

# EASE THE RÉSISTANCE: THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE AND OTHER-REFERENCING IN ATTENUATING PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTANCE TO PERSUASIVE DIABETES MESSAGES

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## ABSTRACT

Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Dillard & Shen, 2005) explains that persuasion may fail by inducing threats to individuals' perceived autonomy; this study provides evidence of pathways through this resistance to enhance message persuasiveness.

A 2 (narrative) x 2 (other-referencing) x 2 (message) x 4 (order) experiment tested whether packaging overt recommendations as a story rather than an informational argument (i.e. narrative structure) and highlighting the impact of health decisions on family and friends rather than the individual (i.e., other-referencing) can effectively attenuate reactance. In the context of reactance-inducing print messages promoting healthy diet and physical activity for adult diabetics ( $N = 58$ ), narrative and other-referencing directly and indirectly influenced attitudes and behavioral intentions. Specifically, both narrative and other-referencing led to lower perceived threat to choice, less state anger and counter-arguing, less negative cognitive responses, more positive attitudes toward the ad and the behaviors promoted, and greater likelihood of compliance. Moreover, reactance mediated the influence of these factors, such that narrative and other-referencing attenuated reactance, which, in turn, enhanced persuasion.

Findings illustrate two strategies that message creators may use in order to benefit from clear, direct health messages while avoiding the resistance they may provoke. Moreover, findings inform message design for diabetes self-care education, a pressing need given the rapidly increasing prevalence of this illness, particularly among underserved populations.