultivated collectively to grow fruits, vegetables and herbs for personal use, often encompassing school gardens and teaching plots (Egli et al., 2016). Historically rooted in efforts to address wartime food shortages in the UK, Europe, and North America, these gardens contributed significantly to food security during World Wars (Ginn, 2012). Community gardens have been shaped by their perceived ability to mitigate poverty, food insecurity and unequal access to fresh produce (Diekmann et al., 2020; Hou, 2017). Nowadays most community gardens are volunteer driven (Egli et al., 2016). While volunteering in gardens is widely acknowledged to bring nutritional, social and emotional benefits (Okvat & Zautra, 2011), it remains unclear how volunteering in gardens could lead to changes in participants' well-being.

To answer the questions of how volunteering in community gardens influences participants' well-being and through what processes or experiences the well-being changes are taking place, this study uses community gardens as an empirical setting to examine how volunteers' well-beings is shaped through the conceptual lens of liminality during their participation. Liminality refers to a transitional phase in which individuals temporarily detach from everyday roles, enabling shifts in identity and communal belonging (Turner, 1983). It encompasses psychological, social and spatial dimensions that create fertile ground for self-reflection, emotional release and personal transformation (Darveau & Cheikh-Amman, 2021). This concept has been widely applied in tourism and events to explore transformative experiences (Neuhofer et al., 2020). Community gardens create liminal conditions where individuals could temporarily step outside their everyday roles and social structures, however, untangling the relationships between gardening and how health outcomes improved remain underexplored in well-being research (Soga et al., 2017).

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it aims to explore how the multi-dimensional nature of liminality is experienced by community garden volunteers and how it may affect their well-beings. Second, it delineates volunteers' well-being transformative process during community garden participation. Third, to provide implications for community planners, policymakers, and mental health practitioners in fostering inclusive, engaging and resilient communities. Sixteen volunteers in a local community garden in South England were recruited for interviews. This research extended the understanding of the well-being changes in the liminal journey and showed how well-being transformations occur during the liminal journey. In this journey, hedonic well-being was enhanced within the temporary space and eudaimonic well-being was fostered, leading to lasting personal growth and behavioural changes beyond experience. Results could also benefit community planners, government policymakers, charity organisations, community garden directors, and mental health professionals in composing effective strategies to cultivate a more inclusive, engaging, and resilient community.

## Literature review

### *Conceptual foundations of liminality*

Liminality, introduced by Van Gennep (2019), describes transitional phases in rites of passage marked by structured rituals. Turner (1974) expanded this concept to emphasise the transformative potential of liminal phases, where a sense of egalitarianism that transcends social hierarchies refers to the shared experience of individuals who are undergoing a liminal phase together.

In tourism, Jafari's five-stage process outlines the progression of intense experiences and transitions, including collaboration, liberation, animation, repatriation, and integration (Jafari, 1987). McKercher and Lui later adapted this model, adding participation and disentanglement stages to describe the tourist's journey from daily life to a tourist role and back (Magrizos et al., 2021). Unlike obligatory rites, these experiences enable personal growth and creativity outside structured obligations, exemplified by activities like festivals (Getz et al., 2010) or marathons (Thomassen, 2016; Lev, 2023). Voluntary and creative states often occur in modern leisure contexts, such as festival participation (Milazzo & Soulard, 2024).

Differently from liminal, liminoid experiences are non-cyclical, chosen, and characterised by freedom, occurring in 'third places' like sports, cultural events, cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community (Oldenburg, 1999), or transportation hubs (Huang et al., 2018). These liminoid experiences allow individuals to experiment with identity and meaning in a less constrained environment, often blending personal innovation with shared group identity.

### *Liminality in leisure and community garden*

Following Darveau and Cheikh-Ammar (2021), liminality can be understood as a processual experience. The interplay of liminal time, space, and positional shifts in these liminoid rituals underscores their transformative potential, emphasising the importance of examining how such elements operate in concert (Thomassen, 2016). While individual engagement with these liminal dimensions is often subjective, research on how liminal experiences facilitate well-being remains limited. Therefore, there is a need to investigate how these dimensions interact with individuals in different scenarios. This study applies liminality as a theoretical lens to explore volunteers' experiences, recognising that community gardens are not inherently liminal spaces but may give rise to leisure experiences that take on liminal aspects. In the process of volunteering activities, gardening integrates physical activity, social connection, and symbolic meaning which aligns with the occupational science framework of doing (gardening activities), being (immersing in the garden space), and becoming (achieving personal growth and well-beings) (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

Liminality offers individuals an opportunity to step back from societal norms and re-evaluate traditional roles, including familial obligations, professional duties, and gendered behaviours (Bui et al., 2014). This form of 'pause' from daily structures facilitates opportunities for reflection, redefinition, and transformation, while also offering the potential for individuals to reintegrate into social roles (Darveau & Cheikh-Ammar, 2021). Cyclical activities in community gardens, such as planting and harvesting, can be

interpreted through the notion of liminal time, as they disrupt the linear schedules of daily life and foster opportunities for reflection and renewal (Kingsley et al., 2009).

Within volunteering, participants may experience shifts of roles, taking on new identities such as carers, learners or collaborators. These shifts foster emotional engagement, affirm personal qualities, and contribute to a stronger sense of self-worth (McGuire et al., 2022). Research on volunteering suggests that adopting socially valued roles enables identity validation and fosters belonging, which are significant contributors to psychological wellbeing (Armour et al., 2025).

### *Liminality and wellbeing transformation*

Well-beings research is often categorised into hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives, yet no universally accepted definition exists (Stuart et al., 2020). Hedonic well-being refers to the subjective pursuit of pleasure and happiness, primarily assessed through life satisfaction and the balance of positive and negative emotions (Diener et al., 1985). It emphasises the degree of satisfaction or immediate pleasure, without accounting for deeper psychological or relational dimensions (Zhang et al., 2024). In community garden activities, such as planting and harvesting, offer immediate emotional satisfaction and an escape from daily stressors (Delle Fave et al., 2011; Diener et al., 2018).

From a eudaimonic perspective, the eudaimonic approach emphasises achieving human potential and psychological wellness through meaningful and virtuous activities rather than simple pleasure-seeking (Boniwell, 2008). Drawing on Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, researchers argue that eudaimonic well-beings involve activities that may not yield immediate pleasure but contribute to long-term flourishing, both morally and intellectually (Arvanitis & Stichter, 2023; Huta & Ryan, 2010). Some volunteering activities provide opportunities for personal growth, social connection, and purposeful contribution, which are central to achieving long-term well-being (Huta & Ryan, 2010).

While previous studies have demonstrated the psychosocial benefits of community gardens (e.g. Newman et al., 2014), the application of liminality to understanding well-being remains limited. This study therefore applies the concept of liminality to explore the transitional experiences of community garden volunteers. Liminality can give rise to various forms of personal change, with wellbeing transformation representing a salient outcome through which its effects may be identified (Darveau & Cheikh-Ammar, 2021). Rather than defining gardens as inherently liminal, we use liminality as an interpretive frame to examine how volunteers' transitional experiences may connect with wellbeing transformation.

## **Methodology**

### *Research design*

This study uses an inductive approach, grounded in the thematic analysis principles of Clarke and Braun (2013) to capture the experiences of community garden volunteers and their well-being changes, offering deep insights into emotions, perceptions, and personal narratives. Qualitative data has the advantage of revealing complex and nuanced aspects

of well-beings that quantitative methods might overlook (Adler et al., 2016; Fusch et al., 2018), such as uncovering the processes and underlying reasons for improved happiness, revealing subjective and relational aspects of well-beings, and emotional fulfilment, communal bonds, and personal growth.

This research was conducted in collaboration with the Grounded Community Garden in Boscombe, Bournemouth, a charity known for engaging community volunteers. Participants were involved in various voluntary activities, such as the Grounded growers, beekeepers, and those working in secret gardens or composting. Following guidelines for qualitative interviewing (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017), the interview questions were semi-structured and designed to explore key themes related to the study's objectives. The topics included: (1) participants' motivations for joining the community garden, (2) their emotional and physical experiences during garden activities, (3) the perceived social connections and communal relationships formed, and (4) reflections on how the garden influenced their overall well-beings and lifestyle. Ethical guidelines were rigorously followed, with approval from the Ethics Committee and the Grounded Community's information safety protocols. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Before undertaking the research, the researchers actively participated in garden programs, including facilitating family gardening sessions with children and inviting friends to engage in gardening activities. These experiences deepened the researchers' conception of community gardens, fostering a deep understanding of local residents' involvement and their emotional attachment to these spaces. However, as external academic researchers, they maintained a degree of critical distance, enabling a reflexive and analytical approach to the study. By building trust with staff and volunteers and critically reflecting on their own positionality, the researchers ensured an ethical, empathetic and informed exploration of well-being transformations within the community garden context.

### ***Data collection***

Following Galletta (2013) recommendations, semi-structured interviews were used to encourage participants to freely express their thoughts and emotions, fostering a rich understanding of their experiences. Collaborating with the Grounded Community Garden's HR department, researchers identified potential participants and scheduled interviews.

The criteria for selecting potential interviewees were jointly developed by the manager of the Bournemouth Boscombe Charity Community Garden and three researchers. To ensure a meaningful and reliable data collection process, stable volunteers who regularly participated in the community garden were chosen as the target group. These volunteers, having established trust with the staff, were deemed suitable candidates for the study. Participants in this study were recruited through the gatekeeper role of the community garden staff, who helped identify volunteers willing to share their experiences. During this process, we excluded from the recruitment pool some volunteers who preferred not to disclose their identity or were concerned about recognition. While this approach ensured ethical considerations and participant comfort, it may have unintentionally excluded individuals with potentially ambivalent or negative experiences of community

**Table 1.** Respondents' demographic information.

ID	Gender	Nationality	Generation	Volunteer project	Other roles in community garden
P1	Female	Netherland	Baby boomer	Gardening workshop	Advisor for the future plan
P2	Female	Bangladesh	X	Gardening workshop	
P3	Male	UK	Y	Gardening workshop	
P4	Female	Italy	Y	Gardening workshop	
P5	Male	UK	X	Food Bank project: collect free food regularly	
P6	Female	UK	Y	Gardening workshop	
P7	Male	UK	X	Gardening workshop	Advisor for grant application
P8	Female	UK	Y	Family event: Kids gardening workshop	Advisor for the future plan
P9	Male	China	Y	Gardening workshop	
P10	Female	China	Y	Gardening workshop	
P11	Male	Indonesia	Y	Gardening workshop	
P12	Female	UK	Y	Family event: Kids Gardening workshop	Community business support like kitchen share
P13	Male	Iran	Y	Gardening workshop; Organic composite; Food bank: Get food regularly	
P14	Female	UK	Baby boomer	Bee project: Raise bee, build beehive, collect honey	
P15	Male	UK	X	Bee project: Raise bee, build beehive, collect honey	
P16	Female	UK	Y	Family event: Kids Gardening workshop	

gardening. This study specifically focuses on exploring the well-being enhancements associated with community gardening. Although negative or mixed experiences are equally valuable aspects of the broader discourse on community gardening and deserve further investigation, they were not the primary focus of this research.

The interviews, lasting 20 to 60 minutes, were conducted in comfortable settings, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. A pilot study refined the interview process, ensuring question clarity. Purposeful sampling yielded 16 participants (7 males, 9 females), aged 18 to 60, capturing a wide array of well-being experiences. The demographic information was self-reported based on the respondents' self-perception. Additionally, we ensured that the language used in demographic questions, including those related to age and ethnicity, avoided any exclusive terminology. Data saturation was reached after 16 interviews, following Fusch and Ness's (2015) principles. Table 1 provides respondents' demographic details.

### **Data analysis**

A hybrid thematic approach combining deductive and inductive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data collected in this study (Gioia et al., 2013) to provide a comprehensive framework for analysing data. The deductive phase drew on pre-existing theoretical frameworks of liminality (Turner, 2004; Van Gennep, 2019) and well-beings (Delle Fave et al., 2011; Huta & Ryan, 2010), which inspired the study's research objectives and interview questions. In the inductive phase, emergent themes were derived directly from participants' narratives, enabling the discovery of new insights that extended beyond the existing

**Table 2.** Examples of classification in open coding classifications.

Sub-category	Categories	Core Categories
Seeking solace	Emotional support	Hedonic well-beings
Sense of belonging		
Forgetting the world outside	Escaping from reality	
Immersing oneself in the garden		
Activities involving children	Quality time with family	
Quality time with spouse		
Burn calories	Enhancing physical health	
Physical activities outdoors		
Fresh air under the sun	Ethical improvement	Eudaimonic well-beings
Reduce waste		
Purchase organic food	Changing habits	
Convert to vegetarianism		
Interest in planting	Acquiring new skills	
Learn gardening		
Cultural exchange with people	Regurgitation fraternity of kindness	
Fundraising for the community		
Donate time and money		

theoretical framework (Proudfoot, 2023). This phase involved line-by-line coding of raw data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), capturing participant experiences of social interactions, communal bonds, skill development, and lifestyle changes associated with community gardening. This combined approach facilitated a better understanding of how community gardens function as liminal spaces, fostering both hedonic and eudaimonic well-beings (Table 2). Inductive codes, such as ‘forget about the outside world’, were enriched by deductive codes grounded in theory, such as the transformative impact of gardening on participants’ roles and identities (Sanchez & Liamputtong, 2017; Turner, 2008). This approach balances the structured insights offered by existing theoretical frameworks with the flexibility of capturing emergent themes directly from participant narratives. By integrating these two phases, the study ensures both theoretical alignment and the discovery of new, participant-driven insights.

The use of NVivo 12 facilitated the aggregation of similar codes into broader themes, a process refined through subsequent assessments to ensure a coherent pattern, as suggested by Attride Stirling (2001). The research team’s final step involved a rigorous re-evaluation of all coded data to confirm the emergence of coherent patterns, adhering to the analytical rigour described by Walters (2016). A summary of resultant themes, codes and keywords is presented in Table 2.

We established credibility through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks to enhance trustworthiness. Three transcripts were randomly selected for member checks, reinforcing the validity of our findings. Dependability and confirmability were reinforced by ongoing intra-team communication, as recommended by Healy and Perry (2000), ensuring consistency and neutrality in the data interpretation. The triangulation process involved three independent analysts coding the data, with one taking on the role of a sceptic to explore alternative interpretations, enriching the depth and rigour of the analysis as supported by Creswell and Miller (2000).

## Findings

### *Hedonic well-beings enhancement*

Studying well-beings in community gardens reveals a multifaceted rise in hedonic well-beings, linked to immediate pleasure and increased happiness. According to the framework established by Delle Fave (2013), hedonic well-beings is cultivated through pleasurable experiences and outcomes, which, in the community garden setting, are facilitated by several specific triggers. Engagement in regular exercise and access to nutritious food options significantly contribute to the holistic enhancement of well-beings. Community gardens provide an environment where physical activity is naturally integrated into daily routines, promoting overall physical health and contributing to a sense of vitality (Kingsley et al., 2009).

Community gardens contribute to volunteers' well-being by integrating purposeful activity into everyday life while also providing moments of respite from daily pressures. For some, gardening became a regular routine linked to physical vitality. One participant linked garden engagement directly to an active commute and bodily benefits. For example, Participant M said, 'Whenever I engage in garden activities, I ride my bike there, which provides great exercise. This routine is very beneficial for my health'. Others highlighted simple exposures associated with outdoor work. Participant D said, 'Exposure to sunlight boosts vitamin D levels, which supports bone health and immune function, while the fresh air fosters a sense of rejuvenation'.

Hedonic well-being is further enhanced when the garden provides respite, attentional absorption, and stress relief, functioning as a temporal sanctuary that interrupts daily pressure and supports mindfulness. Participant Q reflected: 'After work, I like coming here; it helps clear my mind and keeps me active'. Similarly, participant D explained, 'When I work in the garden, I forget about the outside world . . . all the problems and things that may upset me fade away, and I become completely immersed in the present moment'. These accounts suggest that community gardens simultaneously integrate into daily routines and provide temporary liminal moments of renewal.

Moreover, community gardens transcend their physical bounds to become nurturing environments where social bonds are cultivated through shared gardening tasks. These social interactions foster a sense of belonging and companionship, providing emotional support that alleviates symptoms of depression and promotes positive emotions (Sippel et al., 2015). A long-term volunteer characterised the setting as immediately welcoming, 'Everyone in this community is nice and willing to assist newcomers' (Participant G). Another emphasised the everyday pleasure of mutual exchange. Participant T said, 'Here we share experiences with each other, it's a mutual way of communication, and I am involved here with pleasure'.

Participants often experience a reinforcement of social roles, whether by strengthening familial and societal identities or by allowing for their temporary relinquishment, both of which contribute to an individual's sense of well-being (Yazici, 2024). The garden provides a sanctuary from the pressures of daily life, offering a space for relaxation and family engagement. Strong social ties developed within the community garden context are linked to mental and physical well-beings, which are essential for long-term health and happiness (Haslam et al., 2016). Participant J further highlighted how shared gardening aligned with personal routines and emotional needs: 'I can come here when

my husband is working on the project . . . I can see him more and now understand his effort'. This interaction enhanced her emotional satisfaction and relationship quality, strengthening the affective benefits of leisure time spent with loved ones, which is an important feature of hedonic well-being (Flood & Genadek, 2016).

Community gardening benefits mental health by social support with activities. Participants described feeling physically active and mentally refreshed. Participant A said, 'When I am fully involved in it, I find myself completely immersed, which significantly benefits my mental health. This practice has been incredibly helpful for me'. For those managing work-related stress, the garden created a temporary suspension of daily pressures and a space for mindfulness and recovery. Reported by participant D, 'When I work in the garden, I forget about the outside world. All the problems and things that may upset me fade away, and I become completely immersed in the present moment'. As Participant P participant explained. 'I was going through a difficult time with a close family bereavement prior to joining the community . . . from the continuous support and friendliness at the charity that allowed me to come out of that season stronger than when I entered'.

### **Eudaimonic well-being enhancement**

Eudaimonic well-being is advanced when participants experienced deeper fulfilment grounded in ethical living, personal growth, and meaningful social contribution (Heintzelman, 2018). Participant P traced a progression from participant to adviser, 'I happen to have charitable background . . . so I've been helping them on a voluntary basis . . . looking at their fundraising, governance . . . trying to help them create that . . . I'm helping them shape the organisation'. Another described assuming formal responsibility, 'I've been helping them on a voluntary basis . . . structuring the charity . . . it cheers me up because I can see the organisation growing' (Participant T). In some cases, participants even envisaged co-creation of new organisational partnerships, as M reflected, 'I was talking with Mike (Mike is Grounded Community's manager) about the organisation's future . . . a café . . . so that I could be involved in . . . I used to have a café in London'.

This study also provided several key aspects that constitute eudaimonic well-being situated within the context of community gardens, embodying the Aristotelian ideal of achieving one's highest potential through virtuous living and engaging in activities that contribute to the common good (Dhiman, 2021). Participant A remarked:

Not everyone is just so supportive of each other . . . I see a lot of people come from struggles . . . I Come through the gate in this kind of unwritten rule of kindness. I work with all my heart by helping people, which gives me a deep sense of satisfaction.

Engagement in community gardens fosters an enhanced sense of environmental stewardship and ethical living. Except those participants occupying a physical space, they are partaking in the cultivation of a responsible lifestyle, fostering a deeper connection and reverence for the natural world (Dolley, 2020). A significant behavioural change accompanies this ethical awakening. Individuals in community gardens often experience a reorientation of their lifestyles (Dobernig & Stagl, 2015). Such as:

'I believe that planning for the future is crucial, particularly when it comes to ensuring we have a sustainable source of organic food ... In the supermarket, organic food is too expensive for me, but here in the garden I can get vegetables grown by volunteers, and they are free. It also gave me the idea to use my balcony at home to grow my own, so I can have organic food more easily and affordably'. (Participant C)

Community gardens serve as such spaces, where individuals gain inspiration from gardening and creative activities that enabled personal growth. Participant Y said, 'I strive to reduce waste by paying greater attention to the preservation and consumption of veggies'.

Eudaimonic well-being is further characterised by the cultivation of meaningful relationships. Community gardens serve as a platform for forming enduring friendships and a supportive network (Pudup, 2008). For example, Participant M shared how they offered support within the garden community, 'There was a young lady I know from the garden activities ... I provided my spare room at a cheap price. I felt good to be able to help, and I was relieved she had somewhere safe to stay'. These social constructs go beyond mere acquaintanceship, fostering a sense of collective purpose that is integral to the concept of eudaimonia. Participant T, who became a trustee of the garden, stated:

I've been helping them on a voluntary basis ... structuring the charity ... it cheers me up because I can see the organisation growing. I have worked on several positive projects that align with my personal interests. These projects have been meaningful to me because they connect with my passions and allow me to contribute in a meaningful way. My goal is to find areas where I can both help and gain support, fostering a mutual exchange of skills and friendship that makes a positive impact.

Community gardening involves moderate physical activities such as digging, planting, and weeding, which enhance physical vitality. It also provides informal and intergenerational learning opportunities through the sharing of skills, cultivation practices, and cultural knowledge (Armstrong, 2000; Ohmer et al., 2009). In this study, participants described gaining new skills through gardening, which increased their confidence and sense of competence. For example, several volunteers highlighted learning planting techniques and exchanging knowledge with others. As Participant L explained, 'With our back garden and the front, we are trying to design something that we can create'. Gardens can act as 'third spaces' where people from diverse backgrounds connect, overcoming barriers through shared social identities (Chen et al., 2020). Participant Y reflected on how the garden facilitated cultural integration, 'When I join this community, there are lots of people here ... this is how I know British culture, their thinking, their lifestyle, and improving my English'.

Therefore, based on the activities and participant reviews, volunteers derive enjoyment and fulfilment from a variety of sources, reflecting the diverse opportunities offered by community gardening. While all volunteers share a common commitment to the garden, their participation is shaped by their individual preferences and interests. Some are drawn to hands-on activities such as planting and maintaining gardens, while others find fulfilment in socialising, cultural exchange, or contributing to broader community initiatives. This diversity underscores the importance of

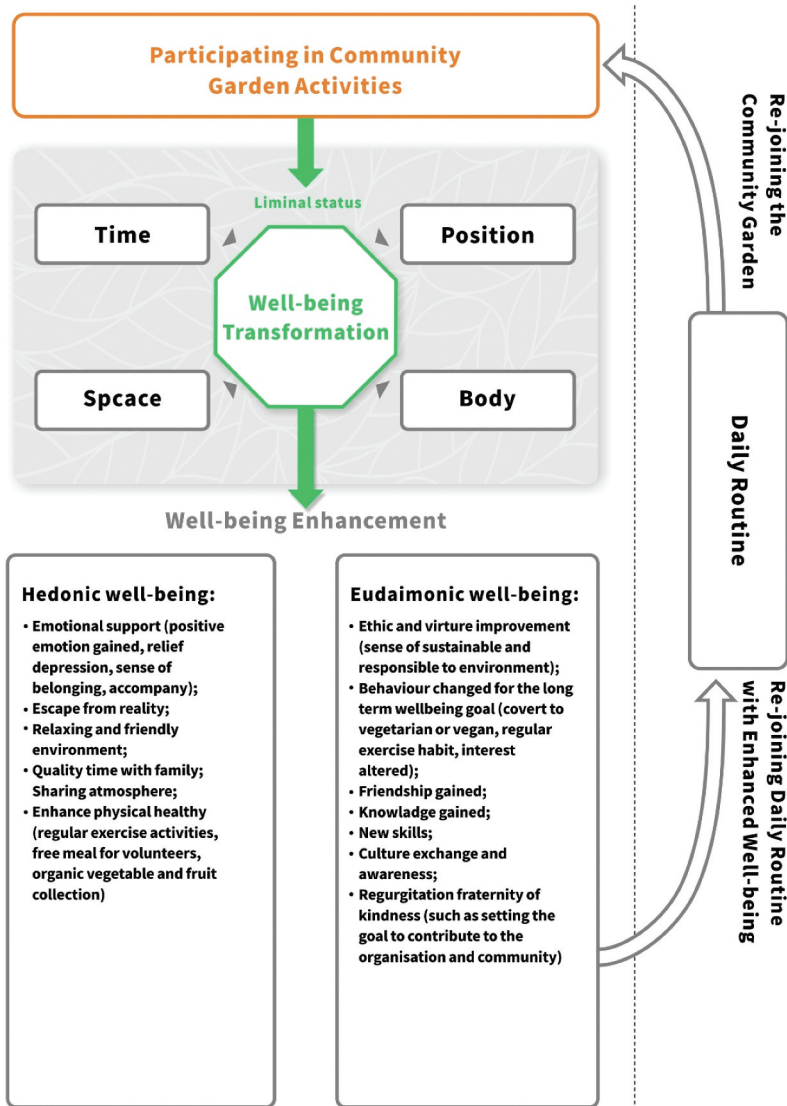
tailoring volunteer projects to provide a range of activities, ensuring that each participant can engage in ways that are personally meaningful and satisfying. Participant R reported, 'I feel like I did something meaningful, and it keeps me moving'. The community garden acts as a catalyst for liminal experiences, fostering respite, connection, and transformation. Participants enjoy the achievement from their gardening work become a motivation to encourage the volunteers to keep doing volunteer jobs.

## Discussion

Volunteering in community gardens provides individuals an opportunity to experience a distinctive form of engagement, such as temporary detachment from everyday routines, immersion in unfamiliar social and physical settings, and the creation of space for reflection and personal reorientation. This study supports the notion that community gardens are not static environments but rather dynamic systems where liminality and well-being interact continuously. [Figure 1](#) presents a conceptual model of participation in community garden activities that facilitates well-being transformation. When individuals engage in liminal status dimensions emerge differently, participants experience hedonic well-being through emotional support, relaxation, family bonding, and physical vitality, while also developing eudaimonic well-being through ethical awareness, behavioural change, friendship, and skill acquisition. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), these transformations enhance well-beings and lead participants either to rejoin their daily routines with renewed energy or to return to the community garden by this dual re-entry pathway, reinforcing an ongoing cycle of engagement and well-being enhancement.

Volunteers' perceptions and subjective feelings shape distinct pathways of engagement in the liminal environment of the community garden. For example, one volunteer may find solace in the garden by feeling the nature, while another may value the fleeting moments of stillness that allow for introspection amidst the tasks. This finding aligns with the existing studies, which argue gardening may influence well-being, including reduced isolation, a sense of achievement and stronger connection to nature (de Bell et al., 2020; Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014). One participant shared how the garden offered an escape from urban stressors, allowing them to 'breathe in fresh air and feel rejuvenated'. Others emphasised the communal aspect, viewing the garden as a place to share knowledge, collaborate, and build relationships. Some volunteers prioritise the garden as a personal retreat, while others see it as a vibrant social arena, reflecting the multifaceted nature of its liminality.

This study proposes that the self-reinforcing relationship between well-being and continued participation in community gardens can be understood through liminality theory. In this context, liminality is a recurrent experiential condition, as each return to the garden creates a temporary distance from everyday structures and reopens opportunities for hedonic pleasure and eudaimonic growth. This cyclical process sustains volunteers' engagement, with enhanced well-being encouraging further participation and renewed participation deepening transformative potential. Well-being transformations may also influence the way volunteers experience their daily routines. Some re-enter everyday life with greater coping resources and positivity, while others find routines largely unchanged and turn to the garden as a source of respite. Rejoining daily life and



**Figure 1.** Flowchart of well-being enhancement process.

returning to the garden therefore operate as complementary pathways through which volunteers sustain their well-being.

Hedonic well-being focuses on immediate pleasure and the avoidance of discomfort, while eudaimonic well-being is concerned with long-term fulfilment and personal growth (Giuntoli et al., 2021). When volunteers immerse themselves in the liminal dimensions of the garden, volunteers experience both hedonic pleasures and eudaimonic growth, which in turn motivate further involvement. In the hedonia well-being level, enhanced well-beings manifests in emotional support (such as positive emotion gain, relief from depression, sense of belonging gained, and companionship), escape from reality, a relaxing and friendly environment, quality time with family, a sharing

atmosphere, and physical enhancement (such as regular exercise activities, free meals for volunteers, organic vegetables, and free vegetable and fruit collection). This aligns with the previous study of importance of positive emotions and sensory experiences in the assessment of well-being (Diener et al., 2018). Initial engagement often triggers immediate benefits to volunteers' well-being, such as reduced stress and increased happiness (Koay & Dillon, 2020). These positive outcomes, in turn, motivate volunteers to re-enter the liminal space, reinforcing their connection to the garden and deepening their transformative journey.

In the eudaimonic well-being level, enhanced well-being manifests in ethic and virtue improvement (such as enhancing the sense of sustainable and responsible awareness towards the environment), behaviour changed for the long-term well-being goal (such as converting to vegetarianism or veganism, altering interest from sedentary to regular exercise habits), friendship gained, knowledge gained, new skills gained, culture and awareness exchange, and the cultivation of a fraternity of kindness (such as setting the goal to contribute to the organisation and community). The eudaimonic well-being motivates participants to re-engage with community gardening activities, as they recognise its value improving their immediate emotional state and in fostering long-lasting changes that ripple through their everyday experiences. These enhancements enable them to return to their daily lives with a more positive outlook, improved coping mechanisms, and healthier habits, which support the previous study (Koay & Dillon, 2020). The eudaimonic well-being is fostered through meaningful and purposeful activities. This is confirmed with Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, which focuses on realising one's potential and engaging in virtuous activities.

### *Theoretical contributions*

This study contributes to the theory in three significant ways. First, it pioneers the extension of liminality theory (Turner, 1983, 2004) within the context of community gardens to explore how volunteering can foster well-being transformation. While the public health benefits of urban gardens are well recognised (de Bell et al., 2020), this study advances the field by conceptualising community gardens as liminal spaces. It demonstrates that the temporary suspension from everyday norms, roles, and routines during volunteer activities opens up avenues for psychological and emotional reorientation. In doing so, this study extends an emerging research trend of considering non-ritualised settings that can trigger liminal experiences that foster personal transformation (Zhai et al., 2024). For leisure studies, this research extends liminality beyond festivals and events to everyday leisure settings, showing how volunteering operates as a leisure practice that reorganises roles, relations, and norms. It also invites future empirical work on how the design and governance of community leisure infrastructures could widen community inclusion and cultivate communities.

Second, this study identifies and explicates the multidimensional connections between leisure participation in community gardens and volunteers' well-being. Drawing on Huta and Ryan's (2010) dual model of well-being, the findings distinguish between short-term hedonic outcomes (e.g. stress relief, enjoyment, and social connectedness) and longer-term eudaimonic outcomes (e.g. ethical awareness, behavioural transformation, and self-realisation). It also contributes to literature on sustainable lifestyles and therapeutic

landscapes by emphasising individual health gains (Bell et al., 2018) and ethically situated outcomes, such as increased civic engagement and environmental stewardship (Kingsley et al., 2020; Fox-Kämper et al., 2018). Distinguishing between hedonic and eudaimonic outcomes clarifies their immediate and long-term benefits, providing a valid framework for further evaluation.

Third, this study develops a flowchart that visually represents the dynamic nature of well-being transformation through liminal participation. The model outlines a self-reinforcing loop in which initial hedonic improvements encourage sustained engagement, subsequently deepening eudaimonic benefits. This framework bridges the gap between liminality theory and well-being studies by offering a practical conceptual tool for understanding how liminal experiences may trigger both immediate and lasting psychological changes. In doing so, it enriches current scholarship on urban gardens (e.g. Ribeiro et al., 2023) and provides a theoretical basis for future empirical investigations into everyday liminality and well-being. Further, this study contributes to broader interdisciplinary dialogues in health geography, leisure studies, and environmental psychology.

### *Practical implications*

The findings of this study offer practical implications across various sectors, benefiting community planners, policymakers, charity organisations, community garden directors, and mental health professionals. The research highlights the importance of community gardens as both therapeutic landscapes (Mossabir et al., 2021) and essential social infrastructure (Calvet-Mir & March, 2019). For planners and policymakers, the findings underscore the value of urban gardens and calls for the integration of participatory green infrastructure into urban planning frameworks (Shi & Woolley, 2014).

Findings reveal that volunteerism enhances psychological well-beings. Volunteers nowadays come from increasingly varied backgrounds, and their participation in urban garden programs contributes in distinct ways. For those who engage in fostering a shared community culture, eudaimonic well-being is enhanced through meaningful activities and a sense of purpose, differing from individuals who derive hedonic well-beings through leisure, relaxation, or access to free meals. Concepts such as therapeutic landscapes (Gesler, 1992) and green infrastructure as social infrastructure (Swensen & Berg, 2020) are helpful to broader urban and health planning. For charitable organisations and NGOs, who are recommended to design programs by highlighting the well-being outcomes of volunteering, organisations can more effectively recruit, engage, and retain diverse volunteer populations to provide physical support, enable emotional relief and establish moral development.

For charitable organisations and NGOs recommended design programs by highlighting the well-being outcomes of volunteering, from physical support to emotional relief to moral development, organisations can more effectively recruit, engage, and retain diverse volunteer populations.

Given the diverse socio-demographic backgrounds, motivations and aspirations of community garden volunteers, this study underscores the importance of adopting

a multidimensional and inclusive approach to fostering well-being, resilience and social connection (Langemeyer et al., 2018). To enhance satisfaction and retention of volunteers, future events could consider highlighting the positive impact on well-being projects which include offering varied gardening activities, skill-building workshops, social events, and designated areas for interaction and relaxation, all tailored to meet the needs of diverse groups. Additionally, structured engagement ensures regular opportunities for volunteers to connect with each other and with the environment, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

## Conclusion and limitations

In conclusion, applying liminality theory offers a nuanced lens for understanding community garden volunteering and its contribution to both hedonic relief and eudaimonic growth in well-beings. Within the garden, volunteers experience immediate hedonic benefits, while outside the garden, their experiences contribute to eudaimonic well-being.

Despite its insightful findings, this study faces several limitations that could be addressed in future research. Firstly, the data were collected from volunteers participating in a single local community garden in the UK, which may not represent the diversity of community gardens or volunteering experiences in different settings. Future studies could expand by including volunteers from community gardens in different regions or countries. While this study highlights the well-being enhancements associated with community gardening, we acknowledge that not all experiences in these spaces are entirely positive. Our observations revealed some mixed and negative experiences, such as participants feeling frustrated when illness or other commitments prevented them from fully engaging in gardening activities or finding it difficult to maintain friendships formed in the garden after returning to their broader community. Although these perspectives are equally valuable for a comprehensive understanding of community gardening, they were beyond the primary focus of this research, which centred on exploring well-being enhancements within liminal environments. Given that different tasks may have varied impacts on well-being, future research is invited to explore how well-being is affected by different types of volunteering activities. Finally, this study did not trace participants' longer-term trajectories once they re-entered their everyday routines. It remains unclear whether the well-being transformations observed in the garden lead to enduring changes in daily life or whether they function as temporary relief that fades without continued garden engagement.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The work was supported by the British Academy ECRN seed funding.

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