

BRIEF REPORT

“Okay, I respect this publicity stunt.” A snapshot of public perceptions of an online game-based blood donation campaign

Abigail Edwards¹  | Barbara Masser^{1,2,3} 

¹School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, Queensland, Australia

²Research and Development, Australian Red Cross Lifeblood, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

³National Institute for Health and Care Research Blood and Transplant Research Unit in Donor Health and Behaviour, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Correspondence

Abigail Edwards, School of Psychology, McElwain Building, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, QLD 4072, Australia.
Email: abigail.edwards@uq.edu.au

Funding information

University of Queensland

Abstract

Background: With a decrease in young and first-time donors, applying gaming elements to blood donation may provide a novel means of encouraging young donors. In August 2023, the online game DiabloIV launched the *Blood Harvest* in which players were encouraged to donate blood products in the United States to receive virtual in-game rewards. Given the novelty of this independent initiative, our aim was to capture Diablow IV players opinions of the Blood Harvest through thematically analyzing their online discourse related to this blood donation campaign.

Study Design and Methods: We captured publicly available Twitter/X posts ($n = 78$) and engagement ($n = 390$) relevant to the Blood Harvest posted during and immediately after the campaign (October 13, 2023–November 27, 2023).

Results: Using thematic analysis, we identified 5 themes relating to the Blood Harvest campaign: (1) *Positive perceptions* and community motivations to donate, (2) *Negative perceptions* of the initiative and online game, (3) *Players' inability to donate* and participate in the initiative, (4) *Incentives* and incentive comparisons, and (5) *Benefiting from positive associations* focusing on the reputational gain that may be accessed through promoting blood donation.

Discussion: Situating a donation campaign in an established video game provides a novel opportunity to engage young donors. Through capturing public data, we provide a unique snapshot of how an online gaming community perceives and reacts to an independently initiated game-integrated blood donation campaign. This highlights key strengths of the approach as well as identifying potential risks for blood collection agencies.

Despite global trends showing a decrease in young^{1,2} and first-time³ blood donors, there remains an absence of recruitment strategies targeted at young donors. Gamification (using game elements to enhance a provided service⁴) is associated with stronger purchasing intentions

in young populations.⁵ Applying gaming elements to blood donation may thus provide a novel means of engaging young donors.

Blood collection agencies (BCAs) already employ gamification to engage and retain donors (e.g., awarding virtual

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2024 The Authors. *Transfusion* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of AABB.

badges based on donation type/frequency⁶). Likewise, in 2019 Sanquin launched the *#myfirstblood* campaign where players of an online video game were rewarded with virtual costumes (skins) for registering to donate blood.⁷ This initiative is credited with over 7400 young men registering to donate.⁸ However, while *#myfirstblood* successfully recruited young donors, it is unknown how this campaign impacted donor motivations, perceptions and loyalty.⁷ Understanding the broader impact of online game-based campaigns is critical as both online recognition of blood donors⁹ and incentives¹⁰ have inconsistent effects across both donor and non-donor panels, and within key demographics (with only 37.6% of young donors encouraged by incentives¹¹). Further, the impact of game-based donations campaigns run without the involvement of BCAs has not been considered.

1 | THE BLOOD HARVEST

DiabloIV is an online action role-playing game produced by Blizzard Entertainment Inc. (Blizzard) with 10 million players worldwide.¹² As part of an in-game event, in October 2023, Blizzard announced the *Blood Harvest*. For this, DiabloIV players were collectively challenged to collect 666 quarts of blood (approximately 1,261 500 mL donations) by donating blood to any local donation center in the United States (US). The Blood Harvest was not associated with any specific BCA, no specifications were made in terms of substances (e.g., whole-blood, plasma), and players submitted proof of their donation directly to Blizzard. The Blood Harvest had three tiers of rewards (33%, 66% and 100% completion of goal). Once each collection milestone was reached, all players (regardless of whether they donated or not) received in-game rewards of skins and other in-game items. The Blood Harvest was set to run from October 20, 2023 to November 20, 2023, however Blizzard announced that the final donation goal, which was presumably 666 quarts of blood, was reached on November 16, 2023.

2 | THIS STUDY

In the context of partnerships with online games, the Blood Harvest was a unique donation campaign as it was not associated with a BCA and offered community-based rewards for reaching collective donation goals. Further, unlike previous game-based donation campaigns, it was not solely focused on recruitment. As such, it is necessary to understand how the Blood Harvest impacted DiabloIV players overall perceptions of blood donation and the initiative. In this study, we captured players' attitudes and opinions of

DiabloIV's Blood Harvest campaign through thematically analyzing online discourse related to the campaign.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Data collection

As players were encouraged on the official Blood Harvest website to share the campaign on Twitter/X and Facebook, we extracted publicly available Twitter/X posts identified as relevant to Blood Harvest through using the official *DiabloBloodHarvest* hashtag (October 13, 2023–November 27, 2023). Facebook data was not accessed due to the non-anonymity of data on this platform. Posts and engagements (text-only) were included if they were written, in English, and not censored by Twitter/X. We identified 78 posts for inclusion in analyses.

Engagement (i.e., comments, re-tweets, and quotes) from the official Diablo account relevant to the Blood Harvest campaign and our research question (6/7 posts) were also included. A total of 390 comments, re-tweets, and quotes were included in analyses. No identifying information (e.g., usernames) was captured. All Twitter/X data was captured by the first author on the December 19, 2023.

3.2 | Ethics statement

The study was approved by the University of Queensland's Human Research Ethics Board (2023/HE002152).

3.3 | Analysis

Data was analyzed in six-phases using Braun and Clarke's¹³ guidelines for thematic analysis. Codes and initial themes were created by the first author and the thematic structure revised within the research team. As no identifiers were captured, our sample is collectively referred to as DiabloIV players.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Positive perceptions

DiabloIV players had generally positive perceptions of the Blood Harvest, blood donation, and receiving in-game rewards for donating. While some players expressed being motivated by the campaign to donate

blood, others used the Blood Harvest as an opportunity to share their own motivations for donating.

This is actually really cool - we've been in a global "blood shortage" since the pandemic and the need never goes away. If you're able to donate ... please do! People having surgery, with chronic conditions, injury, etc., need you!

4.2 | Building community

Many DiabloIV players expressed that the Blood Harvest was a way for the DiabloIV community to unite to do something good. "What an amazing way to get the community involved in donating blood!" This sense of community was often expressed through game-relevant language and references when players encouraged others to donate. Players also expressed appreciating the inclusivity of the Blood Harvest's community-based reward system while simultaneously noting the exclusion of some from blood donation, "I really appreciate [the game producers] making the rewards open for everyone - because there are a lot of people who aren't allowed to give blood even if we wanted to..."

4.3 | Negative perceptions

Although perceptions of the Blood Harvest were generally positive, some players expressed negative views. These comments ranged from mild concern, "That's not creepy at all.", to criticism linking the Blood Harvest to a dystopian future, "something about this just feels horribly wrong to me and utterly dystopian, its genuinely scary." However, the main criticism of the Blood Harvest was that only donations made to US BCAs counted towards the community reward goals. DiabloIV players outside of the US expressed frustration and disappointment that their donations would not contribute. Other comments used the Blood Harvest to direct criticism towards the game, DiabloIV, and its producer, Blizzard. On announcement of the Blood Harvest one player asked, "How much do we have to donate for [Blizzard] to make a good game?"

4.4 | Inability to donate

Throughout the Blood Harvest, DiabloIV players disclosed that they were unable to donate blood due to both

their health and policies surrounding the deferral of men who have sex with men. However, the tone of these disclosures widely varied. Some players, despite being unable to directly contribute, expressed positivity towards the campaign and encouraged others to participate on their behalf, "Hey straight allies in [location]: Go donate blood on my behalf and register here so I can get in game cosmetics." Other players expressed frustration at not feeling like they could participate in the game-based experience due to their inability to donate, "This is rather unfair to players like myself who would give blood but cannot because of things like a rare blood cancer that prevents me from doing so."

4.5 | Incentives

DiabloIV players' opinions of the use of in-game incentives to encourage blood donation varied. While some players appreciated being able to benefit from a prosocial behavior, others held negative views of incentivizing blood donation. One player expressed their negative view of donor incentives by highlighting the absurdity of offering small virtual incentives for blood donation, "What the fk? Next is donate your kidney for in game rewards."

4.6 | Comparing incentives

As the Blood Harvest was a US-based campaign, players compared the monetary value of the virtual incentives offered by DiabloIV to the tangible rewards provided by some BCAs, "I donate to [blood collection center] and they regularly give me 40-dollar gift cards. Blizzard over here with 2 cent skins." Further, and potentially due to the lack of clarity around what counted as a "blood" donation, players also related receiving in-game rewards to plasma transactions.

4.7 | Benefiting from positive associations

Although the Blood Harvest was initiated independent of BCAs, its creation created an implicit link between Blood Harvest's creator, Blizzard and blood donation. While people generally have positive perceptions of BCAs,¹⁴ Blizzard has recently received negative press due to allegations of workplace harassment and a toxic workplace culture.¹⁵ However, in response to the Blood Harvest, many players applauded Blizzard for both its effective use of marketing and its support for a good cause.

...Blizzard gets a lot better of flak, deservedly so...However, this is an excellent idea and tie-in. Giving blood is a super easy thing to do and it benefits society. Now you can benefit too, with some dope in-game [rewards]...

5 | DISCUSSION

Situating a donation campaign in an established video game provides a key opportunity to engage young donors. The Blood Harvest was a unique donation campaign initiated independently of BCAs and offering players community-based rewards for reaching collective donation goals. Analysis of public perceptions of the Blood Harvest thus provides insights for BCAs on engaging young donors.

DiabloIV players had generally positive perceptions of the Blood Harvest campaign with many players encouraging others to donate blood within their established DiabloIV community using specific game-based references. Players were even inspired by the campaign to share their independent motivations for donating blood. Such discourse is crucial as receiving positive word-of-mouth recommendations is linked to stronger willingness to donate.¹⁶

Research shows that donation campaigns that anchor off strong group identities (e.g., universities) encourage blood donation in young people.¹⁷ As such, using established online and in-person communities and positioning blood donation as a group-defining behavior shows potential for engaging young donors. Further, by leveraging community-based rewards all DiabloIV players were able to participate in the Blood Harvest regardless of their ability to donate. The sense of inclusion for US players of the game generated through community-based rewards may have contributed to players' positive perceptions.

Within game-based advertising, there is a reciprocal relationship between evaluations of the product and evaluations of the brand.¹⁸ In the context of Blood Harvest, players' perceptions of the video game may influence their perceptions of blood donation, with this reflected in the negative comments towards DiabloIV and Blizzard. Simultaneously, positive perceptions of blood donation¹⁴ and prosocial behavior more generally may facilitate a reputational boost for organizations that promote these behaviors in online games. Indeed, throughout the Blood Harvest, players applauded Blizzard for their willingness to create a blood donation campaign. As organizations may benefit from being associated with blood donation, and BCAs risk being disadvantaged through associations with negatively

perceived organizations, a key consideration for BCAs is how they can proactively foster key community partnerships to ensure there is no reputational loss through these promotions.

While we systematically sourced data from Twitter/X using the official campaign hashtag, key limitations of our study are the limited number of Twitter/X comments and not accessing data on other platforms where opinions may have been voiced. Further, we were unable to access donation data relating to the Blood Harvest. Despite these limitations we provide a unique snapshot of how an online gaming community perceives and reacts to an independently initiated game-integrated blood donation campaign, highlighting key strengths of the approach as well as identifying potential risks for BCAs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Deon Chique for bringing this campaign to our attention and for reading a final version of this manuscript. The Australian government funds Australian Red Cross Lifeblood to provide blood, blood products and services to the Australian community. Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Queensland, as part of the Wiley - The University of Queensland agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was supported by research funds allocated to the first author as part of their PhD and an award made from The University of Queensland Vice Chancellor's Strategic Funds to the second author.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest relevant to the manuscript submitted to TRANSFUSION.

ORCID

Abigail Edwards  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1169-1738>

Barbara Masser  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9385-6497>

REFERENCES

1. Greinacher A, Fendrich K, Alpen U, Hoffmann W. Impact of demographic changes on the blood supply: Mecklenburg-West Pomerania as a model region for Europe. *Transfusion*. 2007; 47(3):395–401.
2. Lemmens KP, Abraham C, Hoekstra T, Ruiten RAC, de Kort WLAM, Brug J, et al. Why don't young people volunteer to give blood? An investigation of the correlates of donation intentions among young nondonors. *Transfusion*. 2005;45(6):945–55.
3. Carter MC, Wilson J, Redpath GS, Hayes P, Mitchell C. Donor recruitment in the 21st century: challenges and lessons learned in the first decade. *Transfus Apher Sci*. 2011;45(1):31–43.
4. Huotari K, Hamari J. Defining gamification: a service marketing perspective. Paper presented at the Proceeding of the 16th

- International Academic MindTrek Conference. New York: Association for Computing Machinery; 2012.
5. Bittner JV, Shipper J. Motivational effects and age differences of gamification in product advertising. *J Consum Mark.* 2014; 31(5):391–400.
 6. Sardi L, Idri A, Fernández-Alemán JL. Gamified mobile blood donation applications. *Bioinformatics and Biomedical Engineering: 5th International Work-Conference, IWBBIO 2017, Granada, Spain, April 26–28, 2017, Proceedings, Part I 5.* Granada, Spain: Springer; 2017.
 7. Piersma T. From young gamers to loyal blood donors? *Alliance magazine.* 2019 Available from: <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/from-young-gamers-to-loyal-blood-donors/>. Accessed 17 Jan 2024
 8. The Invaders. *How can you activate young men to become blood donors?* Available from: <https://theinvaders.nl/case/myfirstblood/>. Accessed 17 Jan 2024
 9. Chell K, Mortimer G. Investigating online recognition for blood donor retention: an experiential donor value approach. *Int J Nonprofit Volunt Sect Mark.* 2014;19(2):143–63.
 10. Chell K, Davison TE, Masser B, Jensen K. A systematic review of incentives in blood donation. *Transfusion.* 2018;58(1):242–54.
 11. Glynn SA, Williams AE, Nass CC, Bethel J, Kessler D, Scott E P, et al. Attitudes toward blood donation incentives in the United States: implications for donor recruitment. *Transfusion.* 2003;43(1):7–16.
 12. Activision Blizzard Inc. *Activision Blizzard announces second quarter 2023 financial results.* 2023 Available from: <https://investor.activision.com/news-releases/news-release-details/activision-blizzard-announces-second-quarter-2023-financial>. Accessed 17 Jan 2024
 13. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol.* 2006;3(2):77–101.
 14. Melián-Alzola L, Martín-Santana JD. Service quality in blood donation: satisfaction, trust and loyalty. *Serv Bus.* 2020;14(1): 101–29.
 15. Murray C. Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick set to leave in December—here's what to know about his controversies, *Forbes.* 2023 Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2023/10/13/activision-blizzard-ceo-bobby-kotick-set-to-leave-in-december-heres-what-to-know-about-his-contraversies/?sh=798ed39a21be>. Accessed 04 Jan 2024
 16. Martin S, Greiling D, Leibetseder N. Effects of word-of-mouth on the behavior of Austrian blood donors: a case study of the red cross blood donation service. *Health Promot Int.* 2019; 34(3):429–39.
 17. Bryant J, Woolley T, Sen Gupta T, Chell K. Using competition for plasma donor recruitment and retention: an Australian university case study. *Vox Sang.* 2023;119:155–65.
 18. Yoo S-C, Eastin MS. Contextual advertising in games: Impacts of game context on a player's memory and evaluation of brands in video games. *J Mark Commun.* 2017;23(6):614–31.

How to cite this article: Edwards A, Masser B. “Okay, I respect this publicity stunt.” A snapshot of public perceptions of an online game-based blood donation campaign. *Transfusion.* 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1111/trf.17794>