

Reactance Theory Deep Dive Presentation

Understanding Resistance to Persuasion and Social Influence

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- Why do people sometimes *do the opposite* of what they're told?

Think About:

- Someone telling you “*you're not allowed to do that*”
- A moment of feeling pressured to agree with a decision you don't actually agree with

These situations trigger a push-back response or a feeling that your freedom or control is being limited

What is Reactance Theory?

- Developed by Jack Brehm (1966)
- Reactance = a psychological response to perceived loss of freedom
- When people feel their choices are limited, they become motivated to regain that freedom
- This often leads to resistance, opposition, or doing the opposite behavior



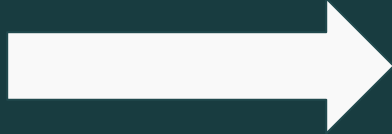
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Core Idea



- People value their freedom of choice
- When that freedom is restricted:
 - They feel discomfort or pressure
 - They are motivated to restore that freedom
- The stronger the restriction, the stronger the reactance

Causes of Reactance



Reactance is Triggered When:

- Rules feel too strict or controlling
- Someone tries to force a decision
- A message feels manipulative
- People perceive persuasion as a threat to their independence

Everyday Examples:

- 1.) **Your professor says “don’t even think about pulling out your phones until the end of class”**
 - suddenly you’re way more tempted to take out your phone
- 2.) **A club at SNC keeps emailing you to “sign up NOW!!!”**
 - you immediately don’t want to join anymore based off their constant, annoying emailing
- 3.) **American Eagle keeps sending out “LAST CHANCE!!!” emails every week**
 - You start ignoring them because it feels manipulative having the same “last chance” sale every week when clearly it’s not “last chance”
 -
- 4.) **Everyone in your friend group decides to wear the same outfit for a night out**
 - you purposely pick something different to wear

Reactance in Persuasion

- Persuasive messages can backfire if they feel controlling
- People are more receptive when:
 - They feel free to choose
 - They are not pressured
- Tone matters:
 - Independence-supportive → more effective
 - Controlling → triggers reactance



Real-World Applications



- **Marketing:**
 - Avoid overly aggressive messaging
- **Healthcare:**
 - Encouraging patient autonomy improves compliance
- **Education:**
 - Students learn better when they feel control over choices
- **Workplace:**
 - Autonomy increases motivation and satisfaction

Heuristic Value

- **Heuristic value** = how people *simplify decisions*
- **Reactance theory** = how people *resist feeling controlled*
- **Together:** Good persuasion uses helpful shortcuts without making people feel forced

Example : Social Media Advertising

Types of ads you see on Instagram or TikTok....

- **Heuristic in action:**
 - “10M people love this product” → social proof shortcut
 - Influencers you trust → authority/liking heuristic
- **Reactance trigger:**
 - “BUY NOW OR MISS OUT FOREVER”
 - Overly aggressive sales tactics

What happens:

A subtle influencer recommendation works well (low reactance + high heuristic value).

~ A pushy ad makes people scroll past or even dislike the brand



Psychological Effects

When reactance occurs, people may:

- Argue or counter the message
- Reject advice or recommendations
- Strengthen their original beliefs
- Act opposite to what is being suggested

Strengths of the Theory

- Explains counterintuitive behavior (why people resist persuasion)
- Useful across many fields (marketing, health, communication)
- Supported by research on human motivation and autonomy

Limitations of the Theory

- Doesn't explain **all types** of resistance
- Individual differences matter (some people react more than others)
- Situational factors can influence responses
- Not every perceived restriction leads to reactance

Persuasive Stance/Our Argument →

- **Reactance Theory is a useful and practical framework for understanding persuasion**
- **It highlights an important truth:**
 - Persuasion is not just about messaging, but about perceived freedom
- **Effective persuasion should:**
 - Avoid controlling language
 - Emphasize choice and autonomy
- **Overall: It's a strong explanatory tool, especially in modern communication environments**

Conclusion

- Reactance Theory explains why people resist persuasion
- It centers on freedom, autonomy, and control
- Understanding it helps improve communication strategies
- **Key takeaway:**
 - People are more likely to be persuaded when they don't feel forced



Reference Page

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