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A Test of Follower Psychological Reactance to a Leader in the College Classroom: Investigating Late Work Policies on Instructional Dissent Through Freedom Threat and Reactance

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ABSTRACT

Employing psychological reactance theory (PRT; Brehm, 1966), this study investigated how instructors' late work policies influence students' dissenting behaviors through perceived freedom threat and psychological reactance. Using a 2 (Forcefulness: low vs. high) by 2 (Late work: accepted vs. not accepted) experimental design, results indicated that, compared to a policy that incorporates low forceful language and accepts late work, a late work policy that is more rigid and uses more forceful language led to greater expressive and vengeful dissent serially through freedom threat and psychological reactance. While there was no evidence of serial mediation for rhetorical dissent, there was evidence of simple mediation in that the highly forceful, late work not accepted policy led to greater use of rhetorical dissent through freedom threat when compared to the low forceful, late work not accepted policy. This study argues for the use of serial mediation to test PRT in future instructional experiments. Implications for management and leadership are discussed.

KEYWORDS

psychological reactance theory, instructional dissent, late work policies, forceful language

Introduction

The survival of a firm depends on its continual ability to adapt, innovate, and remake itself to meet industry demands (Piderit, 2000). At the heart of the firm's survival is thus its ability to successfully navigate the organizational change necessitated by effective innovation and adaptation (Lewis, 2019; Nesterkin, 2012). However, organizational change does not occur in a vacuum, as such overarching change requires the individual adaptation of employees within the transforming entity to be successful (George & Jones, 2001). While the process of organizational change demands firm-level adaptation, that of individual change requires individual, cognitive adaptation (George & Jones, 2001). It may therefore be more accurate to suggest that it is the ability of employees within the organization to navigate the cognitive adaptation necessitated by effective innovation that lies at the heart of a firm's survival (Nesterkin, 2012).

Unfortunately, individual change brought about by organizational transformation is likely to be met with resistance, as the associated cognitive adaptation is apt to be viewed as a forced deviation from the individual's established norms, routines, and ideas and thus perceived as an undermining of one's personal autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Nesterkin, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2006). When individuals' autonomy is threatened in such a manner, they may experience reactance, a motivational state triggered when one's freedoms are threatened or restricted (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). According to psychological reactance theory (PRT; Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981) when an individual perceives their behavioral freedom is threatened, they will be motivated to reestablish their threatened or eliminated freedom. In the case of organizational change, employees experiencing reactance may become unresponsive to leaders, resist change, and even engage in deviant behaviors directed toward their managers in an attempt to bolster their autonomy, especially when changes are presented in a demanding or threatening manner (Nesterkin, 2012; Powers & Altman, 2022; Rees et al., 2024).

In particular, this study aims to test the principle that persuasive messages which imply threats increase the magnitude of reactance (Brehm, 1966). To do so, the present paper utilizes a student sample to examine how followers respond to a leader's (e.g., a teacher's) persuasive messages. Utilizing a classroom sample is appropriate for the nature of this study, as such an environment may be seen as a microcosm of an organization when considering issues related to leadership, structure, and control (Cohen, 1976). For instance, when instructors introduce course policies in their syllabi, students may feel that their autonomy to make decisions is thwarted in response to an organizational change, or an alteration to a core aspect of an entities' operation (Hallencreutz & Turner, 2011). From a position of authority, college instructors must often persuade students to complete learning tasks and to follow course policies and rules in a similar manner as managers must influence subordinates to follow organizational procedures. With this in mind, the present study seeks to illuminate how subordinates (e.g., students) respond to a leader's (e.g., a teacher) persuasive messaging in the face of organizational changes that alter a core aspect of an organization's (e.g., a classroom) operation. Specifically, the goal of this study is to investigate students' psychological reactance toward instructors' late work policies and students' subsequent instructional dissent as autonomy restorative behavior. In doing so, the present paper provides us with a greater understanding of the psychological reactance individuals may experience in the face of systematic change that may hamper a leader's ability to effectively influence them (Nesterkin, 2012; Powers & Altman, 2022; Rees et al., 2024).

Psychological Reactance Theory

PRT posits that if an individual perceives that their behavioral freedom is being infringed upon, they will experience psychological reactance which manifests as the motivation to restore the eliminated or threatened behavior (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The four major elements of the theory include perceived freedom, threat to freedom, reactance, and freedom restoration. First, individuals must believe that they have the freedom to enact a behavior. When perceived freedoms are then threatened by a compliance-gaining message, reactance will arise. The reactance will cause individuals to try to restore their freedom by disregarding the proscribed behavior altogether, known as the boomerang effect, or by increasing their attitudes toward the threatened behavior.

Originally a theory born in the discipline of psychology, PRT has been widely heuristic in communication research since the early 1990s. Bensley and Wu (1991) first introduced PRT to communication research through an experiment in which they investigated college students' reactance toward high- and low-threat antidrinking messages, discovering that highly threatening messages can increase behavioral intentions to drink. Health communication scholars were early adopters of PRT, conducting myriad reactance studies investigating persuasive prosocial health messages such as teeth brushing (Dillard & Shen, 2005), sunscreen use (e.g., Shen, 2015), organ donation (e.g., Reinhart et al., 2007), and vaccine advocacy (e.g., Richards et al., 2021). PRT has also shown immense utility in persuasion literature, investigating antecedents of freedom threat such as autonomy-supportive, controlling, and threatening language (for a review, please see Burgoon et al., 2002), and ways to reduce reactance with concepts such as implementing restoration postscripts (Bessarabova et al., 2013) and empathy (e.g., Shen, 2010; for a review, please see Rosenberg & Siegel, 2018).

In 2005, Dillard and Shen addressed Brehm's (1966) view that state reactance was not empirically testable by operationalizing reactance as negative cognitions and anger as a result of freedom threat. To measure negative cognitions, PRT research has often relied on a thought-listing technique in which participants are given 90

seconds to write down all thoughts they had while viewing a persuasive message, after which either participants or trained coders are asked to code each thought for relevance and valence (Quick & Stephenson, 2008). However, the thought listing technique can be extremely time-consuming as training coders to complete this task can take hundreds of hours (e.g., Reynolds-Tylus et al., 2021). Further, participants may not be best suited to complete this task, in which each participant may not be as thoughtful in their coding processes as trained coders or lack consistency with other participants. More recently, Reynolds-Tylus et al. (2021) assessed the utility, validity, and reliability of three approaches for measuring negative cognitions for psychological reactance, including the two thought-listing techniques and a three-item negative cognitions measure. Their results advocate the use of a three-item negative cognitions measure. Advancements such as these help with the utility of the theory, the brevity and low inference measures for participants, and allow researchers to adopt PRT more easily.

PRT in the College Classroom

College instructors often employ compliance-gaining techniques, make requests of their students, and proscribe behaviors through their syllabus within the college classroom (e.g., Kearney et al., 1984). Where students have been found to resist instructors' compliance-gaining strategies (Burroughs et al., 1989; Kearney et al., 1991), reactance may very well be the result of instructors' proscriptive messages. In 2013, Zhang and Sapp tested PRT in the instructional setting, finding through their experimental investigations that instructors' requests can lead to students' feeling their behavioral freedom is threatened. Specifically, they found the closer the student-instructor relationship and more polite the instructor was in their request, as well as the more legitimate the request is perceived by the student and the greater perceived teacher credibility, the less likely students will experience freedom threat. The decreased freedom threat will mitigate students' reactance and resistance to instructors' requests. This initial study paved the way for further investigations of student reactance to instructor requests.

Ball and Goodboy (2014) investigated instructor clarity and controlling language on an extra-ungraded assignment request and Frey et al. (2021) investigated controlling language and fairness of instructors' technology policies. Ball and Goodboy (2014) found that instructors' use of forceful and unclear language when asking students to complete an extra assignment positively predicted student perceived freedom threat. Frey et al. (2021) found that the more controlling and the more unfair a technology policy was perceived, the higher the freedom threat. Frey et al. also found an interaction in which the unfair policy resulted in greater perceived freedom threat in both the low and high controlling language conditions. Both studies concluded that freedom threat predicted psychological reactance, leading students to engage in freedom restoration behaviors.

These three studies suggested that their manipulations of antecedent communicative behaviors indirectly affected students' restoration behaviors through freedom threat and reactance by testing their manipulated variables on freedom threat using either ANOVA (Frey et al., 2021) or Pearson correlation (Ball & Goodboy, 2014), then separately testing the effect of freedom threat on restorative behaviors mediated through reactance. While it suggested through their findings that their manipulated persuasive messages indirectly invoked restorative behaviors through freedom threat and reactance, the indirect effects were not fully tested.

In a cross-sectional study, Tatum et al. (2018) successfully tested the indirect effect of students' perceptions of their instructors' discouraging cell phone policies on restorative behavior through freedom threat and psychological reactance. They found that the more discouraging students perceived their instructor's cell phone policy, the greater likelihood of expressively and vengefully dissenting due to the mediating effects of perceived freedom threat and reactance. Arguably, their use of serial mediation offered a more accurate test of the theory when wanting to determine whether certain persuasive language and requests influence reactance and restorative behaviors. Causality, however, may not be verified as time order was not present in the study. Thus, the current study will combine the experimental design of the previous studies (i.e., Ball & Goodboy, 2014; Frey et al., 2021; Zhang & Sapp, 2013) while using serial mediation used in Tatum et al.'s (2018) design to test the indirect effect of the instructors' classroom messages on restorative behaviors through freedom threat and reactance.

Prior instructional PRT studies argue that reactance will lead to instructional dissent as a way to restore students' freedom (Ball & Goodboy, 2014; Tatum et al., 2018). More broadly, dissent occurs in

organizational settings when individuals voice opposition or differing viewpoints about workplace policies and practices (Kassing, 1997). Instructional dissent, as a specific form of this phenomenon, involves students expressing concerns or disagreements related to course policies, instruction, or classroom experiences (Goodboy, 2011b). Goodboy (2011a, 2011b) identified three types of instructional dissent: expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful. Expressive dissent encompasses students venting their emotions for catharsis and venting to classmates, friends, or family members with the expectation of feeling relief (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2017). Rhetorical dissent involves discussing the grievance directly with the instructor with the goal of the instructor remedying the perceived transgression. Rhetorical dissent is considered potentially constructive in allowing instructors to amend or repair problems students might have (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013, 2016; Goodboy & Bolkan, 2017). Vengeful dissent is performed when students attempt to impose harm on the instructor as retaliation or revenge. Vengeful is the most aggressive instructional dissent as students will maliciously communicate about their instructor to classmates, administrators, or the general public (e.g., social media) in the hopes of damaging their instructor's credibility or career (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2017).

Since its inception, instructional dissent has been widely studied in instructional research. For example, students tend to use dissenting behaviors when they blame their instructors for a disagreement (LaBelle & Martin, 2014) and when students experience negative emotions toward a specific course (e.g., Goodboy et al., 2019; Goodboy et al., 2021). When students feel they are bullied by their instructor, they are more likely to expressively and vengefully dissent (Martin et al., 2015). Instructional dissent behaviors have also been found to be a result of students' perceived freedom threat through reactance as a mediator (Ball & Goodboy, 2014; Tatum et al., 2018). While Tatum et al. (2018) found that students were only likely to vengefully and expressively dissent as an indirect effect of cell-phone policies through freedom threat and reactance, Ball and Goodboy (2014) found that freedom threat indirectly led to all three types of dissent when mediated by reactance.

To further test PRT and findings that instructors' persuasive messages in the classroom will lead to students' instructional dissent as restoration behaviors, the current study will employ classroom late work policies as the manipulated instructor request. Instructors' late work policies may be perceived by students as a threat to their freedom, leading to psychological reactance. Students may perceive the policies to be unfair (Chory-Assad, 2002), infringing upon their autonomy and leading to psychological reactance (Frey et al., 2021). Prior research has investigated this premise through the work of classroom procedural justice scholarship. Procedural injustice includes the judgment students make about the fairness of the criteria instructors use to determine grades in their classes (Chory et al., 2014). Students will thus judge the fairness of instructors' policies, such as a late work policy, in which stricter policies are viewed as more unjust and lenient policies as fairer. Stringent late work policies are perceived to be among the top student-perceived procedural injustices, and students' most common emotional responses to these procedural injustices are anger and frustration (Chory et al., 2017; Horan et al., 2010). Where anger and negative cognitions make up psychological reactance (Dillard & Shen, 2005), students may likely be experiencing reactance to these procedural injustices, namely rigid late work policies.

Thus, this study aims to investigate PRT in the college classroom by predicting that stringent late work policies will lead to instructional dissent because they will feel that it is infringing upon their freedom, thus leading to reactance, especially if forceful language is used in the policy. Although the social psychology literature has long suggested that individuals are apt to follow the instructions of an authority figure (e.g., Blass, 1991; Milgram, 1963), both situational and personal elements alter the likelihood of obedience, or alternatively dissent, in a given scenario (Bass, 1991). For instance, messages that incorporate highly forceful language (e.g., "ought," "must," and "need") as opposed to low forceful (e.g., "might," "could," and "perhaps") continue to result in greater perceptions of freedom threat and increased psychological reactance (e.g., Ball & Goodboy, 2014; Dillard & Shen, 2005; Frey et al., 2021). Because controlling language in syllabi is negatively related to students' self-determined motivation, affect toward the course, and impressions of the instructor (Merchán Tamayo et al., 2022), it is therefore likely to reduce their obedience to a hierarchical superior (Bass, 1991). For instance, both Ball and Goodboy (2014) and Frey et al. (2021) found that students' perceived freedom threat was significantly greater when an instructors' message was high in forceful language. Building off prior instructional research, the current study thus aims to investigate PRT in the college classroom by manipulating an instructor's implementation of a late work policy using both high-

and low-controlling language and accepting or not accepting late work. It is hypothesized that low control and accepting late work will result in less freedom threat than high control and not accepting late work, leading students to experience reactance and intentions of restoring their freedom through instructional dissent. Proposing serial mediation to fully test this process, the following hypotheses were posited:

Ha-c: Compared to a late work policy that allows for late work with less forceful language, utilizing a policy that does not accept late work with highly forceful language will serially increase students' perceived freedom threat, psychological reactance, and students' intentions to dissent (a) expressively, (b) rhetorically, and (c) vengefully.

Method

Participants

Following IRB approval, participants were recruited from several communication courses at a large Eastern university for this anonymous experiment during the Spring 2022 semester. Students received a small amount of extra credit for participating. Participants were directed to a secure link hosted by Qualtrics, an online survey system.

Participants (N = 266) were undergraduate students; 166 participants were female, and 100 participants were male. Ages ranged from 18 to 35 (M = 20.03, SD = 2.05). The sample included students self-identifying as Caucasian (n = 222, 83%), Black/African American (n = 15, 5%), Asian (n = 4, 1%), Hispanic or Latinx/a/o (n = 9, 3%), and other (n = 15, 5%). 39% of participants were first-years (n = 104), 23% of participants were sophomores (n = 61), 18% of participants were juniors (n = 49), and 18% of participants were seniors (n = 50). Participants also indicated how often they typically hand in work past its due date on a scale from 1 (Never) to 7 (Always). 66 participants (24%) reported "never," 97 participants (36%) reported "very rarely," 47 participants (17%) reported "rarely," 38 participants (14%) reported "occasionally," 11 participants (4%) reported "somewhat frequently," 6 participants (2%) reported "very frequently," and 1 participant (<1%) reported "always" typically passing in their work late.

Procedure and Design

A 2 (Forcefulness: low vs. high) x 2 (Late work: accepted vs. not accepted) design was employed. The data were collected electronically through Qualtrics. After consenting to participate, participants were instructed, "Please read the following classroom assignment policy and scenario. Imagine that you are a student in this class." Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, including either the low or high forcefulness condition and late work accepted or not accepted. To ensure that participants read through each message, a timer was programmed through Qualtrics, ensuring participants stayed on the page for at least 30 seconds. Participants first read the late work policy. Then they were immediately exposed to their hypothetical instructor's response to a scenario in which the participant attempted to submit a homework assignment two days after the due date. For the message stimuli, forcefulness was manipulated based on the work of Ball and Goodboy (2014), Miller et al. (2007), and Quick and Considine (2008), who used high forceful (e.g., "ought," "must," and "need") and low forceful (e.g., "might," "could," and "perhaps") language in their manipulations. Additionally, the policy was manipulated by whether late work would be accepted or not. If late work was accepted, participants were instructed that they would incur a 10% late penalty for each day late for up to seven days. To read the message stimuli, please see Appendix A.

The no late work accepted message stimuli were between 151 (low forceful) and 158 (high forceful) words; The late work accepted message stimuli were between 198 (low forceful) and 185 (high forceful) words. Next, all participants responded to manipulation checks (see below), followed by psychological reactance, outcome measures, and control variable measures (see below), ending with demographic questions.

Manipulation Check

Participants were asked to respond to one item to assess whether they understood if late work was accepted or not (i.e., "This teacher accepts late work") using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Results of a t-test revealed that participants reported significantly greater acceptance of late work from the accepts late work condition (M = 5.29, SD = 1.59) than in the does not accept late work condition (M = 2.20, SD = 1.63), t (264) = –15.643, p < .001, d = 1.611. Thus, the late work acceptance condition passed the manipulation check.

Next, participants were asked to respond to one item to assess the forcefulness of the language of each message (i.e., "This teacher uses forceful language in their Late Work Policy") using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Results of an independent samples t-test revealed that participants reported significantly greater forcefulness from the high forcefulness condition (M = 4.05, SD = 1.89) than in the low forcefulness condition (M = 3.19, SD = 1.87), t (264) = 3.731, $p < .001$, d = .458. Thus, the forcefulness condition passed the manipulation check.

Measures

Please see Table 1 for a list of variable means and standard deviations as well as correlations among variables. McDonald's omega with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence interval was used for reliability of all scales as recommended by Goodboy and Martin (2020).

Table 1 *Correlation Matrix, Scale Means and Standard Deviations.*

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Freedom Threat	3.04	1.42	—					
2. Psychological Reactance	3.45	1.47	.589**	—				
3. Expressive Dissent	3.75	1.53	.463**	.601**	—			
4. Rhetorical Dissent	3.41	1.36	.340**	.304**	.384**	—		
5. Vengeful Dissent	1.67	1.05	.287**	.296**	.295**	.268**	—	
6. Frequency Late	2.45	1.27	.070	.108	.182**	.098	.047	—

Note. Psychological reactance is the combination of negative cognitions and anger variables.
**$p < .01$.

Freedom Threat

Perceived threat of freedom was assessed by adapting Dillard and Shen's (2005) four items (i.e., The Late Work Policy tried to manipulate me, the Late Work Policy tried to pressure me, the Late Work Policy threatened my freedom to choose, and the Late Work Policy tried to make a decision for me). Participants were asked to respond to the statement on a 7–point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Freedom threat had an omega reliability coefficient of ω = .869, SE = .017, [.832, .898].

Psychological Reactance

Participants' psychological reactance was measured using anger and negative cognitions (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Four items were used to measure anger toward the late work policy. Participants reported how irritated, angry, annoyed, and aggravated they were toward the policy on a scale ranging from 1 (none of this feeling) to 7 (a great deal of this feeling). Negative cognitions were measured with three items ("The thoughts you had about the Late Work Policy were [unfavorable/negative/bad]") from Quick and colleagues (Al-Ghaithi et al., 2019; Quick et al., 2015) using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Reynolds-Tylus et al. (2021) combined the anger and negative cognitions items to have a seven-item measure of psychological reactance. In this study, we had an omega reliability coefficient of ω = .937, SE = .007, [.922, .949] for the seven-item measure.

Instructional Dissent

The instructional dissent scale (IDS; Goodboy, 2011b) asks participants to respond to 22 items regarding the extent to which they express their grievances about class-related issues using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Consistent with past PRT research using the IDS (e.g., Ball & Goodboy, 2014; Tatum et al., 2018), items of this scale were adapted to measure how one would respond to the hypothetical classroom scenario. The IDS consists of three subscales that measure expressive dissent (10 items; e.g., "I would complain to others to express my frustrations with this course"), rhetorical dissent (6 items; e.g., "I would express my disagreements with my teacher because I would want

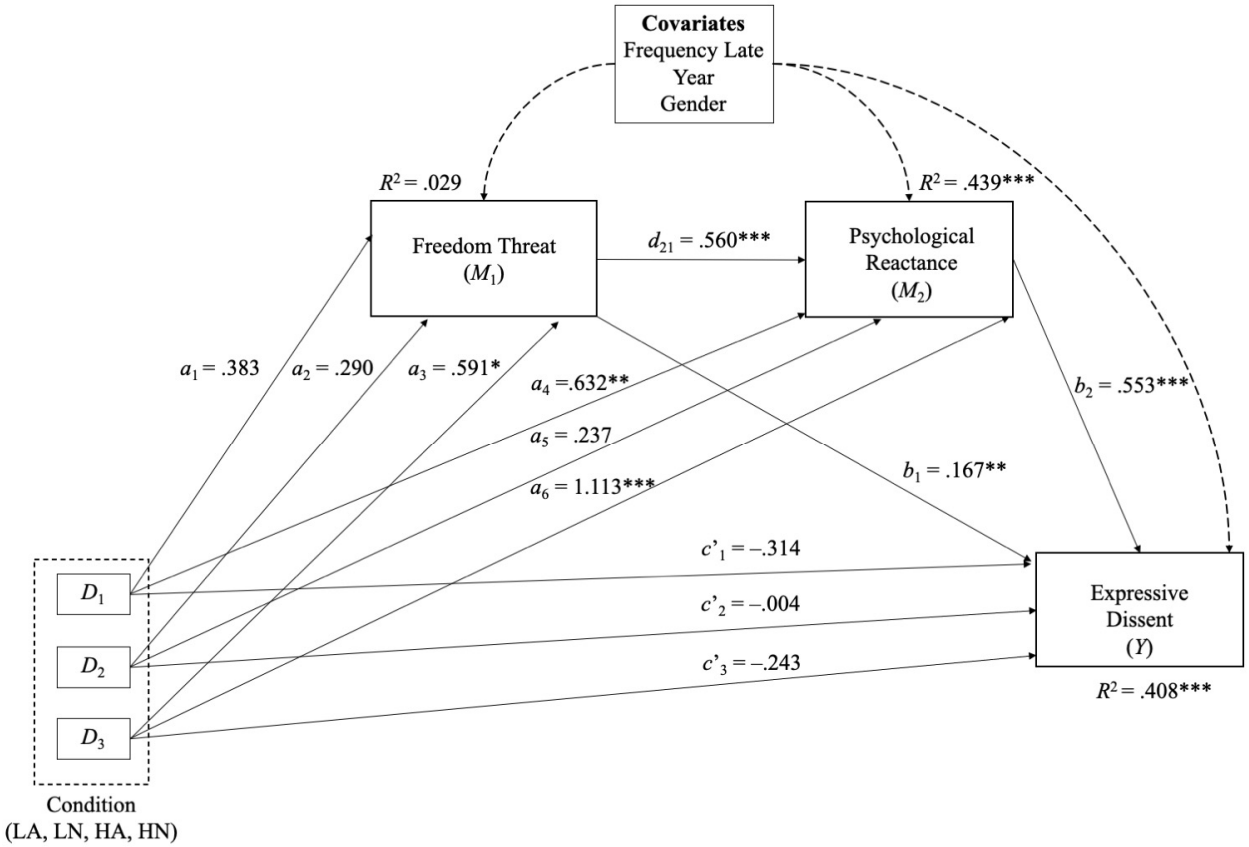
something to change in the course for the better"), and vengeful dissent (6 items; e.g., "I would hope to ruin my teacher's reputation by exposing their bad practices to others"). The expressive dissent subscale had an omega reliability coefficient of ω = .953, *SE* = .005, [.942, .962]. The rhetorical dissent subscale had an omega reliability coefficient of ω = .886, *SE* = .013, [.856, .909]. The vengeful dissent subscale had an omega reliability coefficient of ω = .952, *SE* = .009, [.933, .966].

Results

H1a-c were tested using Hayes (2022) PROCESS macro, Model 6. Serial mediation models with a categorical indicator were investigated, using the low forcefulness by late work accepted policy as the referent. The significance of the indirect effects was tested through the calculation of a bootstrap confidence interval using 5,000 bootstrap samples, with the Mersenne Twister seed set at 15. All reported coefficients are unstandardized. Additionally, all results include participants' year of education, gender, and typical frequency of returning assignments late as covariates.

Ha predicted that the late work policy condition would influence students' expressive dissent through freedom threat and subsequently psychological reactance. Please see Figure 1 for path coefficients, effect sizes, and coefficients of covariates (i.e., frequency late, year, and gender) on freedom threat, psychological reactance, and expressive dissent. Results of the serial mediation model indicated evidence of serial mediation of the high forcefulness by late work not accepted policy when compared to the low forcefulness by late work accepted policy (D_3), $a_3d_{21}b_2$ = .183, *SE*B = .029, [.035, .345], $a_3d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .119, *SE* = .050, [.023, .223]. There was no evidence of serial mediation for the low forcefulness by late work not accepted policy when compared to the low forcefulness by late work accepted (D_1), $a_1d_{21}b_2$= .041, *SE*B = .081, [-.032, .286], $a_1d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .077, *SE* = .052, [-.022, .187]. Additionally, there was no evidence of serial mediation for the high forcefulness by late work accepted policy when compared to the low forcefulness by late work accepted policy (D_2), $a_3d_{21}b_2$ = .089, *SE*B = .081, [-.032, .286], $a_2d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .058, *SE* = .049, [-.033, .164]. Thus, H1a was partially supported in that the policy in which late work was not accepted using high forceful language caused greater expressive dissent through freedom threat and psychological reactance than the policy in which late work was accepted using low forceful language. Furthermore, evidence of simple mediation through freedom threat was present for D_3 (a_3b_1 = .099, *SE*B = .060, [.003, .236], a_3b_{1ps} =.064, *SE* = .039, [.002, .154]), but not for D_1 (a_1b_1 = .064, *SE*B = .050, [-.021, 178], a_1b_{1ps} = .041, *SE* = .033, [-.014, .116]) or D_2 (a_2b_1 = .099, *SE*B = .048, [-.027, .163], a_2b_{1ps} = .031, *SE* = .031, [-.018, .105]). Evidence of simple mediation through psychological reactance was present for D_1 (a_4b_2 = .349, *SE*B = .106, [.144, .571], a_4b_{2ps} = .228, *SE* = .068, [.093, .370]) and D_3 (a_6b_2 = .615, *SE*B = .136, [.370, .907], a_6b_{2ps} = .401, *SE* = .086, [.245, .585]) but not for D_2 (a_5b_2 = .131, *SE*B = .114, [-.091, .365], a_5b_{2ps} = .085, SE = .074, [–.060, .239]).

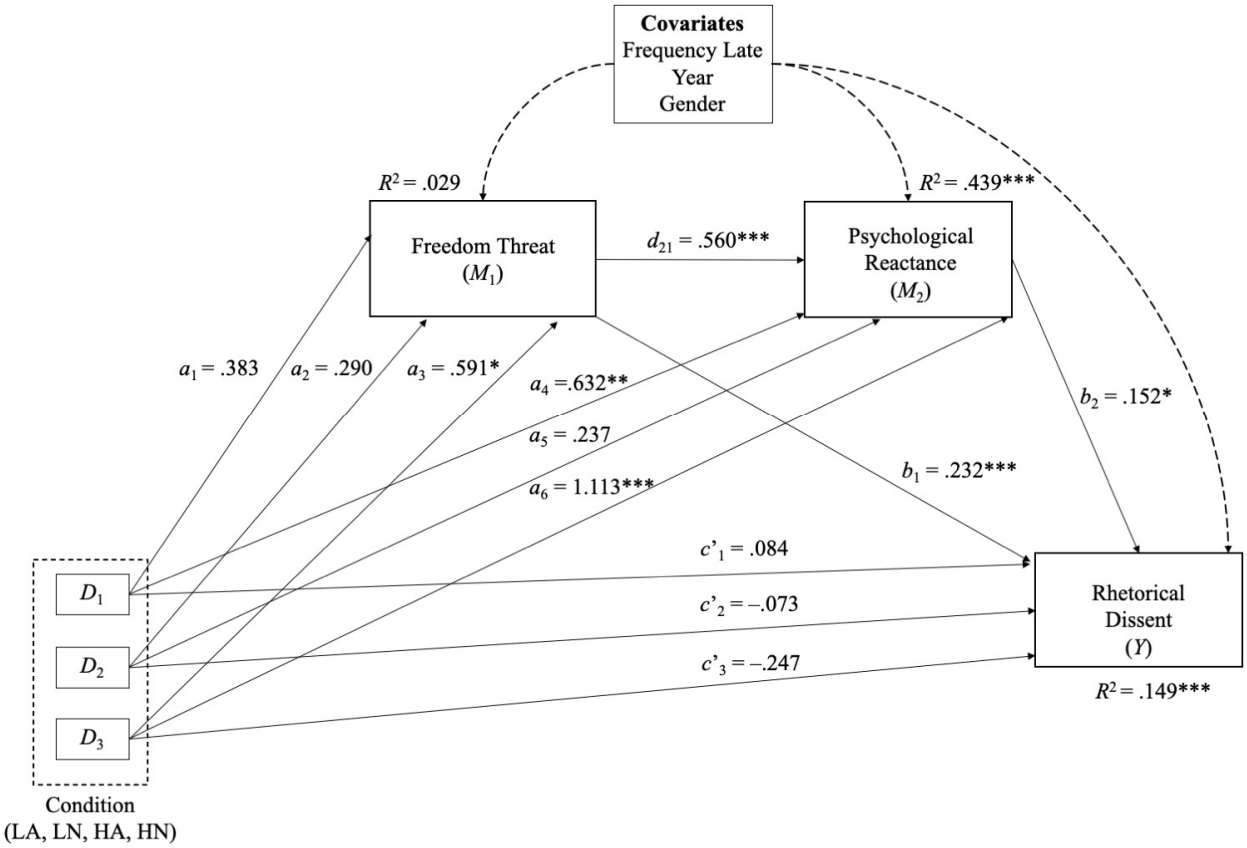
Figure 1. Model of serial mediation with freedom threat and psychological reactance as proposed mediators of forcefulness by policy condition effects on expressive dissent.



Note. Conditions are represented by L (low forcefulness) and H (high forcefulness) by A (late work accepted) and N (late work not accepted). Frequency of passing in late work was a significant predictor of expressive dissent, B = .148, *SE*B = .059, p = .013, but year of school (B = –.058, *SE*B = .063, p = .351) and gender (B = –. 211, *SE*B = .155, p = .176) were not. Frequency late was not a significant predictor of freedom threat (B = .082, *SE*B = .069, p = .239) or psychological reactance (B = .076, *SE*B = .055, p = .163). Year was not a significant predictor of freedom threat (B = .029, *SE*B = .074, p = .697) or psychological reactance (B = .022, *SE*B = .059, p = .705). Gender was not a significant predictor of freedom threat (B = .053, *SE*B = .184, p = .771) or psychological reactance (B = .146, *SE*B = .145, p = .315).
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Hb predicted that late work policy conditions would influence students' rhetorical dissent through freedom threat and subsequently psychological reactance. Please see Figure 2 for path coefficients, effect sizes, and coefficients of covariates on rhetorical dissent. Results of the serial mediation model indicated no evidence of serial mediation for D_1 ($a_1d_{21}b_2$ = .032, *SE*B = .030, [–.011, .107], $a_1d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .024, *SE* = .022, [-.008, .078]), D_2 ($a_2d_{21}b_2$ = .024, *SE*B = .026, [–.013, .089], $a_2d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .018, *SE* = .019, [-.010, .066]), and D_3 ($a_3d_{21}b_2$ = .050, *SE*B = .034, [–.002, .134], $a_3d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .037, *SE* = .025, [-.001, .096]). Thus, H1b was not supported. Additionally, there was evidence of simple mediation through freedom threat for D_3 (a_3b_1 = .137, *SE*B = .076, [.017, .310], a_3b_{1ps} = .101, *SE* = .055, [.012, .227]), but no evidence of simple mediation through freedom threat for D_1 (a_1b_1 = .089, *SE*B = .068, [-.024, .239], a_1b_{1ps} = .065, *SE* = .050, [-.018, .174]) or D_2 (a_2b_1 = .067, *SE*B = .062, [-.036, .208], a_2b_{1ps} = .049, *SE* = .045, [-.026, .153]). There was no evidence of simple mediation through psychological reactance for D_1 (a_4b_2 = .096, *SE*B = .057, [-.001, .223], a_4b_{2ps} = .070, *SE* = .042, [-.001, .163]), D_2 (a_5b_2 = .036, *SE*B = .038, [-.027, .126], a_5b_{2ps} = .026, *SE* = .028, [-.020, .062]), and D_3 (a_6b_2 = .169, *SE*B = .095, [-.003, .371], a_6b_{2ps} = .124, *SE* = .069, [-.002, .270]).

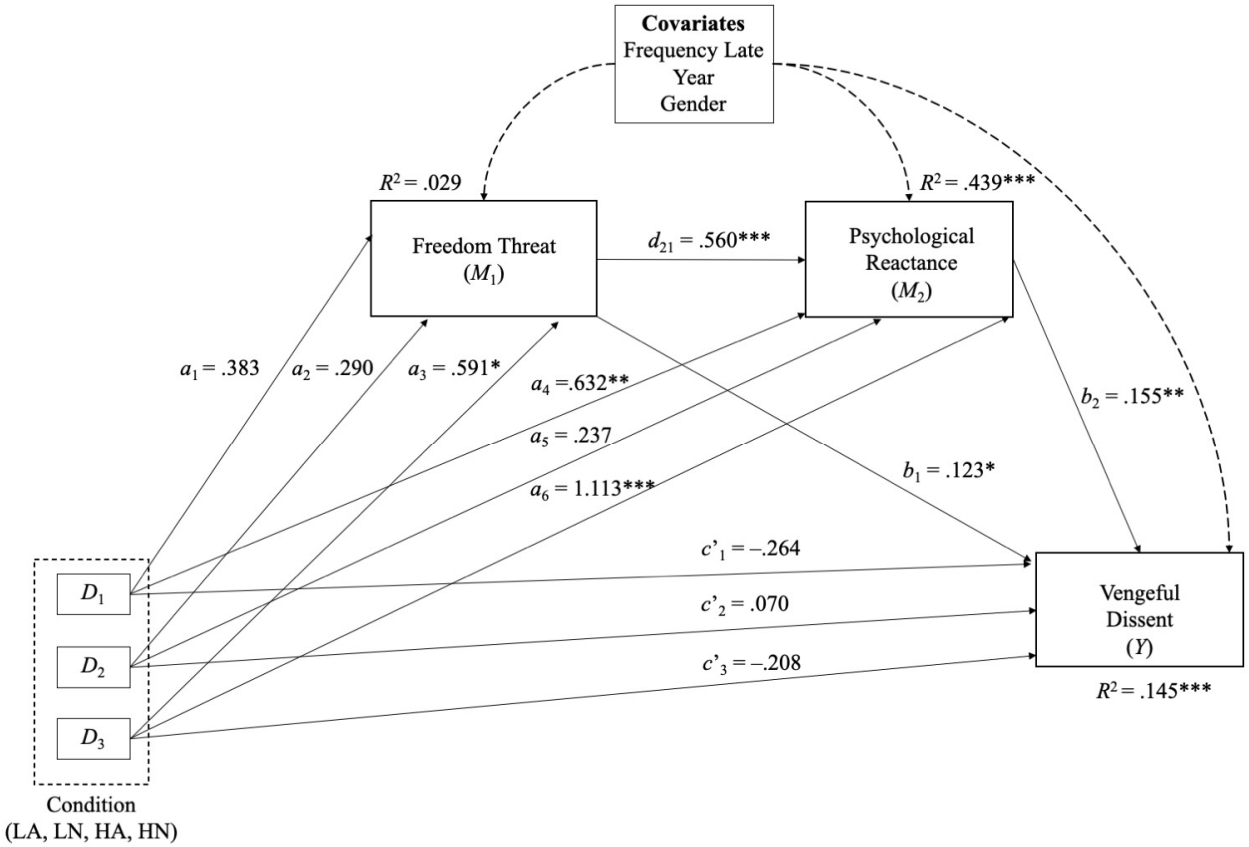
Figure 2. Model of serial mediation with freedom threat and psychological reactance as proposed mediators of forcefulness by policy condition effects on rhetorical dissent.



Note. Conditions are represented by L (low forcefulness) and H (high forcefulness) by A (late work accepted) and N (late work not accepted). Frequency of passing in late (B = .055, *SE*B = .063, p = .376), year of school (B = .034, *SE*B = 067, *p* = .606) and gender (B = .191, *SE*B = .166, *p* = .249) were not significant predictors of rhetorical dissent. See Figure 1 for coefficients of covariates regressed on freedom threat and psychological reactance.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Hc predicted that late work policy conditions would influence students' vengeful dissent through freedom threat and subsequently psychological reactance. Please see Figure 3 for path coefficients, effect sizes, and coefficients of covariates on vengeful dissent. Results of the serial mediation model indicated evidence of serial mediation for D_3 ($a_3d_{21}b_2$ = .051, *SE*B = .029, [.007, .121], $a_3d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .048, *SE* = .026, [.006, .109]), but no evidence of serial mediation for D_1 ($a_1d_{21}b_2$ = .033, *SE*B = .026, [–.009, .097], $a_1d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .031, *SE* = .024, [–.009, .088]) or D_2 ($a_2d_{21}b_2$ = .025, *SE*B = .023, [–.015, .079], $a_2d_{21}b_{2ps}$ = .023, *SE* = .021, [–.014, .073]). Thus, H1c was partially supported in that the policy in which late work was not accepted using high forceful language caused greater vengeful dissent through freedom threat and psychological reactance than the policy in which late work was accepted using low forceful language. Furthermore, there was evidence of simple mediation through freedom threat for D_3 (a_3b_1 = .073, *SE*B = .044, [.004, .174], a_3b_{1ps} = .069, *SE* = .043, [.004, .168]), but no evidence of simple mediation through freedom threat for D_1 (a_1b_1 = .047, *SE*B = .038, [–.015, .132], a_1b_{1ps} = .044, *SE* = .037, [–.014, .129]) or D_2 (a_2b_1 = .035, *SE*B = .034, [–.021, .113], a_2b_{1ps} = .033, *SE* = .033, [–.020, .110]). There was evidence of simple mediation through psychological reactance for D_3 (a_6b_2 = .172, *SE*B = .070, [.055, .326], a_6b_{2ps} = .163, *SE* = .060, [.056, .289]) and D_1 (a_4b_2 = .098, *SE*B = .046, [.025, .204], a_4b_{2ps} = .093, *SE* = .040, [.025, .182]), but no evidence of simple mediation through psychological reactance for D_2 (a_5b_2 = .036, *SE*B = .034, [–.026, .112], a_5b_{2ps} = .034, *SE* = .031, [–.025, .100]).

Figure 3. Model of serial mediation with freedom threat and psychological reactance as proposed mediators of forcefulness by policy condition effects on vengeful dissent.



Note. Conditions are represented by L (low forcefulness) and H (high forcefulness) by A (late work accepted) and N (late work not accepted). Gender was a significant predictor of vengeful dissent in that males are more likely to vengefully dissent holding constant all other predictors (B = .364, *SE*B = .129, p = .005), but frequency of passing in work late (B =-.021, *SE*B = .049, p = .804) and year of school (B = -.005, *SE*B = .052, p = .923) were not significant predictors of vengeful dissent. See Figure 1 for coefficients of covariates regressed on freedom threat and psychological reactance. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Post Hoc

While the results indicate that freedom threat is significantly higher for participants in the high forcefulness by late work not accepted condition when compared to those in the referent, low forcefulness by late work accepted policy (a_3 = .591, p < .05), the remaining two conditions did not influence freedom threat resulting in an insignificant effect size for the overall path from condition to freedom, $F(6, 259) = 1.291$, p = .261, R^2 = .029. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to confirm that forcefulness and late work policy affected participants perceived freedom threat. As the manipulation checks revealed significant differences between low and high forcefulness and late work accepted and not accepted, consistent with Ball and Goodboy (2013), the scores for forcefulness and late work policy were used in this test. Results of the Pearson correlation analysis revealed that forcefulness had a significant effect on freedom threat (r = .359, p < .001), such that the greater the perceived forcefulness, the greater the perceived freedom threat. Additionally, the late work policy had a significant effect on freedom threat (r = -.198, p = .001), such that the more the policy is perceived as prohibiting late work, the greater the perceived freedom threat. Based on these results, the relationship between instructors' use of forcefulness and late work policy influenced participants' freedom threat.

Discussion

PRT states that persuasive, proscriptive messages that infringe on individuals' autonomy will cause reactance, leading individuals to attempt to restore their threatened behavioral freedom (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The current study investigated perceived freedom threat, reactance, and instructional dissent as restoration attempts due to instructors' late work policies. Supporting PRT's principle that persuasive messages that imply threats increase the magnitude of reactance (Brehm, 1966), the findings show that instructors' messages in the college classroom aiming to influence behavior influence students' perceived freedom threat, leading to reactance and instructional dissent as restoration behaviors.

As predicted, policies in which late work is not accepted and uses forceful language indirectly led to restoration behaviors through freedom threat and reactance significantly more than a policy in which late work is accepted and low forceful language is used. Specifically, results suggest that students are more likely to dissent vengefully and expressively, but not rhetorically, when instructors' late work policies are rigid and forceful (e.g., "You must submit all work by the due date") as opposed to policies that are more autonomy-supportive and less controlling in language (e.g., "Work may be submitted up until seven days past the due date"). The policy only influenced dissent, however, due to causal mechanisms of perceived freedom threat and reactance. These findings held even when controlling for the frequency at which participants typically turn in assignments late, their year in college, and their gender. The frequency that students turn in assignments late accounted for some of the variance in expressive dissent. These results may suggest that students who more frequently pass in work late will be more likely to dissent expressively in classes with more rigid late work policies because a behavior they frequently do (i.e., passing in assignments late) is being thwarted. Additionally, consistent with past research (e.g., Goodboy, 2012), gender accounted for some variance in vengeful dissent as men are more likely to dissent vengefully than women.

While there were no serial indirect effects of policy conditions on rhetorical dissent, there was evidence of simple mediation through freedom threat on rhetorical dissent. These findings mirror that of Tatum et al. (2018) who found serial indirect effects of cell-phone policy on expressive and vengeful dissent through freedom threat and reactance, but only simple mediation through freedom threat on rhetorical dissent. The current findings suggest that when students perceive the forceful and rigid late work policy to threaten their autonomy but do not experience reactance, they are more likely to go directly to their instructor with their grievances than if the policy is low in forcefulness and allows for late work. As rhetorical dissent is seen as the most constructive form of dissent (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy & Bolkan, 2017), perhaps this finding would suggest that students who resist anger and negative cognitions about an issue they perceive as freedom threatening would be more likely to take their complaints straight to the instructor rather than use slander. While anger has been positively associated with all three types of instructional dissent (Goodboy et al., 2019; Kennedy-Lightsey, 2017), in this current study anger had the lowest effect on rhetorical dissent. Thus, students who feel anger and negative cognitions may be more apt to use destructive forms of behaviors such as expressive and vengeful dissent as restorative behaviors, as findings from the current study and Tatum et al. (2018) would suggest.

Findings also suggest that students are no more likely to dissent if instructors either use less forceful language when wanting students to pass in work on time, or use controlling language while allowing their students to pass in their work late with a penalty than if instructors were to allow late work while using unassertive language. There was, however, evidence of simple mediation with policies utilizing low forceful language with work not accepted on both expressive and vengeful dissent through psychological reactance when compared to the low forceful, late work accepted policy. Thus, while the serial indirect effects may suggest that if instructors want to avoid students dissenting because of a "no late work accepted" policy they ought to use low forceful language, the simple mediation model would suggest that students are still likely to dissent vengefully and expressively if late work is not accepted no matter the forcefulness of the language. Taken together, the findings therefore suggest that instructors' language choice in their syllabi is likely to alter students' obedience, regardless of the positional authority afforded to them in the classroom (Blass, 1991).

Overall, these findings may be explained in part by prior research that claims students perceive rigid late work policies as a classroom injustice (Chory et al., 2017; Horan et al., 2010). The results of this study may suggest that students perceive rigid policies as unjust because they restrict students' autonomy. Procedural justice

scholarship looks at the fairness in determining grades in class (Chory et al., 2014) stating that strict late work policies such as those that do not allow for late work result in anger and frustrations of students as opposed to those that are lenient (Chory et al., 2017; Horan et al., 2010). Thus, if there is an unfair policy that is forceful in its delivery, it is understandable that students have a greater likelihood of experiencing reactance as a result. As negative emotions toward a course can result in instructional dissent behaviors (e.g., Goodboy et al., 2019; Goodboy et al., 2021), the anger and frustrations felt by the injustice and reactance will then also be likely to result in vengeful and expressive dissenting behaviors as found in this study.

Future research may seek to investigate academic entitlement as another possible explanation for why students may experience such heightened psychological reactance to rigid late work policies. Academic entitlement is defined as the "expectations of high grades for modest efforts and demanding attitudes toward teachers" (Greenberger et al., 2008, p. 1193). Entitled students tend to be more grade-oriented than learning-oriented (Goldman & Martin, 2014). Students could believe they are entitled to pass in work late regardless of their instructor's policy because students may believe they should be able to control their academic achievements (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Perhaps part of the reason students dissent vengefully and expressively in retaliation to policies that do not allow for late work is due to the increase in academically entitled attitudes of the student population. Students may also be reluctant to rhetorically dissent as Goldman and Martin (2016) argued that students today may not know how to raise their concerns to their instructors. Future research may benefit from investigating whether academic entitlement, and other trait-based dispositions, may influence students' obedience to instructors, including their psychological reactance to rigid course policies and how they respond (or not) to their instructors.

We conducted post-hoc analyses similar to prior experimental PRT studies investigating restoration behaviors due to student reactance. First, prior studies utilized ANOVAs or Pearson correlations to investigate whether their manipulated conditions influenced students' perceived threat to freedom before assessing subsequent simple mediation analyses of freedom threat on restoration behaviors through reactance (Ball & Goodboy, 2014; Frey et al., 2021; Zhang & Sapp, 2013). In the current study, a post hoc test revealed similar results to these previous studies, such that the manipulated variables (high and low forcefulness and accepting or not accepting of late work) influenced freedom threat. More specifically, findings suggest that students perceived greater freedom threat when they perceived language as more forceful and more prohibitive of late work. Also consistent with past literature, findings suggest simple mediation for freedom threat on dissent through reactance. However, when adding the manipulated condition as the initial indicator variable in serial mediation, only one serial path was significantly more likely to predict expressive and vengeful dissent. Thus, while findings are consistent with prior studies, serial mediation is a more punishing analysis, and is thus more exacting in its results and ought to be considered for similar studies in the future.

Limitations of this study include that participants were asked to visualize themselves in a class scenario. Students are not reporting on a real class in which they are enrolled, a real teacher with whom they have a relationship, and their grade was not at stake. Additional methods (e.g., a single case study involving an instructor who manipulates their late work policies over a number of courses and semesters) could provide further evidence that acceptance and controlling language in the syllabus would impact student behaviors (e.g., dissent). An additional limitation that is important to note involves the study's use of a sample sourced from a single university. This limited source reduces the potential generalizability of our results and should be considered when interpreting them.

Further, students were asked to imagine they requested that their instructor would accept a late assignment. This study only looked at a request with no argument or justification for the request, but in many real classroom situations, students often give a reason why they are turning in an assignment late (e.g., COVID, death of a grandparent, family vacation). In these cases, instructors may be willing to make an exception to their course policies, allowing the late assignment. However, procedural justice literature would argue that teachers need to be consistent with their policies and the exceptions they make, otherwise students would be more likely to perceive the exceptions as unjust (Chory et al., 2014).

Lastly, this study controlled for the frequency for which students turn in assignments late, year in school, and gender. There may be other student characteristics that may have influenced the effect of late work policy on instructional dissent through freedom threat and psychological reactance (e.g., reactance proneness, entitlement, narcissism). Future research would benefit from investigating additional student characteristics.

Conclusion

Overall, students reported the largest levels of psychological reactance to policies that did not allow for late work and used forceful language. Furthermore, students' expressive and vengeful dissent are both directly and indirectly influenced by their perceived threat to freedom from a late work policy, mediated by psychological reactance. While rhetorical dissent was not mediated by psychological reactance, there was a direct effect of freedom threat on rhetorical dissent. In other words, the more students feel that their freedom is being threatened by a late work policy, the more likely they are to directly communicate with their instructor about their grievances regarding the late work policy. Overall, these findings suggest that instructors' late work policies can incite psychological reactance from their students, leading to dissenting behaviors. These results would suggest that instructors may opt to instill policies that allow for late work, even if they come with a grade reduction, to mitigate expressive and vengeful dissent as a result of students' psychological reactance. If instructors choose, however, to have more rigid late work policies, they should strive to use less forceful language when constructing their late work policy to reduce psychological reactance.

The present study additionally provides impactful implications to the fields of management and leadership more broadly. The findings of this study offer critical insights for leaders and managers when designing and communicating policies within organizations, especially in the face of organizational change that alters core aspects of an organization's operation (Hallencreutz & Turner, 2011). Leaders should recognize that overly rigid policies and forceful communication styles can inadvertently provoke resistance and dissent among employees, diminishing their ability to effectively influence and/or guide employees through organizational transformations (Nesterkin, 2012; Powers & Altman, 2022; Rees et al., 2024).

This is particularly relevant in contexts where autonomy and flexibility are valued. By framing policies in less forceful and more inclusive language, leaders can reduce perceived threats to individual freedom and mitigate psychological reactance, fostering a more collaborative and productive work environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Nesterkin, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Additionally, managers should consider incorporating elements of flexibility or compromise in their policies, as these features may reduce the likelihood of vengeful or expressive dissent (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Ultimately, the way policies are communicated is as important as their content; thoughtful communication can enhance perceptions of fairness and minimize resistance, contributing to higher morale, employee obedience, and better organizational outcomes. An organization lives or dies based on its ability to adapt to changing industry conditions. This flexibility is driven by the capability of its employees to cognitively adapt and facilitate the transformation of the organization (Nesterkin, 2012). In consequence, how a leader communicates to their subordinates may be seen as being at the heart of a firm's ability to survive, with the consequences of ineffective communication spelling disaster for a leader's influence, an organization's ability to navigate change, and ultimately, the continued success of the firm (George & Jones, 2001; Lewis, 2019; Nesterkin, 2012).

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Appendix A

Message stimuli (bold words indicate forcefulness manipulations, underlined words indicate policy manipulation):

High forcefulness X No late work:
Late Work Policy: You **must submit all work by** the due date. In order to receive credit, you **must** submit work on time. **Late work will absolutely not be accepted, no excuses. If you attempt to pass in work past the due date, you have to provide** adequate documentation of a university sanctioned absence (e.g., COVID-19 quarantine).You **should** take note of all due dates. **Any sensible person would agree** that completing your assignment on time is advantageous to your success in this course. Therefore, **you really must adhere to this policy**.

Scenario: Imagine that you are in this course and it is nearing the end of the semester. Your work started piling up and you missed a homework deadline. You were able to complete the homework two days after the due date. You ask your instructor if they will accept the late completed assignment and they respond:
*"**The policy must be followed**, I cannot accept your late assignment."*

Low forcefulness X No late work:
Late Work Policy: Work **may be submitted up until** the due date. In order to receive credit, you **might consider** submitting work on time. Late work **may be accepted if you can** provide adequate documentation of a university sanctioned absence (e.g., COVID-19 quarantine). You **might consider** taking note of all due dates. **Many people would probably agree** that completing your assignments on time is advantageous to your success in this course. Therefore, **why not try to adhere to this policy?**

Scenario: Imagine that you are in this course and it is nearing the end of the semester. Your work started piling up and you missed a homework deadline. You were able to complete the homework two days after the due date. You ask your instructor if they will accept the late completed assignment and they respond:
*"**I wish I could, but following the class policy** I cannot accept your late assignment."*

High forcefulness X Late work accepted:
Late Work Policy: You **must submit all work up to seven days past the original due date**. For each day late up to seven days, you will incur a 10% grade deduction. In order to receive full credit, you **need to** submit work on time. After seven days passed the original due date, l**ate work will absolutely not be accepted, no excuses. If you attempt to pass in work past the seven days, you have to provide** adequate documentation of a university sanctioned absence (e.g., COVID-19 quarantine).You **should** take note of all due dates. **Any sensible person would agree** that completing your assignment on time is advantageous to your success in this course. Therefore, **you really must adhere to this policy**.

Scenario: Imagine that you are in this course and it is nearing the end of the semester. Your work started piling up and you missed a homework deadline. You were able to complete the homework two days after the due date. You ask your instructor if they will accept the late completed assignment and they respond:
*"**The policy must be followed**, I can accept your late assignment with a 20% grade deduction for the two days late."*

Low forcefulness X Late work accepted:
Late Work Policy: Work **may be submitted up until** seven days past the due date. For each day late up to seven days, you will incur a 10% grade deduction. In order to receive full credit, you **might consider** submitting work on time. Late work **may be accepted past the seven days if you can** provide adequate documentation of a university sanctioned absence (e.g., COVID-19 quarantine). You **might consider** taking note of all due dates. **Many people would probably agree** that completing your assignments on time is advantageous to your success in this course. Therefore, **why not try to adhere to this policy?**

Scenario: Imagine that you are in this course and it is nearing the end of the semester. Your work started piling up and you missed a homework deadline. You were able to complete the homework two days after the due date. You ask your instructor if they will accept the late completed assignment and they respond:

*"**I would be happy to take your late assignment, but following class policy** your assignment will receive a 20% grade deduction for the two days late."*