



ATTENUATING CONSUMER REACTANCE TO THREATENING MESSAGES

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Abstract

Reactance theory was first proposed by Brehm (1966). Since then, the significant psychological phenomenon has been explored by a lot of studies. According to the Reactance theory, people have free behaviours to take part at any moment. A consumer should have the relevant psychological and physical abilities to have a free behavior to partake in it and they should keep in mind that they can engage in it in future or at the given moment.

Behavior consists of any act that can be imagined. Specifically put, it includes what to do or what not to do, when and how a consumer does something. When a person has such freedom, they may feel reactance whenever they feel that their freedom is eliminated, restricted, or threatened with a sense of elimination. Reactance is the state of motivation that rebuilds eliminated or threatened freedom. There is a direct relationship of reactance and the importance of threatened or eliminated freedom. In this article, we will discuss how to attenuate that reactance of customers when it comes to deal with threatening messages related to shortage or urgency.

Keywords – consumer reactance, threatening messages, reactance theory, consumer behavior, freedom

Introduction

Brehm presented the reactance theory around 60 years ago and explained reactance as a drive to regain freedom after it has been threatened or lost and it helps people to resist the social influence from someone else. The first publication was published in 1966 about reactance and it has attracted a lot of attention from researchers in fields like marketing, health, education and politics and a lot of studies related to consumer reactance have been published. Around 40 years later, Miron&Brehm (2006) reviewed the relevant areas and pointed to various research gaps. This paper is focused on finding those gaps. There is enough clarity about reactance after 50 years of discovery of this theory and the role it plays when it comes to deal with threatening messages. But there are still some questions that are unanswered but it is important to clarify them for psychology.

1.1 Background

Consumer reactance is an unlikeable reaction or arousal to persons, offers, regulations, or rules which eliminate or threaten certain behavioral freedoms (Steindl et al., 2015). When a consumer feels that something or someone is restricting their range of options or taking away their choice, reactance takes place. Reactance strikes when someone is pressured heavily to accept some attitude or perception. Reactance makes a person to strengthen or adopt an attitude or view that is different from what was decided and resistance also rises to persuasion. People who use reverse psychology play on reactance and influence anyone to choose something else than what they desire. Some consumers are highly reactant by nature. This kind of personality trait is known as ‘trait reactance’.

The Reactance Theory

People are usually convinced that they have some freedoms to do justice to their behaviors. But they are unable to do so at some point, or feel that things are not in their control. Being forced to pay tuition fees, being influenced to shop for any product at a grocery store, being ordered to get a job done for the boss, and being prohibited to use the phone in the classroom are some of the examples of threatening messages which lead to the loss of freedom and reactance. When people feel the loss of their freedom, reactance is an unlikeable arousal that serves as a motivator to restore the same.

How much reactance is depends upon the value of freedom threatened and the magnitude perception of the threat. Some of the self-imposing threats are rejecting others and choosing particular alternatives. These are called internal threats. On the other side, external threats come from the factors of impersonal situations that cause obstacles to the freedom of an individual or from social influence focusing on a specific person (Brehm, 1966; Clee&Wicklund, 1980). The unlikeable state of motivation of reactance causes cognitive and behavioral efforts to restore the freedom, along with the feel of emotion. Threatened people usually feel hostile, uncomfortable, angry and aggressive (Berkowitz, 1973; Brehm, 1966; Dillard &Shen, 2005; Rains, 2013).

Threatened people may reflect their restricted behavior or observe other people indulged in a related behavior. They may want threatening individuals to leave them or they may behave aggressively and in a hostile way to get off their aggression. People are likely to derogate the threat source, downgrade their option, or derogate the threat source (Bijvank et al., 2009; Brehm, 1966; Bushman & Stack, 1996; Heilman& Toffler, 1976). The concept of reactance has been less explored, no matter how much its consequences have been explored. Reactance causes affective, behavioral, and cognitive effects.

We have considered more recent improvements in the research about reactance. We present our findings in previous studies on reactance theory and various reactance processes showing the arousal of freedom threats.

1.2 Literature Reviews

Relationship marketing has been through a lot in the current market scenario but it constantly faces resistance from consumers. Both academics and management experts observed that some consumers are reactant over loyalty programs which are the tactical tools of relationship marketing. However, reactance theory has been neglected widely with relationship marketing. **Wendlandt & Schrader (2007)** tried to fill this gap between reactance theory and relationship marketing. Reactance is aroused with contractual bonds but socio-emotional bonds neither cause reactance nor the utility perception of the program. Economic bonds led to the rise of perceived utility to a specific threshold level which led to the dominance of reactance. Hence, limited and careful use of loyalty programs is recommended. Managers can use consumer reactance scale to determine their efforts of implemented or planned measures for consumer retention.

Steindl et al. (2015) review the studies which have been done since 1966 when reactance theory was first proposed. A lot of studies have many new details about the theory adding to the processes activated and phenomenon of reactance when people face threats to their freedom. However, it is important to clarify all the issues which are not yet discussed. They also propose some suggestions and open further research paths.

Bhrem (1966) was the first to propose the concept of psychological reactance. But there is limited research and studies on consolidating and reviewing consumer behavior. There are only a few review studies based on consumer reactance factors. **Amarnath and**

Jaidev (2018) conducted a study to fill this gap by analyzing 41 empirical literatures and articles and explained existing trends while putting the limelight on important theories and they have classified the research context, methodologies, and sample. At the end, they have discussed the implications for marketers and research and opened further research paths.

Mixed results have been observed from the research on impact of threatening messages on consumer reactance. **White et al. (2008)** explored the impact of personalized emails on click-through intentions. Their findings suggest personalization reactance occurs among the consumers when they get highly personalized messages that fit between their personal characteristics and the message. On the other hand, consumers are less willing to give favorable responses to the offer. This effect comes out basically for consumers perceiving the service utility to be low. Justification of personalization is not that important for consumers having higher utility as highly personalized messages are not much likely to develop reactance.

Several persuasive messages are more likely to be restricted to the choice of consumers. **Jalali (2011)** determines the impact of threats of freedom based on receptivity to the details of the message. The findings suggest that consumers are more open to the information in high threat messages at high construal levels and this pattern comes up with the manipulated construal levels via the wordings of the message. The researcher also points to the detailing on which the message is taken and the resultant usage of knowledge of persuasion along with the reasons behind the message. There is lower receptivity of information and higher use of knowledge in persuasion at low construal or high levels of detail facing the threat of messages.

Kim et al. (2017) show different reactions from South Koreans and Americans to ad campaigns relating to the environment with assertive messages that may pose threat to

autonomous freedoms. The findings support the hypothesis that cultural differences are major determinants of reactance from the consumers to assertive ad campaigns. In Study 1, it is found that Americans are not much receptive towards assertive environmental messages with imperatives like must, should, and ought and much more receptive for non-assertive messages with worth, might, and could. On the other hand, there is no response from the South Korean side as well. In Study 2, a power-saving ad campaign replicates the research findings conceptually and further presents the perceived threat while mediating the effects. A realistic setting is used in Study 3 to further help the hypothesis. According to this study, there is an impact of cultural difference on attitudes for assertive messages.

1.3 Research Gap

Reactance can take place when someone is pressured highly to accept a specific attitude or view. Due to reactance, a person can strengthen or adopt an attitude or view that is something else than desired. People play with reactance using reverse psychology and influence the consumers to pick something else rather than they wanted. In this research, we will explore the response of people to threatening messages and how to avoid reactance of consumers. Specifically, this research is trying to fill the gap between consumer reactance and messages that can threaten their freedom and restrict their openness to information provided in persuasive messages. It is observed that reactance takes place when there is heavy pressure.

1.4 Research Question

- How consumer reactance works?
- How can brands avoid causing consumer reactance?

1.5 Importance of the Study

The attempts of influence and persuasion are omnipresent in daily lives. There are significant advertising campaigns that are increasing progressively year after year. Whether as campaigning and advertising or in an interpersonal setting, consumers feel constant pressures on their freedoms of choice and expression which are imposing more or less. Brehm's reactance theory is a social psychology theory based on reactions of the public to eliminated or threatened freedoms (Clee&Wicklund, 1980). It explains the reactions of people when they face influence attempts that are supposed to restrict their freedom and their spontaneous drive to restore their freedom (Sherman et al., 2004). Hence, this study is very important to understand the level of reactance aroused when consumers come across such threatening messages and how brands can control such emotions.

1.6 Research Objectives

- To gain better understanding of reactance theory and its implementation in real world
- To understand how consumer decisions are affected by reactance

Research Methodology

2.1 Research Method & Design

This study is aimed to attain the knowledge of persuasion and to help brands to avoid any cues of reactance from the consumers. There are elements associated with ulterior features or motives that can make the message seem unfair or manipulative. Such types of cues are

directive or controlling language, threats to freedom, or any vested or apparent interest in that case. Creating impartial, fully balanced messages is neither necessary nor always possible with several messages specifically. However, combining these constructs can add to the clues of receptive impacts of information and how it can increase this receptivity even in cases where one cannot get rid of the threat to freedom. These relationships have not been explored completely and they recommend major associations between persuasion knowledge and effects of reactance in openness of consumers to threatening messages for freedom. In this research, we are going to apply secondary research to explore the relations between threatening messages and consumer reactance.

2.2 Research Approach

In order to answer the above research questions and fulfill the objectives, we have conducted a secondary research and analyzed the studies of previous literature to determine the effects of threatening messages to reactance of consumers and how to attenuate that reactance. We have gathered information from all the previous research journals, articles, literatures, and other trusted sources.

Data Analysis

It is often observed that controlling the sense of freedom of consumers can trigger reactance, i.e. an aggressive motivation to regain that freedom. Companies use nudging to change consumer behavior. But when they nudge too much, consumers usually do the very opposite of what they wanted. Reactance is the most common emotion when someone nudges too hard and it leads to unexpected, devastating results.

How consumer reactance works?

Here, we can better learn about the dynamics of consumer reactance with an example of a consumer named, Andrea, who wishes to book a holiday given by Coglode Research (2018).

- **Consumers have some behavioral freedom**

In the case of Andrea, she has behavioral freedom for choosing a fun trip without any uncertainty, fear, or unwanted stress.

- **When freedom seems threatened, it causes reactance**

When Andrea goes online to choose and book her package, she comes across an aggressive approach and highly forceful language that creates urgency and scarcity to force her to book right away. The company was misusing their behavioral principles, which threatened a consumer's willingness to choose a package and book it with patience.

- **Consumers become more willing to regain/protect their freedom directly**

This is known as the "Boomerang Effect" in which consumers do exactly the opposite of what brands want them to do. The forceful approach of the travel booking site made Andrea fall back. Rather than booking right away, she feels better to regain her freedom back and has a burning desire to avoid any unwanted influence. Ultimately, she found it a lot easier to close the tab than booking.

- **Finally, the offended and angry reaction**

Above all, Andrea controls her pain and further develops her freedom by alerting others of the potential threat to their personal freedoms and telling about her worst experience. As a result, the websites that don't make customers reactant become a way more attractive than that travel website.

This example makes it clear how consumer reactance works. There are several factors combined to make consumers feel reactance. It is mainly dictated by the size of threat to behavioral freedom and the perceived value of the same.

How can brands avoid causing consumer reactance?

First of all, brands should understand consumer feelings. Before making any changes, they should rethink their strategies and find out whether it will have a positive impact on the sense of freedom of consumers. Secondly, they must be mindful of how behavioral principles are used. There has been an overuse of faux-scarcity to create an unusual sense of urgency and forceful use of defaults that customers are not interested in, especially when it comes to book holidays and other amusement activities. Here's what brands can do to avoid unwanted, aggressive consequences when it comes to deal with nudge behavior -

- **Show certainty** – When a consumer feels that they can still restore their freedom, reactance gets stronger. Even a little bit of gap in the wall of a prison serves as a hope for prisoners to escape.
- **Autonomy** – If a consumer has the feeling of option, they can be less worried that their freedoms are being removed by the brands. They should combine certainty and autonomy by conveying the certainty of inevitable action while looking for other areas where they can restore control.
- **Warn about the threat early on** – When a brand knows their change will definitely trigger reactance among consumers, they should forewarn about them. They should allow time to sink in for the news to control reactance when they finally reveal the change.
- **Add humor** – Brands should be witty with their language in order to reduce reactance. Lighter, softer tone can make difficult requests seem less painful.

- **Narrative** – It is better to present communications as a story instead of a news headline to reduce reactance, improve persuasion, and identification with characters of the story.
- **Relatability**– If an authoritative figure delivers the information, reactance will come up more often. A relatable layman can better convey a message which is almost relatable to the customers.
- **Convey positive results of a change** – When consumers feel that they are losing their freedom, reactance occurs more likely. Instead, brands should convey the positive results for the change.
- **Motivation** – According to Brehm (1966), reactance is an inherent motivational tool that can be used to free ourselves instead of being completely negative. Brands can use it in their campaigns to drive people to sudden successes with success stories against all odds that can trigger current cultural biases and norms.

Results

A study was conducted by Zemack-Rugar et al. (2017) where they interacted with 84 people and discussed a popular clothing brand. They were either their loyal customers or not. An ad for that brand was displayed to each person and that ad was either assertively or non-assertively written. They were asked, if they had a gift card worth \$25, how much of it they are willing to spend, as per the ad? After showing assertive ads, both loyal and new customers were less willing to pay as compared to non-assertive ads. The assertive ad especially turned off loyal customers as they spent almost 50% of the amount.



Fig. 1 – People’s spending on a brand with assertive ad versus non-assertive ad
(Zemack-Rugar et al., 2017)

In this study, we have observed that brands have to be cautious with their voice, especially when it comes to dealing with the most loyal customers. It is good to change communication style as per the reactance or consider increased resistance from the demand side.

Conclusion

As per the Reactance Theory, individuals have perceived free behaviors and can indulge in any moment. A consumer should have relevant psychological and physical abilities for free behavior. They should consider that they can indulge in it anytime. Behavior consists of a kind of imaginable act. Behavior consists of a conceivable act and it is not that clear to a consumer or observer. A person may feel reactance when they have free behavior

whenever it is eliminated, threatened, or restricted. In this article, we explored how reactance works and how brands can control and reduce consumers' reactance with certain measures.

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