



COVID-19
Canada



THE END OF THE WORLD
AS WE KNOW IT?

RESEARCH REPORT NO. 3

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATING NORMATIVE SUPPORT WHEN THE COVID-19 MEASURES ARE PERCEIVED AS A THREAT TO INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

THIS RESEARCH REPORT IS INTENDED FOR
POLICY MAKERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

THE PROJECT IS FINANCED BY THE CANADIAN
INSTITUTES OF HEALTH RESEARCH (CIHR)

Recommendations

In light of the results obtained from the two suggested hypothesis, one supported and the other not supported, it is recommended that to effectively promote adherence with public health guidelines, governments could:

1) Communicate normative support: Focus communication on the data highlighting that the majority of Canadians abide by the government measures. Doing so informs Canadians that there is widespread support in the fight against COVID-19. For example, many polls show that Canadians are in support of the government measures, such as a recent one that shows that 64% of the population would probably or certainly get vaccinated (CBC News, 2020).

2) Avoid emphasizing non-supportive behaviours by contrasting them with supportive behaviors: When reporting on non-supportive behaviors, it is important to put them into perspective with the proportion of individuals that do abide with the government measures. For example, although 16% of the population reports that they will definitely not get vaccinated against the virus, 64% reports that they would probably or certainly get vaccinated (CBC News, 2020). Doing so brings attention to the actual social norms without showing a bias favoring one side.

Definitions of concepts applied to the COVID-19 context

Concepts	Definitions
Psychological reactance	A motivation that arises when individuals perceive a threat to their freedom. Psychological reactance encourages individuals to take part in freedom-restoring behaviours such as engaging in oppositional behaviour (e.g., not respecting social distancing or inviting friends for dinner).
Social norms	What one believes the majority of residents of his/her province do/think about the government measures. For example, believing that most Ontarians wear a mask in indoor public spaces. Social norms exert social pressure: those who disrespect the norm (e.g., of wearing a mask) are prone to social punishment (social exclusion). Alternatively, those who conform to the norm receive social rewards (social acceptance).
Adherence	The extent to which a person reports actually following the provincial government measure.



Research question

The outbreak of COVID-19 has put substantial pressure on individuals to profoundly change their behaviour. However, an alarming minority of individuals are challenging the new government measures by refusing to wear a mask, to practice physical distancing or to self-isolate. Why do some people resist these measures?

Hypotheses

- 1) People reporting high levels of psychological reactance will adhere less to government measures compared to those with low levels of reactance. Highly reactant individuals should adhere less to the measures as they are likely to perceive that the measures threaten their personal freedom.
- 2) People reporting high levels of psychological reactance will report less adherence to government measures when they perceive strong social norms compared to when they perceive weak social norms in favor of the measures. As social norms exert social pressure, when reactant individuals perceive strong social norms, they should feel that their freedom is further threatened, resulting in a decrease in adherence.

Method

Data were extracted from a large survey which asked a representative sample of Canadians (N=3617) to complete an in-depth questionnaire on multiple occasions over several months. For more methodological details, please consult our technical report (de la Sablonnière et al., 2020).

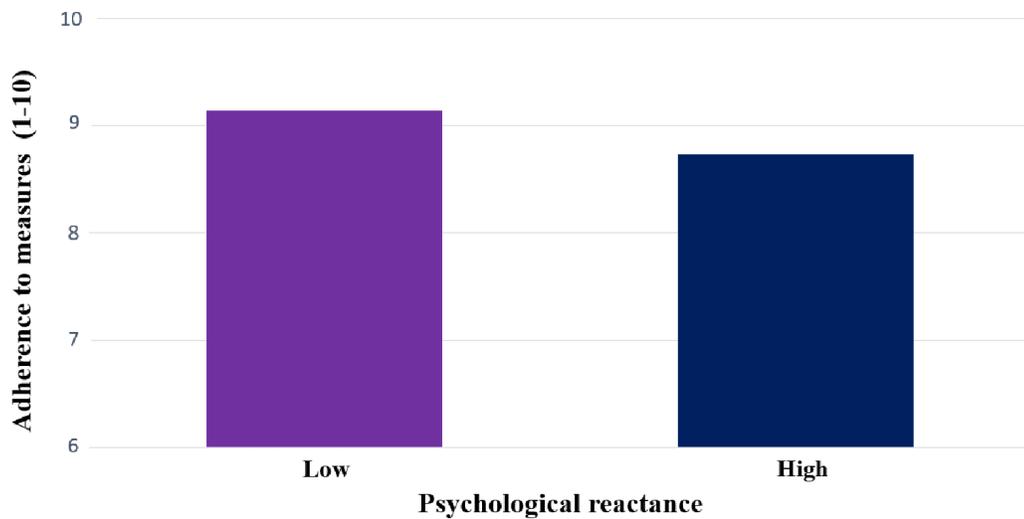
 Measurement Time	 Sample Size	 % (n) Women	 Mean age (range)	 Survey Dates
2	2282	48.9 % (1115)	49 (18-86)	21 April - 11 May 2020



Results

Hypothesis 1 was confirmed. The high reactant respondents reported significantly less adherence with the government measures ($M = 8.73$) compared to the low reactant respondents ($M = 9.14$) (see Figure 1). The results also reveal that all respondents reported overall strong levels of adherence with the government measures.

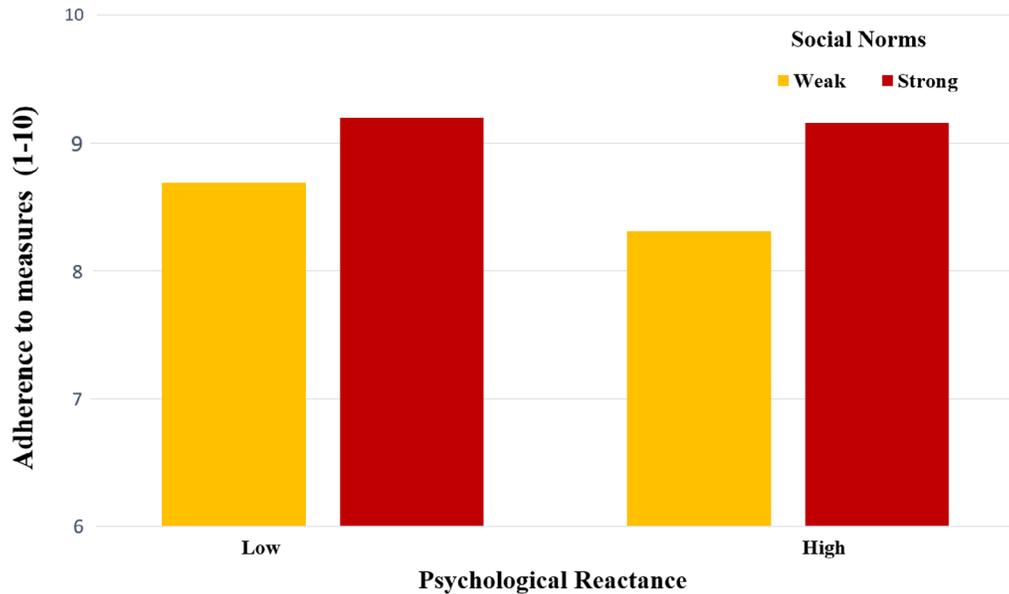
Figure 1



Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Contrary to what was expected, respondents with high levels of psychological reactance adhere significantly more to the government measures when they perceive strong social norms in support of the governmental measures compared to when they perceive weak social norms (see Figure 2).

The same results were found for respondents with low levels of psychological reactance. The low reactant respondents adhere significantly more to the government measures when they perceive strong social norms in support of the government measures compared to when they perceive weak social norms (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Although previous research has shown that highly reactant individuals are prone to take part in freedom restoring behaviors when confronted with social norms, this study indicates that it may not be the case in the context of the current pandemic.

This finding may be explained by the fact that in novel, ambiguous situations, such as the current pandemic, individuals have no clear reference points to serve as a guide for their behavioural decisions. Social norms provide valuable information as they inform individuals how the vast majority of others are behaving. Therefore, in contexts where individuals do not know how to act, social norms may be perceived as an informational source rather than as a source of social pressure. The results show that this process can be generalized to reactant individuals as well. Future studies could examine the role of the situational context in order to better understand why social norms can, in this particular context, positively influence recalcitrant individuals.

Conclusion

The personal decision to adhere to government measures about COVID-19 depends on whether individuals perceive the measures to be a threat to their personal freedom or not. Individuals that perceive government measures as threatening their personal freedom (highly reactant individuals) are likely to take part in freedom restoring behaviour that will encourage them to undermine the measures, resulting in less adherence to them.

The results of the current research also show that highly reactant individuals adhere more to the government measures when they perceive strong normative support in favor of the measures compared to when they perceive weak normative support in their favor. Given the importance of social norms in the adhesion process in the current pandemic, it is strongly suggested that greater emphasis be placed in government communications, media reports and social media on the fact that most Canadians are following the government measures.

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To cite this research report

French Bourgeois, L., Sydoriak, S., Tremblay, R., Dorfman, A., Lina, J. M., Pelletier-Dumas, M., Stolle., D., Taylor, D.M, & de la Sablonnière, R. (2020). COVID-19 Canada: The end of the world as we know it? (Research Report No. 3). The importance of communicating normative support when the COVID-19 measures are perceived as a threat to individual freedom. Université de Montréal.

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Director and founder of the Social Change and Identity Laboratory since 2005, Roxane studies the challenges people face when they are exposed to dramatic social change, such as the colonization that affected Canada's Aboriginal peoples or immigration.

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