Physiological Self-Tracking Makes People More Likely to Donate Organs

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Key takeaways:

1. Tracking physical stats through devices like Fitbit or Apple Health can make individuals more receptive to the idea of organ donation
2. Monitoring one's body helps people perceive their body as separate from their identity, easing worries about losing a part of themselves through donation
3. Younger individuals, women and those with religious beliefs are particularly inclined to view their body as distinct from their sense of self, making them more receptive audience for promoting organ donation

What's the story?

The American Transplant Foundation reports that an average of 20 people die daily due to the scarcity of organs available for transplantation. Furthermore, over 112,000 individuals are awaiting organ transplants in the United States alone. Yet there is a notable gap between levels of support for organ donation and actual donor numbers.

Previous studies have shown that factors such as social marketing as well as people's place of residence, religious beliefs and body integrity concerns influence their willingness to donate organs. Yet many questions remain. Our recently published research into body perception and self-identity indicates that self-tracking of the body's physical status (e.g. through wearable monitoring devices) can help

individuals dissociate their identity from their body and by so doing, increases their willingness to donate their organs in the event of death.

To donate or not to donate, that is the question

Organ donation involves permanently transferring a part of one's body to someone else to address the global need of individuals requiring transplants. Despite the worldwide need for donations exceeding 129,000 transplants annually, less than 10% of these transplants are performed because of organ shortages. These shortages lead to high mortality rates, prompting desperate measures by some individuals to procure organs.

Key motivations for deceased people to donate their organs include altruism, guilt-prevention and the desire to leave a lasting legacy. Barriers to people choosing to donate their organs once deceased encompass family concerns, religious restrictions, health worries and the desire to preserve the sanctity of the deceased's body. Other factors that influence people's organ donation behaviour include

demographic aspects such as age, gender, education, neighbourhood of residence, political views and race.

For marketers, many questions remain about how to encourage people to donate their organs to address the global shortage. We conducted a series of empirical studies to explore how people's physiological and philosophical perceptions of their bodies impacted their decision to donate their organs.

It's all in the mind? Or all in the body?

Individuals' perceptions of their bodies play a crucial role in their decisions about organ donation. For many, the body is closely tied to their self-concept, making changes to it feel taboo. This strong attachment reduces the likelihood of organ donation. On the other hand, those who see the self as distinct from the body - an idea known as self–body dualism - are more willing to donate. Promoting this dualistic view can help alleviate concerns about losing a part of oneself through organ donation.

Existing research indicates that certain factors like age, gender, and religiosity make people more likely to accept the self–body distinction. Younger individuals, women, and religious people often hold dualistic views, seeing the body as separate from the self. Additionally, focusing on physiological aspects of the body, e.g. through self-tracking devices like Fitbit or Apple Health, can enhance this perception. By breaking down the body into data points, these trackers can encourage a more detached view, which may increase support for organ donation.

In a preliminary study, 82.3% of individuals doubted the influence of physiological self-tracking on organ donation behaviour. However, these prior results overlook the potential shift in body perception facilitated by physiological self-tracking, and therefore neglect the impact of this perceptual shift.

We hypothesized that the dualistic bodily perception facilitated by physiological self-tracking could alleviate concerns about self-loss, thereby promoting people to have greater acceptance of organ donation. This prediction specifically applies to trackers focusing on specific bodily functions.

The Research

To investigate the impact of physiological self-tracking on posthumous organ donation attitudes and behaviours, 200 university students from Singapore were randomly assigned to either a self-tracking or control condition, involving wearing a device during physical tasks. The key measure was participants' comfort with posthumous organ donation. We assessed this measure through a survey in which participants were given the option to pledge their organs. Our results showed that participants in the self-tracking condition reported greater comfort with organ donation compared to the control group. Additionally, a higher percentage of participants in the self-tracking condition expressed an intention to receive the organ donation pledge form. These findings support the idea that self-tracking positively influences attitudes and behavioural intentions toward organ donation.

We then explored whether the impact of individuals' self-tracking on their attitudes to organ donation is linked to their perception, more broadly, of their body's integral role in the self. 453 participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk and were randomly assigned to either self-tracking or no-tracking conditions. We used anagram tasks to assess participants' organ donation support, body perception, emotional/rational decision-making, and perceived self-worth.
We found that participants in the self-tracking group showed greater support for organ donation compared to the no-tracking group, an effect that persisted even when controlling for covariates (participants' religion, health concerns and self-tracker usage). Self-tracking participants were also less likely to view their body as part of their self-identity, and this reduced self–body dualism mediated the positive effect on organ donation attitudes.

Finally, we investigated whether it was possible to induce dualistic bodily perception by priming participants to view their body as separate from the self. Participants recruited from the Prolific recruitment platform were randomly assigned to conditions either manipulating self-tracking engagement or offering dualistic priming. Measures included participants' organ donation comfort, thinking style, self-worth, and bodily self-control. The results indicated that the effect of self-tracking on organ donation comfort varied depending on whether participants were primed with a dualism belief. Specifically, physiological self-tracking facilitated organ donation acceptance when participants had no prior belief in self–body dualism.

Implications for organ donation campaigns

Our findings offer some guidance for campaigns seeking to increase compliance with organ donation. Firstly, we suggest communicators can leverage self-tracking apps and devices in campaigns to engage potential donors by highlighting how these tools not only improve health awareness but also foster a mindset more open to organ donation by promoting a detached view of the body. Secondly, compliance campaigns may wish to focus on younger audiences, women and religious

communities and ensure that their messaging resonates with these groups by emphasizing the concept of the body as separate from the self, which aligns with their existing beliefs and makes them more receptive to organ donation. Thirdly, use insights from self-tracking data to create personalized messaging that reinforces the idea of self-body dualism. For example, showing individuals how their physical health can be tracked separately from their sense of self might make the idea of organ donation more acceptable. By applying these actionable insights, compliance campaigns can be more targeted, effective and likely to resonate with key demographics, leading ultimately to higher rates of organ donation.

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