Paradoxes of Resistance with COVID-19 Measures:

Exploring State Reactance as an Emotional Process

– Extended Abstract –

Keywords: Psychological Reactance, Appraisal Theory, Resistance, COSMO

Eingereicht für die 69. Jahrestagung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und

Kommunikationswissenschaft (DGPuK)

Termin: 13.-15. März 2024

Ort: Erfurt

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Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT) formalizes the idea that constraints on personal freedom trigger a motivation to protect it (Brehm, 1966). While PRT has explained resistance in advertising, or to health- and political communication (Marcinkowski & Došenović, 2021; Reynolds-Tylus, 2019; Xu, 2019), the response to COVID-19 restrictions was unexpected: People initially embraced and promoted these measures, challenging the traditional PRT prediction of a 'boomerang effect.' This deviation suggests a more complex reactance process, which needs to be understood for effective communication strategies.

In previous research (Author & Author, 2021) we found that existential fear reduced reactance arousal, while diffuse worry amplified it, and proposed a model on how individual reactance impacts public sphere behavior. The current study sets out to reason these findings (RQ1). We assume that fear correlates negatively with state reactance arousal (H1), whereas worry correlates positively (H2), and that reactance better predicts resistance than compliance (H3). Like in previous research we hypothesize that fear and worry moderate the relationship between reactance and resistance with fear reducing the influence of reactance on resistance (H1a) and worry amplifying it (H2a), and that the described effects are stable over time (H4). We translate our learnings into a new emotion-psychological framework for PRT and discuss its applicability for the paradox dynamics of compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Based on a serial cross-sectional sample (N = 4053) from the representative data set of the German COVID-19 Snapshot Monitoring ("COSMO", Betsch et al, 2020), we conducted correlation analyses, and regression models using multiple methods, including parametric, non-parametric, and Bayesian analyses. To explore how fear and worry moderate the relationship between reactance arousal, and both fear and worry, we conducted mediation analyses. All analyses were compared between three waves of data collection that represent different phases of the pandemic.

Results

As predicted, we find that fear correlates negatively with state reactance arousal (H1), whereas worry correlates positively (H2). As assumed in H3, reactance arousal was a better predictor for resistance (R^2 = .19, $F(1,3029)$ = 718.19, $p < .001$) than for compliance (R^2 = .10, $F(1,3021)$ = 343.42, $p < .001$). We found a moderating effect of fear on the relationship of reactance with resistance, with fear lowering the positive effects of reactance on resistance (resistance: R^2 = .21, ΔR^2 = 1.01, $F(1, 3027)$ = 22.91, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-0.09, -0.04]) (H1a). Divergent to our assumptions, individual worry did not moderate the relationship between reactance and resistance, ΔR^2 = 0.05%, $F(1, 3027)$ = 1.18, $p = .28$, even though the overall model was significant (H1b).

We further found that the correlation effects remained consistent over time (H4). particularly between the first and last wave during the pandemic. However, the strengths of these effects varied, particularly between the first and last wave during the pandemic, which could explain fluctuations in compliance and resistance. An overview can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Dynamics of Reactance and Compliance over time and the predictor value of fear and worry*
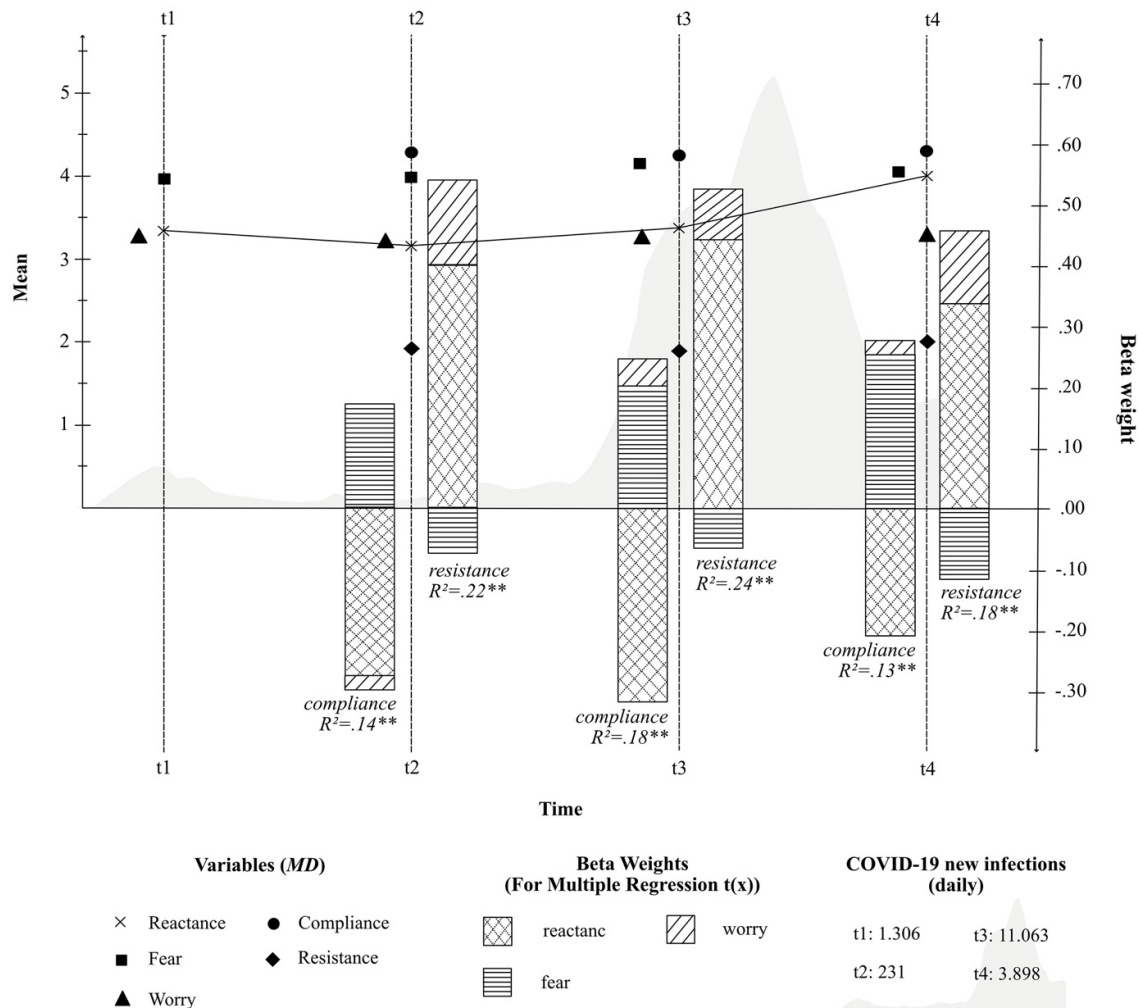
To bridge the gap between cognition and emotion within reactance theory we propose a theoretical model that conceptualizes reactance as an emotion, rather than explaining it as a stimulus–response-type of motivational effect using appraisal theory (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985).

Discussion

Our study has shortcomings in the measurement of emotion. We are currently working on a follow-up study to further specify the appraisal-based reactance-process to heighten its

scientific and practical use. Nonetheless, our novel framework brings forth both theoretical and practical benefits. It enhances our capacity to comprehend shifts and conflicting emotions in reactance arousal. For example, to reason the dynamics of resistance against COVID-19 measures: the model suggests that communicating the virus itself as a threat might have directed reactance against the virus and hence, motivated compliance. Hence, the model equips us to shape the way restrictions are communicated within competitive realms of public discourse for fostering positive, constructive, and sustainable communication that informs and democratically mobilizes people.

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