

"More Than a Thank You! The Effects of Recognition Strategies on Blood Donation"

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Abstract:

Despite the growing need for blood worldwide, blood donation rates remain alarmingly low. This research focuses on recognition strategies and investigates whether their effectiveness varies depending on (1) the type of recognition (public vs. private), (2) its timing across the donor lifecycle, and (3) whether they are accompanied by symbolic rewards. Using a longitudinal panel dataset of over 720,000 donation instances from more than 49,000 donors during a 28-year window (1996–2024), and applying random-effects regression models, the findings show that recognition has a negative short-term effect, as it delays subsequent donations, though this effect fades shortly afterwards. Crucially, the results indicate that recognition strategies become more effective when they are accompanied by a symbolic reward (i.e., commemorative badge) and during the early stages of the donor lifecycle. These results offer novel insights into research on recognition strategies and their effectiveness, and provides actionable, data-driven insights for non-profits to enhance donor loyalty and engagement.

Keywords: *Recognition, Blood Donation, Donation Lifecycle; Donor Engagement.*

Track: *Public Sector and Non-Profit Marketing.*

1. Introduction

Every three seconds, someone needs a blood transfusion (*Red Cross, 2025*). This necessity is exacerbated by the deep global demographic transformation, particularly the projected increase in the population aged 60 and older, which is anticipated to place growing pressure on blood transfusion services (World Health Organization, 2024; INE, 2025). Paradoxically, despite rising demand, active donation rates remain critically low, averaging only 2.41% of the population in EU member states (JRC, 2023). In Spain, for instance, the country recorded 12% fewer donors in 2023 than in 2010 along with a 6,5% decline in donations between 2010 and 2017 (Statista, 2025). This substantial gap between demand and supply highlights a critical challenge for the long-term sustainability of healthcare systems globally.

To address this challenge, organizations seek effective strategies to motivate donors and engage them in recurring donations. The literature has paid an increasing attention to this important theme, focusing mainly on tools such as time off work, medium-value vouchers or gift cards, and cash or tax benefits (Graf et al., 2024), as well as on the provision of free medical tests as an additional motivator for health-conscious donors (Chell et al., 2022). Recognition, defined as “an expression of appreciation given by a group to individuals who undertake desired behaviors” (Fisher & Ackerman, 1998), has emerged as a potentially key motivational tool. Prior research has demonstrated that it can have a positive influence in prosocial contexts as a driver of sustained engagement (Grant & Gino, 2010), strengthening the relational bond between the donor and the organization (Shehu et al., 2024). However, despite its promising potential as a motivational tool, key aspects of recognition remain substantially underexplored. First, most existing research has focused on the main effect of recognition, typically reporting positive outcomes (Davis et al., 2017). Yet, several theoretical and empirical contributions warn that recognition may not always produce favorable responses (Robinson et al., 2019). Second, the existing literature provides limited evidence on the conditions under which recognition can become more or less effective. These include, for example, the type of recognition (e.g., public vs. private; Simpson et al., 2018), the timing of its provision during the donor lifecycle (Luo & Kumar, 2013), or whether it is combined with other incentives (e.g., symbolic rewards).

Given these important gaps, the main goal of the current study is to investigate the impact of recognition on driving recurrent donations over time, and whether these effects vary depending on (1) the type of recognition (public vs. private), (2) its timing along the donor

lifecycle, and (3) whether they are combined with symbolic rewards. To address these objectives the study leverages a unique dataset that contains information for a sample of more than 49,000 donors during a 28-year observation period capturing more than 720,000 donation events. The results extend current knowledge in several important ways, including a better understanding of the effectiveness of recognition strategies and the conditions under which recognition produces the desired motivational effects. It also offers important practical contributions for organizations aiming to design tailored and efficient recognition strategies that can produce positive effects on donors' behavior.

2. Theoretical framework.

This study investigates the effect of recognition on blood donation over time. It also studies whether this effect varies with the type of recognition (public vs. private), its timing (along the donor lifecycle), and whether recognition is combined with symbolic rewards (e.g., commemorative badge). In this section we present the theoretical foundations of the work and establish the research hypotheses.

Recognition is defined as “an expression of appreciation given by a group to individuals who undertake desired behaviors” (Fisher & Ackerman, 1998), and it plays a fundamental role in satisfying psychological needs. Individuals are aware of how their actions are perceived by others, and recognition offers an opportunity to signal prosocial traits such as generosity and fairness (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006). Social Exchange Theory (SET) explains human behavior based on the principle that individuals seek acknowledged experiences and interactions to maximize their overall benefits (Nye, 1978). Within SET, the act of being recognized serves as a form of social exchange, reinforcing prosocial identities and strengthening emotional bonds between donors and organizations (Hollander, 1990).

2.1 Main effect of recognition.

We first discuss the main effect of recognition on blood donation. Recognition has been acknowledged as a powerful stimulus for positive behaviors across diverse contexts (Bradler et al., 2016). In the charitable domain, receiving gratitude has been associated to positive affect and interpersonal connection (Davis et al., 2017). Personalized expressions of gratitude meaningfully increase prosocial behaviors, including generosity and persistence (Grant & Gino, 2010). Recognition has also been positively associated with donation amounts, as individuals motivated by social visibility tend to give more (Ko et al., 2011). Based on this accumulated evidence, the base hypothesis of this research states:

H0: Recognition has a positive effect on donation behavior.

2.2 Changes in recognition effectiveness: type of recognition, timing, and symbolic rewards.

Public vs. private recognition. The literature has offered an important distinction between public recognition, under which the donation decision is made known to others, such as listing names in newsletters (Simpson et al., 2018), and private recognition, which is a discreet appreciation not known to others like personalized thank-you notes. Whether one type is more effective than the other is a topic of debate in the literature. Arguments in favor of public recognition suggest that public appreciation activates image motivation (Amir & Arely, 2009), reinforcing the donor's social identity as altruistic (Lacetera & Macis, 2010). Consistent with this, prior studies have shown that social observability increases charitable actions (Kristofferson et al., 2014). At the same time, evidence shows that mandatory public recognition can reduce participation among individuals who value their privacy or autonomy (Andreoni & Petrie, 2004). Furthermore, excessive public incentives can potentially "crowd out" intrinsic altruistic motivations (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006). Regarding private recognition, research suggests that it resonates better with intrinsically motivated donors who possess an independent self-construal (Simpson et al., 2018). Whether public or private recognition is more effective is thus an empirical question. We hypothesize:

H1: The impact of recognition on donation behavior varies with the type of recognition (public vs. private).

Timing. Customer relationships are dynamic and evolve over time through distinct phases: transactional-stage, developmental-stage, and mature-stage (Zhang et al., 2016). Effective relationship marketing demands tailoring strategies to these stages (Luo & Kumar, 2013). This principle translates directly to donation contexts, where the donor's lifecycle stage determines commitment and responsiveness. At the beginning of the relationship, low initial commitment and weak relational norms mean that recognition might be unexpected and thus can play a more significant motivational role (Gneezy et al., 2011), given that bonds are forming. Less experienced donors are generally more responsive to external motivators as they are still forming their identity (Ferguson et al., 2011). Conversely, as donors gain experience, they become more committed and aligned with the organization's mission and thus may perceive external reinforcement as redundant (Deci et al., 1999). This pattern supports stage-based theories of relationships, in which external cues are more influential during the initial formation of identity and habits (Ferguson et al., 2011) but gradually give

way to internalized norms and self-driven motivation as the donor matures. We thus expect recognition to exert a stronger influence at the beginning of the donor lifecycle. We hypothesize:

H2: The impact of recognition on donor behavior decreases over the donor's lifecycle.

Symbolic rewards. Incentive systems in prosocial behavior balance intrinsic (altruism) and extrinsic (material rewards) motivation (Amir & Ariely, 2009). While extrinsic rewards can boost initial participation (Goette & Stutzer, 2008), they pose a significant risk of crowd-out, potentially decreasing the inherent value and internal drive to perform the action (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006). To avoid this detrimental effect, mainly associated with monetary compensations, researchers have focused on symbolic rewards (e.g., medals, badges). Symbolic rewards hold high psychological and social value without high economic cost, enhancing perceived authenticity (Frey & Neckermann, 2008). They reinforce social ties, elevate self-esteem, and are considered more effective and efficient than monetary incentives (Frey & Neckermann, 2008). We hypothesize:

H3: The impact of recognition on donor behavior increases when it is combined with symbolic rewards.

3. Data and Methods

To test the hypotheses, we collaborated with a blood and tissue bank in Spain that provided access to detailed data on donation behavior for a representative sample of donors during a long observation window. Specifically, the dataset spans 28 years (1996–2024) and includes 722,509 donation events from 49,313 unique donors for which we observe their blood donation behavior over time. The data provides detailed information for each donation such as donation type, location, and date, as well as relevant demographic information (e.g., age, gender). We combine this information with data on the blood bank's communication and recognition strategies, allowing us to identify precisely all the recognitions provided to donors after their donations. Specifically, the bank has been implementing the following recognition policy: private recognition (congratulatory letters) is awarded at the 5th donation; symbolic rewards (a commemorative badge) are introduced alongside private recognition at the 25th donation; and public recognition (a formal event) is provided at the 50th, 100th, and 150th donations.

We use this data to construct the key relevant variables for the empirical analyses. As dependent variable, we focus on blood donation behavior and consider two dimensions that can capture donor engagement: *Time Between Donations* (days between donation instances); and *Donation Breadth* (dummy coded as 1 when donors engage in other, more complex types of donations, such as plasmapheresis). The main independent variable, *Recognition*, is measured as a dummy variable coded as 1 when a donor receives recognition after a specific donation instance. As moderators we consider the following: (1) *Recognition Type*, coded as a dummy variable that takes the value 1 when the recognition is public, and 0 when it is private; (2) *Timing*, measured using as proxy the cumulative number of donations; and (3) *Symbolic reward*, which is measured with a dummy variable that takes the value 1 when the recognition includes a symbolic reward. Additionally, we include a comprehensive set of control variables, including Gender (dummy), Age (continuous), Blood type (categorical), Seasonality (dummy for summer months), and Weekday (dummies for days of the week).

Given the longitudinal nature of the data, we estimate the effects using panel-data techniques. For *Time Between Donations*, we use random-effects regressions; for *Donation Breadth* we use a probit specification. We adopt a nested estimation approach and estimate sequential models, progressively incorporating different groups of relevant variables into the models. To assess how recognition effects unfold over time, we include lagged variables (t-1, t-2, and t-3), enabling us to identify both immediate and delayed behavioral responses to recognition.

4. Findings

We estimated sequential models that progressively incorporate the key research variables into the models: we start with a base model with control variables only (M1); then we include the main effect of recognition using the three lagged variables to capture both the short- and medium-term effects (M2); model 3 (M3) adds the two design-related moderators: *Recognition Type* (public vs. private) and *Symbolic Gratification*, to assess whether the effectiveness of recognition depends on how it is delivered; finally, model 4 (M4) introduces the interaction between recognition and *Cumulative Donation Number*, testing whether recognition effects vary across donor lifecycle stages. Model fit statistics suggest that adding the relevant variables improves model fit. In Table 1 we present the results of models M2, M3 and M4 for the two key dependent variables *Time Between Donations* and *Donation Breadth*.

Table 1.

	Time Between Donations			Donation Breadth		
	M2	M3	M4	M2	M3	M4
Recognition						
Recognition (t-1)	<u>11.95***</u> (0,001)	—	—	<u>-0.038*</u> (0,001)	—	—
Recognition (t-2)	<u>8.10**</u> (0,001)	—	—	<u>0.057***</u> (0,001)	—	—
Recognition (t-3)	0.76 (n.s.)	—	—	(n.s.)	—	—
Moderators						
Public recognition	—	8.33 (n.s.)	—	—	0.0689 (n.s.)	—
Symbolic reward	—	<u>-69.80***</u> (0,001)	—	—	<u>0.1854***</u> (0,001)	—
Recognition × Cumulative (t)	—	—	<u>-1.038***</u> (0,001)	—	—	—
Recognition × Cumulative (t-1)	—	—	<u>-0.617***</u> (0,001)	—	—	<u>0.0017*</u> (0,001)
Recognition × Cumulative (t-2)	—	—	<u>-0.307*</u> (0,001)	—	—	<u>-0.0017*</u> (0,001)
Recognition × Cumulative (t-3)	—	—	0.015 (n.s.)	—	—	—

Regarding the main effect of recognition (Model 2), the results show that it actually increases the time between donations in the short-term while reducing the probability to engage in other types of donations (donation breadth), although these negative effects dissipate over time (no significant effects are found for the lagged recognition variables at t-3; and a significant positive effect is found for donation breadth for the lagged recognition variable at t-2).

When we look at the results of model 3, they indicate that the type of recognition, whether public or private, does not exert a significant effect. Regarding symbolic gratification, the results indicate that combining recognition with a symbolic reward produces positive effects on donation behavior by reducing the time between donations and increasing the likelihood that donors engage in other types of blood donations. These results offer support to H3. Finally, according to the timing of the recognition (Model 4), the results show that recognition is more effective at speeding donations and expanding the types of donations when it is provided early in the donor lifecycle compared with when it is provided later on. These results provide support to H2.

5. Discussion

This study offers several important theoretical contributions that help advance our current understanding of recognition in prosocial behavior. First, we show that recognition does not always generate an immediate positive effect on the desired outcomes. Our results reveal that, in the short term, recognition can produce unintended consequences, such as an increase in

the time between donations or a decrease in the expansion of the donation behaviors. This temporary slowdown (the negative effects disappear when we consider t-3 lagged variables) aligns with research on motivation and goal pursuit, where a situation of post-goal complacency can emerge after individuals are reminded of their accomplishments (Amir & Ariely, 2008), yet, to the best of our knowledge, this pattern has never been empirically documented in a real-world prosocial context such as blood donation.

Second, our study offers novel insights into the conditions under which recognition can become more effective at motivating donation behaviors. We focused on three theoretically relevant aspects related to how the recognition is designed: the type of recognition (public vs. private), the timing, and the provision of a symbolic reward. Regarding the type of recognition, although previous work acknowledges potential important differences between public and private recognition, our findings show no significant difference between them suggesting that, at least in the context of blood donation, the *type* of recognition may matter less. This stands in contrast with studies that highlight strong social-comparison effects (Kristofferson et al., 2014) and suggests the need for additional work in this area. With regard to the use of symbolic rewards, our results confirm the strong role that they have in boosting the effectiveness of recognition, demonstrating that recognition accompanied by a symbolic badge meaningfully speeds up donations and expands the types of blood donations that donors make. This aligns with theories positing that symbolic incentives enhance perceived appreciation without crowding out intrinsic motivation (Frey & Neckermann, 2009). Finally, we contribute to lifecycle-based perspectives on donor behavior by demonstrating that recognition is not equally effective at different stages of the relationship development process, as the results reveal that recognition is more effective when it is provided early in the donor journey, with its influence diminishing as individuals gain experience over time.

Beyond these theoretical implications, the findings offer relevant, data-driven insights for managing the regular donor portfolio of charitable organizations, particularly in the blood donation sector, where maintaining a stable donor base is essential (Leipnitz et al., 2018). Properly designed recognition strategies can act as a low-cost, high-impact tool for strengthening relational ties. The results of our study suggest that managers should combine recognition messages with small symbolic rewards, such as a commemorative badge, as this combination helps increase the motivation to continue donating blood and enhance donor engagement. These interventions have a disproportionately positive impact on donor retention and encourage broader participation, reinforcing appreciation without undermining intrinsic

motivation (Lacetera & Macis, 2010). Also, the results recommend that non-profit professionals should invest more resources in targeted recognition efforts at the beginning of the donor relationship. This approach aligns with dynamic relationship marketing models (Zhang et al., 2016; Luo & Kumar, 2013) and helps optimize resource allocation where external reinforcement is most influential. Since our study found no significant difference in behavioral impact between public and private recognition, non-profit managers are given greater operational flexibility. They can tailor their recognition programs to align with their logistical capabilities and cultural contexts without fear of compromising effectiveness (Simpson et al., 2018).

In summary, recognition should be implemented not as a generic "thank you", but as a deliberate strategic tool that, when used adequately, as shown in our study, can enhance retention, increase donation frequency, and encourage broader participation. On a much broader level, these implications can help address one key challenge facing our societies, which is the shortage of blood. Ensuring a stable, continued, and consistent blood supply is a top public health priority. The findings and recommendations in our study can help advance social welfare by illuminating effective strategies to foster donor retention and commitment that help build resilient donor communities and ensure a sufficient supply of blood to meet the increasing demand.

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