

COVID health behaviour non-compliance as playful oppositionalism
and implications for public health strategy

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Authors:

Professor Mark McDermott, University of East London, Department of Psychological Sciences, UK

<https://www.uel.ac.uk/staff/m/mark-mcdermott>

& Dr. Kathryn Lafreniere, University of Windsor, Department of Psychology, Canada

<https://www.uwindsor.ca/psychology/364/kathryn-l>

What we did:

We conducted an online survey (via the Qualtrics platform) of N=666 respondents from one province, Ontario, in Canada. Self-report data addressed Hochbaum, Rosenstock, & Kegel's (1952) Health Belief Model variables, rebelliousness (as after McDermott, 1987; Klabbers et al 2009), demographics, and compliance with covid public health behaviours.

What we found:

We found that it is not the disaffected form of rebelliousness that predicts non-compliance with mask wearing, social distancing and hand washing, as might be predicted by psychological reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Rather, it was found that it is the 'proactive', excitement-seeking, breaking-rules-in-the-moment-for-'fun' type of rebelliousness that emerged in statistical regression analysis as an independent predictor (along notably with 'conservative', rather than liberal, political orientation).

What we concluded:

Thereby it appears people break covid rules not because they are 'fed-up' with them (a popular media narrative) but because breaking a CV19 rule in the moment provides a mini-thrill, an attention-seeking 'look at me, aren't I naughty/a rebel' sensation. Thus, non-compliance in this setting has more to do with social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as a 'non-conformist' than it does with being truly disaffected with the imposed health behaviour requirements.

What we recommend:

Health messaging must nudge (as after Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) people toward complying with the rules. A significant segment of the general public who proactively rebel against covid rules (circa 10%) need to be persuaded to 'get their kicks' in other ways, perhaps by use of reverse psychology. A complementary tactic, for example, would be to provide playfully oppositional imagery on face masks in order to encourage non-compliant people to wear them – such masks would signal the wearer's rebellious social identity but without putting themselves or others at risk. Deliberate inclusion of such design options in online mask ordering websites is indicated.



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