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Psychological Reactance as a Predictor of Rumination and Worry among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Young adulthood is a period marked by increasing independence and decision-making, which may expose individuals to situations in which their perceived freedom or choices are restricted. Psychological reactance has been associated with responses to restricted freedom and with difficulties related to unwanted thoughts, while rumination and worry represent two forms of repetitive thinking that are related but distinct (Brehm, 1966; Kelly & Nauta, 1997; Stade & Ruscio, 2023). However, limited research has directly examined whether psychological reactance predicts rumination and worry among young adults. The present study aimed to examine psychological reactance as a predictor of rumination and worry among young adults. A quantitative, correlational research design was used with 150 college students aged 18–25 years who were selected through purposive sampling. The Hong Psychological Reactance Scale, Ruminative Response Scale, and Penn State Worry Questionnaire were used to assess psychological reactance, rumination, and worry, respectively. Data were analysed using simple linear regression. The findings revealed that psychological reactance significantly and positively predicted rumination, explaining 7.3% of the variance, $F(1, 148) = 11.677$, $p < .001$. In contrast, psychological

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reactance did not significantly predict worry, explaining 0.8% of the variance, $F(1, 148) = 1.138$, $p = .288$. These findings suggest that psychological reactance may be relevant to rumination among young adults, although it did not significantly predict worry in the present sample.

Young adulthood is often considered a stage of increasing independence, where individuals begin to make their own decisions regarding their education, career, relationships, and personal lives. However, this freedom can sometimes be challenged when individuals feel that their choices or actions are being restricted by parents, society, academic demands, or other circumstances. Such situations may create a desire to regain control over one's freedom and may also make individuals continue thinking about the situation. One possible psychological factor related to such experiences is psychological reactance, which occurs when individuals perceive that their freedom or choices are being threatened or restricted (Brehm, 1966). Individuals may respond to such situations by repeatedly thinking about what happened, why it happened, or what might happen next. These patterns of repetitive thinking can take the form of rumination, which involves repeatedly thinking about negative experiences, feelings, or their causes and consequences (Treynor et al., 2003), and worry, which involves repeated thoughts about possible negative events in the future (Meyer et al., 1990). Therefore, it becomes important to understand whether individuals who are more sensitive to restrictions on their freedom may also be more likely to experience rumination and worry. This study therefore tries to examine psychological reactance as a predictor of rumination and worry among young adults.

Previous research has examined psychological reactance in relation to thought control and unwanted thoughts, providing a basis for understanding how reactance may be associated with repetitive thinking. Kelly and Nauta (1997) conducted a study to explore the relationship between dispositional reactance, which refers to an individual's general tendency to experience psychological reactance when their freedom is threatened, and thought suppression. They found that individuals with higher reactance who were asked to suppress unwanted thoughts felt more disturbed by these thoughts and felt less control over them**.** In another study, Ma et al. (2019) conducted four studies to examine psychological reactance when individuals were exposed to attempts to control their thoughts and behaviours. They found that attempts to control people's thoughts produced greater psychological reactance than attempts to control their behaviour. Further, Wallaert et al. (2023) conducted an experimental study to examine whether reducing reactance pressures would improve people's ability to suppress unwanted thoughts. They found that when reactance pressures were reduced, participants were better able to suppress unwanted thoughts, particularly when their cognitive

resources were limited. In addition, Stade and Ruscio (2023) conducted a meta-analysis examining the relationship between worry and rumination across 233 studies and 69,305 participants. They found a significant positive relationship between worry and rumination, while also showing that although both involve repetitive negative thinking, rumination is generally focused on negative experiences and worry is focused on possible future negative events.

Over the years, various studies have examined psychological reactance in relation to restrictions, thought control and unwanted thoughts. Previous studies have established that psychological reactance is associated with difficulties in controlling unwanted thoughts, while research has also shown that rumination and worry are significantly related forms of repetitive negative thinking. Furthermore, existing studies have mainly focused on thought suppression, thought control, and unwanted thoughts rather than considering whether individuals with higher psychological reactance may experience greater repetitive negative thinking in the form of rumination and worry. Therefore, there is a need to study the role of psychological reactance as a predictor of rumination and worry among young adults. This study may contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between perceived restrictions on freedom and repetitive thinking among young adults. The study would also help in understanding whether individual differences in psychological reactance are associated with tendencies to ruminate about negative experiences and worry about possible future events.

Method

The present study aims to examine whether psychological reactance predicts rumination and worry among young adults.

Sample

The present study included 150 young adults aged between 18 and 25 years. The study used purposive sampling for the selection of participants.

Inclusion Criteria. Young adults aged between 18 and 25 years who were college students were included in the study.

Exclusion Criteria. Young adults below 18 and above 25 who were not college students were excluded from the study.

Measures

Hong Psychological Reactance Scale (HPRS)

The Hong Psychological Reactance Scale developed by Hong and Page (1989) was used to assess individual differences in psychological reactance. The scale consists of 14 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, yielding satisfactory reliability (α = .77) and evidence of construct validity. Total scores range from 14 to 70, with higher scores indicating a greater tendency towards psychological reactance. It measures an

individual's general tendency to experience psychological reactance when their freedom or choices are threatened or restricted.

Ruminative Responses Scale (RRS)

The Ruminative Responses Scale developed by Nolen-Hoeksema and Morrow (1991) was used to assess rumination. The scale consists of 22 items with responses rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always), yielding high reliability (α = .89) and evidence of construct validity. Total scores range from 22 to 88, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of rumination. It measures repetitive thinking in response to negative mood, including tendencies to focus on negative experiences, feelings, and their causes and consequences.

Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ)

The Penn State Worry Questionnaire developed by Meyer et al. (1990) was used to assess worry. The scale consists of 16 items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all typical of me) to 5 (very typical of me), yielding high reliability (α = .93) and good validity. Total scores range from 16 to 80, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of worry. It measures an individual's general tendency to engage in excessive and repetitive worry about possible negative events or outcomes.

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationship between psychological reactance, rumination, and worry among young adults. Psychological reactance was considered the predictor, while rumination and worry were considered the outcomes. Simple linear regression analysis was used to examine the predictive relationships between these variables.

Procedure

Data were collected using Google Forms. Informed consent was obtained from the participants at the beginning of the questionnaire. A brief description of the study was provided, and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses would be maintained. Participants were then provided with instructions for completing the questionnaires and were asked to respond honestly to each item. After completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked for their participation.

Analysis

The collected data were entered and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

Table 1 *Regression Coefficients of Psychological Reactance predicting Rumination*

Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*
Constant	33.53	6.12	—	< .001
Psychological Reactance	.45	.13	.27	< .001
R^2	.07	—	—	—

Note. N = 150. R^2 = .07. F(1, 148) = 11.68, p < .001.

Table 1 presents the regression coefficients of psychological reactance in predicting rumination among young adults. The R^2 value of .07 indicates that psychological reactance explained 7.3% of the variance in rumination, with F(1, 148) = 11.677, p < .001. The findings revealed that psychological reactance significantly and positively predicted rumination (β = .270, p < .001). This indicates that individuals with higher levels of psychological reactance tended to report higher levels of rumination. These findings suggest that individuals who are more sensitive to restrictions on their personal freedom may also experience greater repetitive thinking about negative experiences and feelings.

Table 2 *Regression Coefficients of Psychological Reactance predicting Worry*

Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	*P*
Constant	54.06	3.96	—	< .001
Psychological Reactance	−.09	.09	−.09	.29
R^2	.01	—	—	—

Note. N = 150. R^2 = .01. F(1, 148) = 1.14, p = .29.

Table 2 presents the regression coefficients of psychological reactance in predicting worry among young adults. The R^2 value of .008 indicates that psychological reactance explained only 0.8% of the variance in worry, with F(1, 148) = 1.138, p = .288. The findings revealed that psychological reactance did not significantly predict worry (β = −.087, p = .288). This indicates that higher levels of psychological reactance were not significantly associated with higher levels of worry in the present sample. Therefore, psychological reactance did not emerge as a significant predictor of future-oriented repetitive thinking among the participants.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine whether psychological reactance predicts rumination and worry among young adults. The study included 150 college students aged 18–25 years selected through purposive

sampling. The findings showed that psychological reactance significantly predicted rumination, explaining 7.3% of its variance, whereas it did not significantly predict worry, explaining only 0.8% of its variance.

The significant relationship between psychological reactance and rumination is consistent with Kelly and Nauta (1997), who found that individuals with higher dispositional reactance experienced greater difficulty and disturbance when attempting to suppress unwanted thoughts. Similarly, Wallaert et al. (2023) found that reducing reactance pressures improved thought suppression, suggesting a relationship between reactance and the management of unwanted thoughts.

However, the present finding regarding worry is not directly supported by the previous studies, as research on psychological reactance has primarily focused on thought suppression, thought control, and unwanted thoughts rather than worry specifically. The non-significant finding may suggest that psychological reactance is more closely associated with difficulties in managing unwanted thoughts than with future-oriented worry, although further research is needed to examine this possibility.

Limitations and Implications

The present study provides insights into the relationship between psychological reactance, rumination, and worry among young adults. However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be influenced by participants' subjective experiences and response tendencies. Second, the sample consisted of 150 college students aged 18–25 years selected through purposive sampling, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other age groups and populations. Third, the correlational research design does not allow conclusions regarding cause-and-effect relationships. Additionally, the study examined psychological reactance as a predictor of rumination and worry without considering other psychological factors that may influence these forms of repetitive thinking.

The findings have theoretical and practical implications for understanding repetitive thinking among young adults. The significant relationship between psychological reactance and rumination highlights the relevance of perceived restrictions on personal freedom in understanding repetitive thoughts about negative experiences. Mental health professionals and college counsellors may consider exploring how individuals respond to situations involving restricted choices or personal freedom when addressing difficulties related to rumination. However, the non-significant relationship between psychological reactance and worry indicates that other psychological factors may be relevant in understanding future-oriented repetitive thinking. Future research may include larger and more diverse samples and examine additional variables such as anxiety, emotional regulation, and thought suppression to gain a better understanding of the relationship between psychological reactance, rumination, and worry.

Conclusion

The primary aim of the present study was to examine psychological reactance as a predictor of rumination and worry among young adults. The findings revealed that psychological reactance significantly and positively predicted rumination, explaining 7.3% of its variance. This indicates that individuals with higher levels of psychological reactance tended to experience greater rumination. However, psychological reactance did not significantly predict worry, explaining only 0.8% of its variance. These findings suggest that psychological reactance may be more closely associated with repetitive thinking about negative experiences than with future-oriented worry in the present sample.

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