

The Past, Present and Future: Envisioning the Inevitability of Blood Donation

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Blood, plasma, and organ donation have always been tied to the evolving needs of society. From altruistic community heroes to the anonymous donors of today, the landscape of giving and receiving has changed dramatically. Now, as we gaze toward the year 2050 and beyond, the fundamental question remains: are we prepared for the future of donors and recipients, or will we be perpetually scrambling to keep pace with a society that evolves faster than our capacity to understand it? This commentary delves into the forces shaping donation studies, highlighting shifting social identities, the evolution of civic engagement, and the increasing complexities of technology.

Shifting Social Identities: Who Are the Donors of Tomorrow?

To imagine the future of donors, we must first understand the changes in social identity. The faces of donors are transforming alongside the societal structures they belong to. For example, today, over 80% of Toronto's population, where I am located, consists of immigrants or children of immigrants, illustrating a profound shift in community demographics, and this situation represents the case for most major cities in North America and Europe. These demographic shifts reshape who donates and why. Cultural beliefs, experiences of belonging, and community ties influence participation in donation programmes.¹ Donation is no longer just an act of altruism or duty; it is also a reflection of one's social identity, tied to how individuals see themselves within the larger fabric of society.¹

The increasing diversity of communities calls for a more nuanced understanding of what motivates people to donate. It also challenges us to rethink the narratives we create around donation. The traditional depiction of a "heroic donor" is evolving as modern donors bring with them diverse sets of values and expectations. A young person working in precarious gig employment may not view donation through the same lens as someone with a stable job and access to healthcare benefits. These differences matter, and they will determine how we approach the recruitment of donors in the future.

What does this mean for donation studies? It means expanding the questions we ask and the tools we use to understand donor behaviour. It means considering the socio-economic and cultural contexts that shape why, how, and even if individuals choose to donate. Social scientists, researchers, and policymakers must pay closer attention to the evolving narratives of belonging, which are increasingly complex and deeply tied to factors like immigration, economic instability, and social fragmentation. To truly understand the future of donors, we must acknowledge that donation is not just a biological transaction - it is a deeply social act.

Civic Engagement and Trust: A Shifting Landscape

Beyond identity, the future of donation hinges on evolving concepts of civic engagement and trust. The ways people connect to each other and to institutions have changed, and these changes affect how they view the act of donating. Trust, which once stemmed from community networks and institutions, is now in flux. In

an era dominated by social media and digital storytelling, the concept of engagement has shifted dramatically. People today are drawn not to the flashy or the grandiose but to authenticity - to real stories and real people.

Take YouTube, for instance. The platform has transformed over the past few years, moving from content emphasizing spectacle to content cantered on storytelling and genuine connection. The meteoric rise of figures like MrBeast, whose videos are now more about people and their experiences than outrageous challenges, speaks to a broader societal yearning for connection. People are searching for meaning, for stories that resonate, for a sense of shared humanity - a need that has only grown stronger after the social isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic.^{2,3}

This shift has significant implications for donation systems. Donors today want to feel connected - not just to the recipients but also to the broader mission of donation itself. They want to be part of a story, to feel that their contributions are meaningful beyond the act of giving.^{4,5} This shift from transactional engagement to narrative-driven belonging means that donation campaigns must adapt. They must become more than pleas for help; they must tell stories that engage people on an emotional level, building trust and fostering a sense of community.

The question, then, is whether our current approaches are sufficient. Are our policies, our campaigns, and our systems designed to foster the kind of engagement that today's and tomorrow's donors are seeking? Or are we relying on outdated models of civic duty that no longer resonate with today's society? To prepare for the donors of 2050, we must acknowledge that engagement has changed, and that building trust will require new, more authentic approaches.

Technological Bricolage: Opportunities and Threats

The third force shaping the future of donation is technology - specifically, the increasing role of artificial intelligence and digital platforms. Technology has always been a double-edged sword, offering immense opportunities while simultaneously introducing new challenges. In the context of donation, AI presents both potential benefits and risks that must be navigated carefully.

On one hand, AI has the potential to revolutionize donation systems, making them more efficient and responsive. Imagine a future where AI algorithms can predict when and where blood donations will be needed

most, allowing for targeted donor recruitment campaigns that minimize waste and save more lives. Imagine AI-driven platforms that match organ donors and recipients with unprecedented speed and accuracy, reducing waiting times and improving outcomes. These are the kinds of possibilities that make technological innovation so enticing.

However, there is another side to this story. As technology becomes more sophisticated, it also becomes more exclusive.⁶ The rise of AI is creating new forms of inequality, as those who control the technology gain disproportionate power over those who do not. The same institutions that once championed open access to data are now pulling back, wary of how AI models might misuse their information. Rather than democratizing information, technology threatens to exacerbate existing inequities, creating a system where only those with access to advanced tools can fully participate.

For donation studies, this raises critical questions. How do we ensure that technological advancements benefit everyone rather than deepening divides? How do we navigate the ethical complexities of using AI in contexts that are inherently about human connection and care? As we look to the future, we must grapple with these questions, ensuring that technology serves to enhance - rather than undermine - the values of equity and inclusivity that should be at the core of all donation systems.

Are We Ready for the Future of Donation?

The future of blood, plasma, and organ donation is one marked by rapid change. Social identities are shifting, engagement and trust are being redefined, and technology is advancing at an unprecedented pace. In the face of these changes, the question we must ask ourselves is: are we ready? Are our social science frameworks evolving quickly enough to keep pace with the donors and recipients of 2050, or will we find ourselves once again scrambling to catch up?

To prepare for the future, we need to rethink the way we approach donation studies. We need to expand our focus beyond the biological and technical aspects of donation to include the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions that are increasingly central to the act of giving. We need to develop new methods for understanding donor behaviour, methods that are attuned to the complexities of future identity, engagement, and technology. This means asking better questions. It means designing studies that take into account the diverse motivations and

experiences of donors, that recognize the importance of storytelling and authenticity in building trust, and that address the ethical challenges posed by new technologies. It means moving beyond the narrow focus on individual donors and recipients to consider the broader social systems in which they are embedded.

Ultimately, the future of donation studies will depend on our ability to adapt—to see donation not just as a medical necessity but as a deeply social act shaped by the values, beliefs, and technologies of the time. If we can do this, we may find ourselves not just keeping up with the changes of 2050, but leading the way toward a more inclusive, equitable, human, and people-centered future for donation.

The inevitability of donation studies lies in their capacity to reflect and respond to the changing world around us. By embracing the shifts in identity, trust, and technology, we can build a future that is not only prepared for the donors and recipients of tomorrow but is also more connected, more compassionate, and more human. The question is, are we ready to take on this challenge?

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