



The effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion: The influence of attitude certainty, issue importance, susceptibility to normative influence, preference for consistency and source proximity

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion and on the roles played by attitude certainty, issue importance, susceptibility to normative influence (SNI), preference for consistency (PFC), and the proximity of the source of counter-attitudinal information in influencing the relationship between public commitment and resistance to attitude change. Using two studies based on experimental design, we confirm the moderating roles of SNI and reference group proximity as well as the mediating roles of attitude certainty and issue importance. Marketing implications are also discussed.

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Resistance to persuasion has been the focus of considerable research (Eagly & Chaiken, 1995; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Kunda, 1990; Reynolds, Gengler, & Howard, 1995), with particular interest paid to the psychological processes that mediate resistance to persuasive attempts (Ahluwalia, 2000; Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, & Chen, 1996; Pomerantz, Chaiken, & Tordesillas, 1995). According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), “explaining why people are so often effective at resisting efforts to change their strong attitudes remain one of the core issues of attitude theory” (680).

In this paper, we study the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion. Public commitment occurs when a person's opinions or positions are made public or known to others. Specifically, we examine the effect of attitude certainty, issue importance, susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) and preference for consistency (PFC) on resistance to attitude change when participants make a public commitment to their attitude. We extend the understanding of the effect of public commitment on persuasion by studying the influence of susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) and preference for consistency (PFC), consistent with the interaction model suggested by personality and social psychologists. We also study the effect of the perceived closeness or proximity of the source group that is responsible for the counter-attitudinal information relative to the proximity of the group to whom the public commitment is made. In this study, we use the term ‘source group’ to denote the group responsible for providing the counter-attitudinal information.

We measure initial attitudes in two studies along with attitude certainty, issue importance, SNI and PFC. We manipulate public commitment by making the initial attitude of the participants public, that is, known to others. After the initial measurement of attitude, the participants are exposed to counter attitudinal information in the form of opinions of their peer group (study 1) or experts (study 2). We hypothesize that participants who make a public commitment become more confident in their views, leading to them to be more resistant to attitude change. We also hypothesize that SNI and PFC increase resistance to persuasion under the condition of public commitment.

This paper extends previous research by studying the influence of two dispositional variables (SNI and PFC) and two mediating variables (attitude certainty and issue importance) on resistance to persuasion under the condition of public commitment. Furthermore, to better understand the role played by SNI in influencing the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion, we manipulate the perceived closeness of the participants to the group to whom the public commitment is made as well as to the group from whom they receive counter attitudinal information.

1. Public commitment

There has been considerable interest in public commitment for quite some time. The earliest work on public commitment includes Kiesler and Corbin (1965), Kiesler, Zanna, and Desalvo (1966), Kiesler, Roth, and Pallak (1974), and Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, and Miller (1978). Public commitment has received more recent attention in behavioral literature (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), and in fact, it has been

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shown to increase customer compliance behavior (Dellande & Nyer, 2006; Nyer & Dellande, *in press*). It has also been used to explain the different effects of complaining behavior and negative word-of-mouth on post-voice satisfaction levels (Nyer & Gopinath, 2005).

Public commitment has wide-ranging implications in realms as diverse as international and domestic negotiations, efforts to de-market drugs and tobacco use, commitments made in online brand communities, and commitments made by corporations to engage in socially-conscious policies. In experimental studies, the level of public commitment is typically manipulated by varying the degree to which the participants' positions are made public or known to others (Ahluwalia, Unnava & Burnkrant, 2001; Holt, 1970). The more publicly one states their attitude, the more one is committed and locked into that position (Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989). Individuals who are publicly committed are more resistant to later attacks and are more susceptible to attitude-consistent appeals as compared to those who make their commitments privately (Kiesler & Corbin, 1965). Cialdini and Trost (1998) state that commitments made in public tend to be more persistent than commitments made in private. Cialdini et al. (1978) detail how public commitment is used by car salesmen in their low-balling techniques. The public nature of their commitments appears to be the main reason for the efficacy of their low-balling techniques (Burger & Cornelius, 2003).

Recent research provides empirical evidence that public commitment can make individuals more resistant to counter-attitudinal attacks. Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000) found that commitment toward a brand acts as a moderating influence on resistance to attitude change as a result of counter-attitudinal information. Ahluwalia et al. (2001) studied the effects of brand commitment on changes in attitudes regarding attributes not mentioned in the ad, known as a spillover effect.

Many mechanisms have been suggested to explain the role played by public commitment in influencing resistance to attitude change and promoting behavior congruent with one's public commitments. Pauling and Lana (1969) found that making a commitment strengthened the confidence that individuals had in their attitudes, and this increased confidence could strengthened their attitudes. Holt (1970) suggested that public commitment makes one's attitudes more salient, thereby providing an anchor for later communication and appeals to action. An alternate explanation by Eagly and Chaiken (1995) suggests that commitment leads individuals into a state of defense motivation. Defense motivation results in selective cognitive processing of information that is inconsistent with the person's attitude (Pomerantz, Chaiken, & Tordesillas, 1995; Kunda, 1990).

The ability of personality variables to predict attitudes and behavior has been of interest to researchers for decades (Epstein, 1977; Mischel, 1968). Various researchers have argued that behavior is primarily influenced by situational factors, while other scholars have held that behavior is primarily driven by the individual's personality. Personality and social psychologists have put forth the interaction model that allows for both personality and situational factors to simultaneously influence attitudes and behavior (Linville & Carlston, 1994). Consistent with the interaction model, we argue that preference for consistency (PFC) and susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) play a role in influencing resistance to persuasion.

2. Preference for consistency

Individuals have a need for consistency that arises from an "inborn preference for things that are predictable, familiar, stable and uncertainty reducing" (Swan, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992: 6). In Western society, people who are perceived as holding consistent opinions are evaluated positively (Suh, 2002). Those who unwaveringly uphold their beliefs and resist external and social pressures to change are often idealized, while those who vacillate are given negative trait ascriptions, such as immaturity and passivity, and are referred to as "waffler" or "two-faced" (Maslow, 1968; Wells & Iyengar, 2005). Thus, in order to preserve a positive self-image, individuals in

Western cultures are motivated to exhibit stability in their preferences and/or in their expressions of preferences (Tesser, 2000).

Preference for consistency is a personality trait that refers to the susceptibility of individuals to consistency effects like cognitive balance (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995). One of the reasons that participants hold on to their views in the face of counter-attitudinal information involves a need to appear consistent in the eyes of others. Cognition-based explanations for consistency have long been studied in the literature (Festinger, 1957). Consistency pressures make people susceptible to compliance techniques in marketing, such as foot-in-the door and low-balling techniques. The foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique has been discussed in the marketing literature as a technique designed to take advantage of people's desire to appear consistent in the eyes of others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). FITD is a compliance technique where subjects, after agreeing to an initial request, observe their behavior and ascribe traits to themselves consistent with their recent actions. This change in self-view and the need for consistency with this self-view is expected to direct future compliance. Thus:

H1. Individuals with a high PFC will be more resistant to counter-attitudinal persuasion as compared to those with a low PFC.

3. Susceptibility to normative influence

Susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) is defined as the need to identify with others and/or enhance one's image with products or brands or the willingness to conform to other's expectations regarding purchase decisions (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 2006; Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989; Wooten & Reed, 2004). The influence of SNI on consumption behavior is significant in situations of conspicuous consumption (Bourne, 1957; Wooten & Reed, 2004). This need for protective self-presentation and the need to identify with others indicate that those who have high SNI are more susceptible to influence by others.

Since the influence of SNI is significant in the context of conspicuous consumption, individuals making their opinions known to others, that is, through public commitment, will be more inclined toward protective self-presentation. Those who have high SNI are thus highly in need of social approval. They experience a greater need to appear consistent in the eyes of others and hence become more resistant to counter-attitudinal information. At the same time, high-SNI participants presented with counter-attitudinal information from a group they are close to (or a group they desire to be close to) may be more motivated to change their opinion to align themselves with this group rather than to appear consistent with their own attitudes.

4. Source proximity

Proximity of the source group refers to how close – physically, emotionally, psychologically, or otherwise – a participant feels to the source of information (Davis, Johnson, & Ohmer, 1998; Wasieleski & Hayibor, 2008). Social impact theory and signaling theory offer theoretical explanations for the influence of proximity. Social impact theory (Latane, 1982; Latane & Bourgeois, 2001) suggests that consumers consider the impact of sources within a social space, and those located within the same social space are considered more immediate and, therefore, more influential in their decision (Latane & Bourgeois, 2001). Signaling theory (Spence, 1974) proposes that cues, such as the perceived proximity of the source, provide consumers with information often necessary to construct evaluations of relatively unobservable factors.

In particular, we explore the role played by proximity in influencing attitude change when participants are exposed to counter-attitudinal information. We argue that the proximity of the source group relative to the proximity of the group to whom the public commitment is made will have a significant influence on attitudinal changes. The persuasive impact of members of groups to which one belongs has been shown to be substantial (Newcomb, 1943). These effects have been referred to in the

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