The Effect of Public Commitment on Resistance to Persuasion: Preliminary Findings

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We find that individuals who publicly declare their positions on an issue (i.e. make a public commitment) are more resistant to persuasion. The study explores the psychological processes underlying this phenomenon, in particular the role played by Attitude Certainty in mediating the effect of Public Commitment on Resistance to Persuasion. The study also finds that among the individuals who engage in public commitment, those high in the personality trait of Preference for Consistency are more likely to be resistant to counterattitudinal persuasion.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1000016/la/v1/LA-01

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Abstract
We find that individuals who publicly declare their positions on an issue (i.e. make a public commitment) are more resistant to persuasion. The study explores the psychological processes underlying this phenomenon, in particular the role played by Attitude Certainty in mediating the effect of Public Commitment on Resistance to Persuasion. The study also finds that among the individuals who engage in public commitment, those high in the personality trait of Preference for Consistency are more likely to be resistant to counter-attitudinal persuasion.

Introduction
This working paper summarizes the findings from the first of a few ongoing research studies that examine the impact of public commitment on resistance to persuasion. The findings indicate that subjects who make a public commitment to their initial position on an issue (by stating their position in a public manner), are less influenced by a counter-attitudinal message compared to subjects who do not make a public commitment to their initial position.

According to Kiesler, (1971) commitment is a binding of the individual to the position implied by his act or decision, and a key determinant of the magnitude of the commitment is the publicness with which the individual declares his/her commitment to a position. The more publicly one states one’s attitudes, the more one is committed to and locked to that position (Hollenbeck, Williams, and Klein 1989). Cialdini & Trost (1998) found that commitments made in public tend to be more persistent than commitments made in private. Pallak, Cook, and Sullivan (1980) argued that attitudes stated publicly are relatively stable and are more likely to result in behaviors consistent with the attitudes. Various studies have shown that individuals who make a public commitment to a goal are more likely to engage in behaviors consistent with that goal (Dellande and Nyer, 2005; Pallak and Cummings, 1976).

How does public commitment influence attitude and behavior? As Tedeschi (1981) noted, people have a strong desire to appear consistent and rational in the eyes of others. When individuals publicly state their position on an issue, they may be motivated to stay consistent with their publicly stated position to avoid anticipated personal and social disapproval for any failure to do so (Parrott et al. 1998). It is therefore possible that personality traits such as Preference for Consistency (PFC) could influence the effect of public commitment on attitudes and behavior. Individuals high in PFC are expected to exhibit higher levels of resistance to persuasion since these individuals place great value on being viewed as consistent.

Further, using Bem’s attribution theory, we argue that individuals who make a public commitment to an issue will evaluate themselves as being more confident in the position that they have taken.
Study
An experiment (approved by the Institutional Review Board) was conducted using 118 undergraduate student subjects participating in a computer-based exercise administered in a computer lab. Each subject was seated before a computer and began by answering a survey which included six measures of SNI (adapted from Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989), and six measures of PFC (adapted from Cialdini, Trost and Newsom, 1995). The subjects were then shown a billboard ad for a new Italian fast-food restaurant. The subjects were instructed to evaluate the ad slogan using three seven-point scales. This was followed by two measures of the subjects’ certainty (Certainty) in their evaluations of the ad slogan.

A randomly selected half of the subjects who were assigned to the ‘no public commitment condition’ moved on to the next task while the remaining half who were assigned to the ‘public commitment’ condition were requested to provide consent to having their evaluations be made public on a web site. These subjects were informed that their evaluations, along with their names would be visible to other study participants soon afterwards. While the ‘public commitment’ subjects were led to believe that their evaluations had been made public, in reality they were not. All subjects then participated in various filler tasks.

Each subject was then exposed to a screen that provided what was purportedly the evaluation of the ad slogan by students at a different university. Subjects who had evaluated the slogan unfavorably were informed that the slogan had been favorably evaluated by the students in the other school (an average of six on the seven-point scales, where larger numbers represent more favorable evaluations). On the other hand, subjects who had evaluated the slogan favorably were informed that the slogan had been evaluated unfavorably by the students in the other university (an average of two on the seven-point scales).

This was followed by further filler tasks. A research assistant interrupted the proceedings at this point and informed the subjects of a problem with the computer database, and requested the subjects to evaluate the ad slogan once again on a printed questionnaire (which was then handed out) using the same three seven-point scales.

Analysis
All the measures used in the study were found to have high levels of reliability. An ANCOVA was conducted using the two levels of public commitment as the experimental factor, and the pre-post change in ad slogan evaluation was used as the dependent variable. PFC, and Certainty were used as covariates. The analysis showed that the main effect of public commitment and both covariates (PFC and Certainty) had significant effects on attitude change. Higher levels of public commitment, Certainty, and PFC led to higher levels of resistance to persuasion.

Discussion
The study demonstrates the ability of public commitment to lock individuals to their publicly stated positions. The analysis also indicates that individuals high in PFC are more likely to be influenced by public commitment and thus these individuals are likely to become more resistant to counter-attitudinal influence. Further, the analysis indicates that one of the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect of public commitment is the individual’s confidence in his/her evaluation, with those individuals who make public commitments becoming more confident in their evaluations and thus becoming more resistant to counter-attitudinal persuasion.

References