

**Beyond Boomerang: Rethinking Reactance in the Era of Global Crises  
in Multimodal Public Spheres**

*- Panel on the conference topic -*

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*Contribution details | Abstract*

**Beyond Boomerang:**

**Rethinking Reactance in the Era of Global Crises in Multimodal Public Spheres**

Global crises like climate change, global migration, and pandemics necessitate extensive regulation, intensifying public debates on freedom and its limitations. These discussions escalate when people feel pressured or manipulated, hindering fact-based communication on critical issues.

Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT; Brehm, 1966) provides a framework for understanding these reactions to perceived freedom restrictions and the (non-)verbal behaviors that follow. The theory posits that humans have an inherent need for autonomy and resist when it is threatened. Communication science has underscored reactance's relevance in understanding resistance to climate change messaging (Ma et al., 2019), polarization (Bhanot & Hopkins, 2020), disinformation (Boyer, 2021), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Rudert et al., 2021), particularly in online environments (Alsagheer et al., 2023). However, the model of reactance developed by Dillard and Shen in 2005 has not adequately adapted to the fast-paced and multimodal digital discourse spaces that have developed in the last two decades. This limitation reduces PRT's effectiveness in explaining how freedom is negotiated today, often reducing reactance to mere boomerang effects and anger (Ratcliff, 2019).

This panel aims to deepen our understanding of reactance beyond the boomerang effect by initiating an interdisciplinary and multi-methodological dialogue on how freedom restrictions are negotiated in diverse communication environments. The first paper presents a new Reactance Process Model, enhancing our theoretical grasp of the reactance process by incorporating variables previously seen only as moderators. The second paper, through a quantitative

experiment, explores how multimodal framing heightens resistance by enhancing perceptions of manipulation. The third paper employs conversation analysis of video-captured group interactions to examine the formation and negotiation of reactance. The final paper offers a literature review that applies reactance theory to anti-radicalization and extremism prevention, providing new strategies to enhance the effectiveness of these campaigns. Together, these presentations not only advance the theoretical underpinnings of reactance but also crucially inform practical discussions on negotiating freedoms within complex, real-world contexts.

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*Presentation of the Panel | First Presentation***Beyond Boomerang – Proposing a new Model of Psychological Reactance for Communication Sciences**

The growing importance of addressing complex challenges like climate change, or pandemics has heightened the relevance of psychological reactance theory (PRT, Brehm, 1966). While PRT has been essential in understanding resistance to public messaging, its development stalled after the introduction of the Intertwined Model of Reactance (Dillard & Shen, 2005). This model, though robust, oversimplifies the complex interplay between cognition and emotion, creating a gap in understanding reactance mechanisms. To address this, we propose the Psychological Reactance Process Model (PRPM), which reconceptualizes reactance as an emotional process, grounded in Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Ellsworth, 2013). The PRPM clarifies how cognition and affect interact during message processing, leading to more accurate predictions of reactance behaviors as shown by a first empirical test (N = 546). The PRPM offers deeper insights for communicators dealing with resistance in public discourse, enhancing the application of PRT in strategic communication, especially when navigating freedom dilemmas.

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*Presentation of the Panel | Second Presentation***Look - don't look!****Psychological Reactance in Multimodal Framing**

This study explores psychological reactance in multimodal news framing, examining how images and text together influence audience resistance. While prior research indicates that visual elements can both enhance and mitigate framing effects (Bock, 2020; Powell et al., 2019), our study uniquely combines reactance theory with multimodal framing (Geise & Maubach, 2024) to explore this dynamic in a factorial two-group experiment with 336 participants. Contrary to expectations, adding images to articles did not reduce reactant behaviors. Instead, the news modality significantly impacted perceived manipulative intent ( $W=50757$ ,  $p=.02$ ), with higher perceived manipulation in the multimodal group ( $M=2.46$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ) compared to the monomodal group ( $M=2.24$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ). We discuss the role of media literacy, topic influence, and text anchoring. These findings call for a reevaluation of images' role in resistance during framing, contributing to a deeper understanding of how freedom perceptions shape responses to multimodal media that needs further research.

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*Presentation of the Panel | Third Presentation*

### **Collaborative Negotiation of Psychological Reactance in Interpersonal Communication on Climate Change**

Addressing climate change requires urgent collective action, often spurred by emotionally charged messaging. This study examines psychological reactance in climate activism, focusing on how individuals negotiate freedom-threatening demands during media consumption about environmental issues.

Using conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974), the research uncovers that while participants theoretically support restricting media use for environmental benefits, they often experience cognitive-emotional dissonance in practice. This dissonance, explained through psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), triggers behaviors aimed at restoring personal freedom, such as reframing situations to regain agency and minimizing personal implications.

The study reveals that reactance is a processual phenomenon in group dynamics, collaboratively negotiated within interpersonal interactions. These insights deepen our understanding of how emotional and cognitive components interact in climate-related behaviors, offering implications for designing climate communication strategies that reduce reactance and encourage sustained behavioral change.

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*Presentation of the Panel | Third Presentation***Relevance, measurement and effects of reactance in radicalization prevention:****A systematic literature review**

Extremist and radical content has been given a new platform and means of dissemination as a result of advancing digitalization and the rise of social media. Prevention campaigns are one way of counteracting the persuasive potential of this content and preventing the potential of radicalization processes as far as possible. Although large-scale prevention programs have demonstrated positive effects on knowledge transfer and psychosocial factors, many evaluation studies have methodological limitations (Jugl et al., 2021). One key aspect to consider are unintended reactance processes. If, e.g., prevention campaigns confront participants with their alleged shortcomings or if dropout reports are perceived as betrayal, boomerang effects could be triggered rather than the intended prevention of radicalization (Walsh & Gansewig, 2019). By means of a systematic literature review (Fig. 1), this presentation examines the questions 1) whether reactance is considered in the evaluation of prevention campaigns, 2) how reactance is implemented and measured in these studies, and 3) which reactance effects are observed in these contexts.

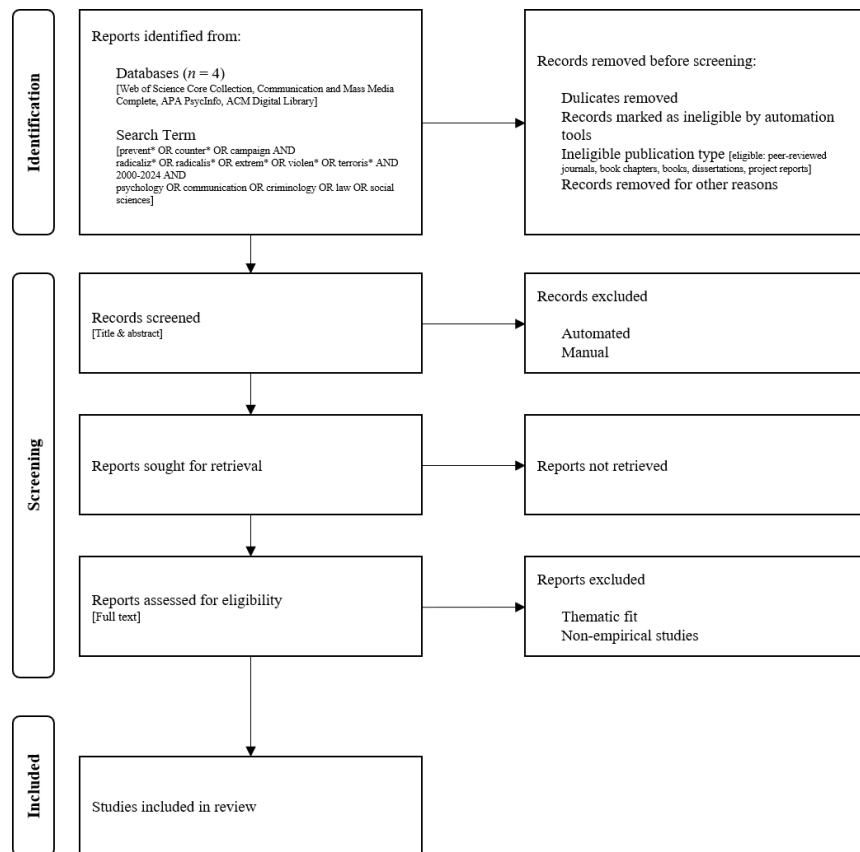


Fig. 1. PRISMA Chart

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