The Influence of Public Commitment on Resistance to Attitude Change: an Investigation Into the Psychological Processes.

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This research investigates the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion, and the effect of attitude certainty, susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) and preference for consistency (PFC) on resistance to attitude change after making a public commitment to their attitude. Two studies measure the initial attitude of subjects along with their attitude certainty, SNI and PFC. Attitude change is measured after exposure to counter attitudinal information. Subjects who made a commitment in public became more confident in their evaluations and more resistant to attitude change. SNI and PFC also increase resistance to persuasion under conditions of public commitment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion, and examines the roles played by attitude certainty, susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) and preference for consistency (PFC) in influencing resistance to attitude change when subjects make a public commitment to their attitude.

Resistance to persuasion has been the focus of some research (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1995), specifically on the psychological processes that mediate this resistance. In this paper we examine the role played by public commitment in influencing the attitude change process.

When an individual makes a public commitment to an issue (i.e. makes his/her opinion on an issue known to others), the individual’s opinion on the issue becomes more resistant to change. A review of the literature leads us to believe that the more publicly one states ones attitude, the more one is committed to and locked to that position (Hollenbeck, Williams & Klein, 1989), leading to our first hypothesis.

H1: Individuals who make a public commitment to a position become more resistant to counter attitudinal persuasion.

An explanation for this could be that public commitment makes these individuals more confident in their original attitude position, which in turn leads to an attitude that is more resistant to counter-attitudinal persuasion.

H2a: Individuals who make a public commitment to an evaluation will experience an increase in certainty in their evaluation.

H2b: The greater the degree of certainty that individuals have in their evaluations, the more resistant to counter attitudinal persuasion they become.

Two personality variables we explore to explain the effects of public commitment are Preference for Consistency (PFC) and Susceptibility to Normative Influence (SNI). We argue that individuals who are high on PFC are especially resistant to counter attitudinal information.

H3: Compared to those low in PFC, individuals high in PFC will be more resistant to counter-attitudinal persuasion.

When high SNI subjects make their positions public to relevant others, and are then presented with counter-attitudinal information from a relatively distant reference group, the subjects will be less likely to be influenced by the need to align their position with that of the close reference group. Under this situation the subjects may be less motivated by the urge to be perceived as consistent.

H4a₁: When exposed to counter attitudinal information attributed to a relatively distant reference group, high SNI subjects will be more resistant to persuasion under conditions of public commitment.

H4a₂: When exposed to counter attitudinal information attributed to a relatively close reference group, high SNI will be less resistant to persuasion when not under conditions of public commitment.

H4b: When exposed to counter attitudinal information attributed to a relatively close reference group, high SNI subjects will be less resistant to persuasion regardless of whether they make a public commitment or not.

H5: Individuals who feel more affinity to a reference group will be less resistant to change when exposed to counter attitudinal information attributed to that group.

We argue that publicly committing to an attitude increases the personal significance of that attitude and thereby increases the attitude certainty and attitude strength, leading to an increase in resistance to persuasion.

H6a: Attitude certainty will mediate the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion.

H6b: Attitude importance will mediate the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion.

Data were collected for the two experiments from 227 and 98 undergraduate student subjects respectively. The subjects were participating in a computer-based exercise administered in computer laboratories.

We find that individuals who publicly state their position on an issue experience increased confidence in their initial attitudes, and evaluate the issue as being more important. This increase in attitude certainty and issue importance was found to increase resistance to persuasion. The two dispositional variables we investigated were found to have significant effects on the effect of public commitment on resistance to persuasion. We found evidence for a two-way interaction of public commitment and SNI in their effect on resistance to persuasion when exposed to counter-attitudinal information from a relatively distant reference group. While public commitment causes individuals to become more resistant to persuasion, this effect is even more pronounced for those high in SNI, with these individuals becoming significantly more resistant to persuasion (compared to those low in SNI) under conditions of public commitment; while those high in SNI become significantly less resistant to persuasion (compared to those low in SNI) when not under public commitment.
When exposed to counter attitudinal information attributed to a relatively close reference group, high SNI subjects were found to be less resistant to persuasion compared to low SNI subjects. When the counter attitudinal information is attributed to a source considered to be relatively distant, the urge to engage in self presentation and the need to align with other’s opinions gain dominance depending on level of SNI of the subject. When source is distant, high SNI subjects are more influenced by the need to align with the opinion of others and hence have less resistance to counter attitudinal persuasion. Low SNI subjects on the other hand are more influenced by the need for protective self-presentation by being consistent and hence have a greater resistance to persuasion.

This is the first paper that investigates the effect of SNI on resistance to persuasion when a commitment has been made in public. Further, we study the psychological process that mediates resistance to attitude change as a result of public commitment by studying attitude confidence and attitude importance.

REFERENCES


