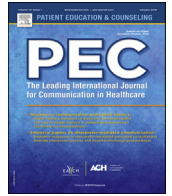




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# Micro-cultural customization of organ donation propagation messages

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Organ transplantation is plagued by limited availability of organs. This study investigated the effect of messages promoting organ donation which were customized according to the language-defined micro-cultures in Switzerland.

**Methods:** Community-, informative-, and emotional-oriented messages were carried by conventional flyers. A 3 × 3 between-subjects experiment was conducted with short- and long-term willingness to donate, long-term signing of organ donation card and long-term interpersonal communication on organ donation as outcome variables.

**Results:** The culturally customized interventions appeared to have no immediate effect and consequently no differential effect on willingness to donate organs and on signing a donor card. Among the Swiss Germans, of the three messages, the community-oriented one instigated less interpersonal communication.

**Conclusion:** Findings are consistent with a mechanism in which the message does not have an immediate effect on willingness to donate organs but motivates further thought and related behaviors that lead to higher commitment and later increased willingness to donate.

**Practice implications:** Targeting not only the message but also the objective that drives the messages must be considered. Campaigns should include elements that build on the unfolding commitment process to promote the follow-up actions that lead to greater willingness.

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## 1. Introduction

With technological advances over the past decades, the opportunity to transplant cadaverous organs to save lives has vastly increased in scope [1]. The problem with this increasing opportunity is the limited availability of organs for transplantation. In Switzerland, as in countries throughout Europe, the need for organs far exceeds the supply [2,3]. The Swiss Federal Office of Public Health encourages citizens to make explicit whether they wish to donate (or not to donate) by signing a nonbinding organ donor card and informing their relatives [4]. Nonetheless, the share of Swiss adults who have signed the donor card remains low [5].

In an earlier study [6] we conducted a national survey focused on beliefs, attitudes, and behavior (signing a nonbinding donation card) toward organ donation. That study revealed systematic differences with respect to these factors among the major Swiss language groups reflecting micro-cultural background, as evidenced also by further studies [7,8].

Language defines distinct micro-cultures that exist in Switzerland alongside strong national and cantonal identities. These micro-cultures are geographically separate from each other, with the Swiss-German region comprising the north, the east and the central region of the country, the Swiss-French being situated in the west, and the Swiss-Italian region almost completely coincident with the southern Canton of Ticino. The Swiss-German part is the largest, comprising almost three fourths of the country's population; somewhat more than 20% live in the Swiss-French area, and less than 5% in the Swiss-Italian [9].

The three micro-cultures, under the roof of a common Swiss national identity, differ in value orientations and habits, for instance with regard to work ethic [10], voting behavior [11,12] and attitudes to the integration of migrants [13].

The present study seeks to address the question of whether a message customized to one of the three micro-cultures is more successful there than messages customized to the other micro-cultures, thereby corroborating the notion that such differences exist.

The potential of customizing messages has been examined in studies of message targeting and, in its most extreme form, tailoring defined as “any combination of strategies and information intended to reach one specific person, based on characteristics that

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are unique to that person, related to the outcome of interest and derived from an individual assessment” [14]. In a meta-analysis, tailored messages were found to be more effective than generic messages in inducing behavior change [15]. While targeted messages are designed to reach a group of people sharing one or more characteristics, when by chance they are a good fit for the reader, they are as effective as a tailored message [16]. Thus, Kreuter and Wray [16] argued that when the variability among people is low for key determinants of a behavior, targeted messages will be as effective as tailored. When the populace is more varied, tailored messaging should be more effective.

### 1.1. Targeted communication and organ donation

Our prior research revealed clear differences between the Swiss language regions with regard to organ donation behavior, related attitudes, and conditions antecedent to the attitudes and behavior.

Among the Swiss Germans, thinking about organ donation was characterized as individualistic. Among the three groups, they knew most about organ donation but liked it the least and were morally most concerned about organ donation. They were least likely to have social contacts with donor card holders or people involved in organ transplantation. Regression analyses showed objective as well as procedural knowledge, emotions towards organ donation, moral concerns and, partly, social contacts were all salient predictors of willingness to donate. That is to say, their comparatively deep moral concerns, their negative emotions, and a low number of social contacts with donor card holders all drove away the Swiss Germans from a behavioral predisposition to donate. The only factor driving them towards willingness to donate appears to be their high level of knowledge.

The French-speaking Swiss knew less about organ donation than the Swiss Germans, but they liked it better. They had more social contacts with people holding a donor card or otherwise involved in organ donation, and they harbored fewer moral concerns against donation. In spite of these wide discrepancies between the French-speaking and the German-speaking in thinking and feeling about organ donation, the predictive power of these variables in regression analyses was relatively similar: only procedural knowledge and moral concerns did not affect willingness to donate among the French-speaking in contrast to the German-speaking.

The Swiss Italians differed from both other groups. They were even less knowledgeable about organ donation than their French-speaking compatriots, and their knowledge was of no consequence to willingness to donate. In terms of emotions and social contacts, they were rather similar to the French-speaking and therefore very different from the German-speaking. By contrast, in moral concerns and their consequences on willingness to donate, the Italian-speaking resemble the German-speaking much more than the French-speaking Swiss [6].

Based on this and other evidence, the earlier study singles out knowledge and information as the crucial factor in Swiss-German predispositions towards organ donation, whereas emotions and social contacts appear to be much more meaningful in the micro-cultures where Romance languages are spoken.

### 1.2. Study

In this study, we attempt to develop culturally customized messages based on the former survey results and test their efficacy against the other two versions in all three regions. Customization means that an informative version was written, expecting that it be especially efficacious with the German-speaking Swiss, while an emotional donation-supporting version was made for the French-speaking and a community-oriented version for the Italian-

speaking. Doing this, we extend the previous results in two more ways. First, although the assumption behind the earlier study was that knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs are factors in explaining the behavioral disposition to donate one's organs, the evidence was correlational. The present study provides an experiment to gain added insight into the causal mechanism.

Second, the earlier study provided only a static picture of the thinking typical of the inhabitants of the three different language regions. The subject itself, however, demands a dynamic view to change people's behavior toward organ donation. Therefore, this study considers the effect of persuasive messages in a perspective with a longitudinal element, albeit a short one.

### 1.3. Hypotheses

This study distinguishes immediate and delayed or follow-up effects as well as intentional (willingness to donate), reflective/communicative (talk to someone) and behavioral effects (sign a donor card). The latter two need some time and cannot therefore be measured immediately after the intervention is applied, which leads to four hypotheses:

**H1.** The respective culturally customized versions of the intervention will, immediately after their presentation, increase the willingness to donate one's organs more than the other versions.

**H2.** The respective culturally customized versions of the intervention will, after some delay, increase willingness to donate organs more than the other versions.

**H3.** The respective culturally customized versions of the intervention will, with some delay, lead to more frequent signing of a donor card than the other versions.

**H4.** The respective culturally customized versions of the intervention will, with some delay, lead to more frequent reflective and communicative activity surrounding organ donation than the other versions.

## 2. Methods

The study employed an experimental design. Three targeted flyers promoting organ donation were developed—one primarily informational, a second designed to tap emotional responses, and a third focused on importance for the community. They were identical in the design and reported the same technical information on organ donation, but they differed in content. The informative flyer was designed to be neutral and objective, explaining facts and figures. The emotional flyer told a story about a family having to decide whether they should donate the organs of their deceased relative or not. The community-oriented flyer stressed the importance of the family, groups and communities by purposefully using vocabulary of togetherness and social bonding. The flyers as well as the questionnaires were drafted, tested and finalized in German, then translated into French and Italian and back-translated into German for checking the adequacy of the translation.

Based on the prior survey results, the informational flyer was expected to be more effective for Swiss-German respondents. The emotional flyer was expected to be more effective for Swiss-French and Swiss-Italian respondents while the community-oriented flyer was expected to be particularly effective with Swiss-Italian respondents, whose survey responses suggested this particular focus.

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