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Health Beliefs and COVID-19 Safety Behaviours

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During the summer of 2020, governments around the world implemented new restrictions and regulations to help to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic. In July 2020, municipalities across Ontario, Canada began to issue mandatory mask orders that required operators of business establishments to prohibit entry of people who weren't wearing face coverings. We conducted an online survey to investigate people's support or opposition to these measures, and to explore factors that might underlie reactions to mask orders. We were specifically interested in the influence of proactive and reactive rebelliousness on reactions to being required to wear masks and predicted that individuals who were high in reactive rebelliousness would be particularly likely to be mask-averse.

We used social media to recruit participants for an online survey that explored health beliefs and COVID safety behaviours. The survey ran from July 22 to July 24 2020, at a time when the issue of mask orders was a "hot topic" in Ontario communities. Our final sample was comprised of 666 individuals from municipalities across Ontario. The survey included questions about support for mandatory mask orders and other COVID safety behaviours, the Rebelliousness Questionnaire (McDermott, 1988), and questions based on health belief model variables.

Our principal findings showed that a large majority of respondents strongly supported mask orders, but that individuals who were high in either proactive or reactive rebelliousness were significantly less supportive of mandatory mask requirements. Both proactive and reactive rebelliousness were significantly associated with lower support for mask use, but only proactive rebelliousness emerged as a significant predictor in hierarchical regression analyses that also included health belief model factors. These findings suggest that mask resistance was more strongly motivated by getting a small thrill from one's social identity as a non-conformist than simply a desire to push back against newly imposed rules and restrictions. The global pandemic continues to present unique challenges in enlisting compliance with mask orders and social distancing requirements, as well as countering vaccine hesitancy. Findings from our study suggest avenues for tailoring health messages to counter such resistance in individuals who might celebrate their identity as a non-conformist.