

Psychological Resistance Theory: Core Connotations, Evolutionary Process and Multidisciplinary Application Research Review

Siwan Li

Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau, China

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Abstract: Since its introduction by Jack W. Brehm in 1966, the Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT) has become a cornerstone framework for explaining resistance behaviors in individuals facing freedom constraints. This study systematically reviews PRT's core concepts-including freedom perception, threat perception, psychological resistance, and behavioral recovery-while examining dimensional differences between trait resistance and state resistance. By tracing the theory's evolution from 1960s laboratory research to contemporary applications in digital environments, health communication, and aging care, the study reveals how linguistic characteristics, individual traits, and cultural contexts modulate resistance psychology. The findings aim to provide theoretical foundations for communication strategy design, emphasizing the use of non-coercive, autonomy-supportive language in health interventions and family communication to mitigate psychological resistance and enhance communication efficacy.

1. Definitions and Related Concepts

The Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT), first proposed by psychologist Jack W. Brehm in 1966, aims to explain the resistant psychological responses and behaviors that may arise when individuals perceive their freedom of choice being threatened or diminished [1].

The theory comprises four core concepts: perceived freedom, perceived threat, psychological reactance, and behavioral restoration. Perceived Freedom: This refers to an individual's belief in possessing freedom of choice and action. When this perceived freedom is threatened or deprived, it triggers psychological reactance. Perceived Threat: Individuals perceive their specific freedoms as restricted or potentially revoked, and this threat perception serves as the catalyst for psychological reactance. Psychological Reactance: This represents an individual's direct psychological response to perceived freedom constraints, functioning as a motivational state aimed at restoring threatened freedoms. Behavioral Restoration: This denotes concrete actions individuals may take to reclaim restricted or lost freedoms. Restoration can be direct (e.g., openly defying rules) or indirect (e.g., covertly circumventing restrictions).

The theory of psychological resistance encompasses two key concepts: Trait Reactance and State Reactance, which describe distinct patterns of human responses to perceived freedom constraints. Trait Reactance refers to an inherent, stable individual tendency reflecting general personality traits

in responding to external control and limitations. This trait determines the extent to which individuals typically resist perceived freedom restrictions. Characterized by long-term stability, Trait Reactance remains relatively consistent across life stages with individual variations—some people may be naturally more sensitive to constraints and exhibit stronger resistance tendencies. It influences how individuals perceive and react to limitations, shaping their responses in social interactions and communication scenarios such as advertising and health information dissemination. State Reactance denotes temporary psychological states and behavioral responses arising from perceived freedom constraints within specific contexts. Unlike Trait Reactance, State Reactance is situational, temporary, and context-dependent, with varying intensity and manifestations depending on environmental factors. It affects individuals' perception, emotions, and behaviors when facing concrete threats or restrictions, and even individuals without high Trait Reactance levels may display intense resistance reactions under particular circumstances. The relationship between these two phenomena manifests through interactive dynamics, where trait resistance and state resistance typically interact in individuals' responses to perceived freedom constraints. Individuals with high trait resistance tendencies may exhibit stronger state resistance in specific situations, as evidenced by their impact intensity. Although both involve reactions to freedom limitations, trait resistance is more closely associated with an individual's general personality traits and long-term behavioral patterns, while state resistance focuses more on immediate responses within particular contexts.

2. Theoretical Development History

The 1960s to 1970s marked the initial phase of psychological resistance theory. In 1966, Brehm first proposed this theory in his seminal work “A Theory of Psychological Reactance”. The book explores how individuals develop a motivational state to restore freedoms perceived as threatened or eliminated. Brehm delves into the concept of “freedom,” examining how people perceive and value personal liberties, as well as their reactions when these freedoms are compromised. The text details various forms of psychological resistance, including attitude shifts, nonverbal behaviors, and direct confrontational actions. Brehm provides numerous experimental examples supporting the theory, such as the choice restriction experiment, attitude change experiment, and social influence experiment. In the choice restriction experiment, participants were presented with multiple product options and instructed to select one. Researchers artificially restricted certain choices, revealing stronger preferences for items that were explicitly excluded. The attitude change experiment involved presenting conflicting information to participants, demonstrating that they tended to reinforce existing beliefs when challenged, exhibiting heightened psychological resistance. Social influence experiments aim to investigate how social pressure or authority affects individuals' perception of freedom. In these experiments, researchers apply social or authoritative pressure to participants under specific circumstances to alter their behaviors or attitudes. Results indicate that participants often exhibit resistant behaviors or attitudes when subjected to intense social or authoritative pressure. During the 1970s, research began focusing on the specific manifestations of resistance reactions, such as attitude changes, opposition to opinions, and behavioral defiance.

The theory of psychological resistance further developed from the 1980s to the 1990s. In the 1980s, researchers began exploring the application of psychological resistance theory in fields such as social interaction, health communication, and advertising. During the 1990s, research expanded further into organizational behavior and political communication.

Since the 2000s, research on psychological resistance theory has undergone significant evolution and expansion. The early 2000s studies primarily focused on psychological resistance in digital environments, such as email marketing and online advertising. By the 2010s, the theory began to be applied to understand user behavior in social media and mobile communication platforms. Recent

studies have increasingly emphasized the impact of cultural differences and individual variations (e.g., gender and age) on resistance responses.

3. Related Studies

3.1 Applications in the Field of Health Communication

James Price Dillard and Li Shen published a seminal paper in 2005 on applying psychological resistance theory to health communication [2]. The study explored the role of psychological resistance in health communication, particularly how it triggers and influences recipient responses during persuasive health message delivery. The research examined various health communication strategies, such as direct instruction and recommendations, and their impact on recipients' psychological resistance levels. It analyzed how specific communication styles (e.g., imperative tones or excessive intervention) exacerbate resistance. The paper proposed strategies to reduce psychological resistance in health message recipients, including the use of gentler, non-coercive language. Additionally, the study investigated the effectiveness of inclusive and participatory strategies in mitigating resistance. Dillard and Shen's work provides valuable insights for understanding and applying psychological resistance theory in health communication, especially when designing health promotion strategies that account for potential resistance responses and effective mitigation methods. The research emphasizes that communication strategies should align with recipients' psychological states to enhance health message acceptance and effectiveness.

3.2 Influence of Individual Traits

Quick, B. L., & Considine, J. R. investigated how individual traits influence resistance responses, specifically examining how trait resistance and thrill-seeking tendencies affect threat perception, state resistance, and resistance recovery [3]. The study primarily explored how trait resistance (an individual's innate resistance tendency) and thrill-seeking (the inclination to seek novelty and excitement) influence how individuals perceive external threats, generate resistance responses, and recover from resistance. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its consideration of individual differences.

3.3 Influence of Linguistic Features

Brian L. Quick, Allison M. Scott, and Andrew M. Ledbetter applied the psychological resistance theory to examine the effectiveness of two message features (threat-free language and role framing) and the moderating role of personality resistance and problem involvement in perceived freedom from threat [4]. The study was conducted in the context of organ donation and revealed no differences between various role framing categories (donor, recipient, or waiting list member), but found that threat-free language was positively correlated with perceived freedom from threat. Perceived freedom from threat was further positively associated with state resistance, while state resistance showed a negative correlation with organ donation attitudes, though this relationship was not statistically significant. The study recruited 351 college students to participate in an experiment involving different role framing categories and the use or non-use of threat-free language. Results indicated that threat-free language was perceived as a greater threat to freedom, but the impact of role framing on perceived freedom from threat showed no significant differences. Overall, the study supports the effectiveness of employing diverse role framing categories and non-threat-free language in organ donation promotion, emphasizing that becoming a donor is a personal choice that reduces perceived freedom from threat, which in turn correlates positively with state resistance. This research expands

discussions on the role of personality resistance and begins to explore problem involvement as a moderating factor in perceived freedom from threat. The study results demonstrate complex interactions among personality resistance, problem involvement, and language related to threat-free perception, which predict perceived freedom from threat. These findings suggest intricate relationships between individual variability variables and message characteristics during the PRT process. The research aims to advance the literature on PRT while providing actionable recommendations for organ donation practitioners.

Hannah Ball, Keith Weber, Alan K. Goodboy, Christine E. Kunkle, Christa L. Lilly, and Scott A. Myers focused on the theory of psychological resistance in family caregiving, investigating how information threatening autonomy used by adult child caregivers influences elderly responses [5]. This study is significant because older adults often need to balance their desire for autonomy with dependence on adult child care. Perceived threats to autonomy may peak in old age, necessitating careful formulation of caregiving messages to avoid negative impacts. Elderly participants identified three types of threat-based autonomy messages: directives (commands), expressions of doubt, and loss framing (emphasizing negative consequences of non-compliance), typically conveyed through coercive language that conveys skepticism or adverse outcomes. Responses included direct resistance, disagreement, or age-related excuse-making, reflecting attempts to reclaim autonomy when facing perceived threats. The study involved 281 elderly participants exposed to different types of caregiving messages about slip-resistant bath mats. Results showed that directive and doubt-expressing messages increased perceived freedom threats and resistance more significantly than loss framing messages. Higher perceived freedom threats led to greater resistance, which in turn resulted in more negative attitudes and lower behavioral intentions to follow caregiving recommendations. However, compared to autonomy-supporting information, loss framing information did not significantly increase perceived freedom threats. In summary, this study highlights the delicate balance required in communication between adult child caregivers and their elderly parents. Caregivers should be mindful of their language use, as certain types of information may trigger resistance in older adults, leading to defiance of recommended behaviors and negative attitudes. This research contributes to our understanding of family caregiving dynamics and the application of psychological resistance theory in this context.

4. Conclusion

In summary, since its introduction by Brehm in 1966, the Psychological Resistance Theory (PRT) has evolved from initial laboratory studies examining choice constraints into a core theoretical framework for explaining complex social behaviors and communication effectiveness. Through four key dimensions-free perception, threat perception, psychological resistance, and behavioral recovery-the theory profoundly reveals the intrinsic motivations driving human self-determination in the face of external control. The distinction between trait resistance and state resistance provides nuanced perspectives for understanding individual differences, while recent empirical research in health communication, organ donation promotion, and aging family care has demonstrated that optimizing information characteristics (e.g., using non-threatening language) to respect individual autonomy is crucial for enhancing persuasion efficacy and reducing resistance behaviors. Future research should continue to investigate the impact of online social environments and multicultural contexts on psychological resistance, aiming to develop more targeted intervention strategies and communication recommendations for evolving social interactions.

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