

Commitment and Consistency

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Abstract

The use of commitment and consistency principles in research and applied fields has demonstrated how effective these principles are in influencing behaviour. Commitment and consistency are effective because people have the desire to maintain consistency with their self-concept, self-presentation, values, and behaviours. Commitments are acts that bind people to future behaviour, providing a mechanism through which consistency is engaged. When individuals make a commitment to behave in a certain way, they are more likely to follow through with the behaviour. Commitment and consistency have been leveraged in a variety of ways to influence behaviour. Strategies such as the foot-in-the-door technique, binding communications, the low-ball technique, and the “four walls” technique involve low-cost preparatory acts that increase the likelihood of acceptance of subsequent high-cost target requests. Other strategies may remind people of their values or previous behaviours in order to influence desired behavioural outcomes. Since many of these strategies can easily be implemented, they have been used in a variety of applied settings to affect behaviour change. Research has also focused on moderators by examining the conditions under which commitment and consistency strategies are most and least effective.

Keywords: commitment, consistency, behaviour change, preparatory acts

Commitment and Consistency

1. Definitions

In the domain of behavioural research, consistency is the act of compliance with one's own beliefs, actions, statements, self-concept, and self-presentation (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). The self-concept consists of the characteristics and qualities that a person attributes to themselves (Kinch, 1963). Self-presentation is how one conveys themselves to others in order to create a specific image of themselves in others' minds (Baumeister, 1982). Because people have a natural desire to maintain their self-concept and promote a socially acceptable image of themselves, consistency plays an important role in human behaviour (Baumeister, 1982; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). To illustrate, if one has the self-concept of being a funny person, one might make efforts to tell jokes whenever possible.

Commitment is the "pledging or binding of the individual to behavioral acts" (Kiesler & Sakumura, 1966, p. 349). Furthermore, commitments to certain behaviours are associated with certain attitudes and how these attitudes resist change (Kiesler & Sakumura, 1966). Commitment is also the mechanism by which consistency is engaged (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Once someone has made a commitment to do something, they are more likely to behave consistently or follow through with the committed behaviour. For example, if someone pledged to donate a certain percent of their income to charity every month, that person is more likely to donate when the opportunity arises, compared to when no pledge was made.

There are many strategies that utilize research on commitment and consistency in order to get people to comply with requests and behave in certain ways. These strategies are commonly used in marketing strategies, efforts to conserve natural resources, and charity work to get people to act in certain ways. The goal is to get people to buy products and services, conserve water and

energy, or donate money and supplies. Behaviour change initiatives that utilize commitment and consistency strategies have had a lot of success in these domains (Garnefeld, Eggert, Helm, & Tax, 2013; Lokhorst, Werner, Staats, van Dijk, & Gale, 2013; Naskrent & Siebelt, 2011). The success of these initiatives has encouraged more research on how commitment and consistency strategies can be applied to a wider variety of settings.

2. Background

The idea that behaviour is motivated by one's desire to remain consistent with one's self-concept has a long history in social psychological theory and research. Festinger's highly regarded book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957) starts off by explaining how people strive toward internal consistency. But when inconsistent behaviours are pointed out (i.e., behaviours that contradict one's attitudes or beliefs), people tend to rationalize these behaviours so as to justify them as consistent with their beliefs. Justifying one's behaviours sometimes involves changing one's attitudes and beliefs. It has also been expressed that the simple desire to present oneself as consistent and favourable to others drives much social behaviour (Baumeister, 1982). Consistency thus underlies many of the decisions people make, whether it is to remain consistent with their idea of themselves, or to remain consistent with how they want others to perceive them.

People tend to behave consistently with the commitments they have made (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Kurt Lewin's research on the "unfreezing" and "freezing" of group-level behaviour (i.e., breaking group habits and establishing new ones) discussed how the simple act of making a decision affects future behaviours (Lewin, 1947). Lewin explained that decisions link motivations (e.g., attitudes or intentions) to actions, people are committed to groups of people with which they identify, and people are committed to their decisions (Lewin, 1947).

Commitments can take many forms, such as stating intent, answering “Yes” to a first request, or signing a public pledge. For example, students who expressed an intention to vote in a presidential election were more likely to vote than those who did not express an intention to vote (Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young, 1987). Remaining consistent with a commitment can also take the form of behaving consistently with one’s mood. For example, people who said they were feeling good in response to being asked how they feel and then having their affective state acknowledged were more likely to comply with an immediate charitable request compared to people whose feelings were not asked about or acknowledged (Howard, 1990).

Most research on the use of commitment and consistency has been done within the larger, more broad study of persuasion and compliance – getting people to agree to and perform behaviours requested of them. The persuasive nature of commitment and consistency are mechanisms for compliance.

3. Applications

In the study and practice of changing individual behaviour, there are many strategies developed around the concept of commitment and consistency (referred to as commitment strategies). Many frequently used commitment strategies consist of two parts: a preparatory act, or initial request, followed by another request that targets the behaviour to be changed (i.e., target request; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Some commitment strategies use multiple preparatory acts. Preparatory acts can take on a wide variety forms – they can be almost anything as long as they are relevant, such as performing related behaviours, completing a survey, reading an article, putting a bumper sticker on a car, or signing a petition. Completing a preparatory act often results in compliance with the target request due to a sense of commitment to an attitude associated with the preparatory act and the desire to maintain consistency with it. Take, for

example, the foot-in-the-door technique, a strategy that has received a considerable amount of attention. This strategy works by asking a small request from someone (the preparatory act), and once they accept the request, they are asked a similar but greater request (the target request). People are more likely to comply with a target request if it is preceded by the initial request (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Freedman and Fraser (1966) suggested that agreement with the initial request results in a change of attitude toward an aspect of the situation (which can be any aspect: the requester, the activity, being philanthropic, or saying “yes” to requests from strangers). However, the most popular explanation for the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door technique is that it involves a self-perception process where people infer their attitudes based on previous behaviour (Burger, 1999).

The binding communication paradigm is a strategy that is very similar to the foot-in-the-door technique (Joule, Girandola, & Bernard, 2007; Grandjean & Guéguen, 2011). This paradigm involves persuasive communications (e.g., messages telling people what they should be doing) that are accompanied by the completion of a related preparatory act (or acts; Joule et al., 2007). The goal is to increase the effectiveness of the persuasive communication to influence behaviour change. For example, completing a survey about one’s environmental behaviours (the preparatory act) before being told how important it is to behave in pro-environmental ways (the persuasive communication) binds one’s behaviours to an idea of what good and bad environmental behaviours are, which motivates one to behave in ways consistent with the good behaviours. The use of binding communications has been shown to be more effective at generating target behaviours compared to being presented with only a persuasive communication or only a preparatory act (Terrier & Marfaing, 2015).

Another commitment strategy that uses the two-part design is the low-ball strategy. This strategy involves someone making the target request and initially presenting it as being a low cost act (e.g., the act does not take much time, money, or resources), but then revealing the actual (high) cost of the request after the person has already stated that they would agree to the request (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978; Pascual, Carpenter, Guéguen, & Girandola, 2016). Revealing the high cost of the target behaviour up front leads to less compliance than when understating its true cost at first.

The lure strategy (Joule, Gouilloux, & Weber, 1989), also known as the bait-and-switch technique (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), is another strategy that involves the two-part design. This strategy involves getting someone to agree to a request that is advantageous (i.e., behaviour that results in something rewarding, desirable, or profitable for oneself), then telling them what they agreed to has been cancelled (or is no longer necessary, no longer available, etc.) and asking them to perform a less advantageous request (the target behaviour; Marchand, Joule, & Guéguen, 2015). Because the person already committed to the initial request, they are more likely to comply with the less advantageous request rather than when no advantageous request was made prior to the target request.

An additional strategy that uses the two-part design involves signing, writing, or stating pledges. This strategy increases commitment by having people agree to behaving in a certain way (Jacquemet, Joule, Luchini, & Shogren, 2013). For example, those who sign an oath of honesty at the beginning of a survey are more likely to provide accurate responses, compared to people who do not sign the oath, because they have a sense of commitment to the oath despite having the free will to respond however they want.

One other strategy is the “four walls” technique (Courbet, Guéguen, Halimi, Joule, & Marchand, 2013). This technique involves the preparatory act of responding “yes” to a series of questions before being asked the target request. The “four walls” technique makes compliance more likely than if one were to respond “no” to a series of questions prior to the request or not answering questions before the request.

There are also a variety of techniques that engage the mechanisms of commitment and consistency without using the two-part design of two requests. For instance, reminding people of previous commitments they made that are congruent with the target request results in a greater likelihood of compliance with the request compared to if no reminders were given (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Conversely, bringing up someone’s past behaviour that is inconsistent with their commitments to certain values (i.e., hypocrisy) often results in compliance with requests that maintain consistency with their values (Fried & Aronson, 1995; Priolo, Milhabet, Codou, Fointiat, Lebarbenchon, & Gabarrot, 2016).

Additionally, asking for a small, almost irrefusable request often results in compliance (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976). In a study using a door-to-door charity context, participants who were asked for a minimal monetary donation were more likely to donate compared to those given a standard plea for donations, and they donated the same amount on average as those given the standard plea (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976). This was an application of a self-concept most people have, which is being a helpful or charitable person. People donated to maintain consistency with this self-concept.

4. Moderators

A large area of research in commitment and consistency has focused on factors that enhance or reduce commitment and consistency effects. The possibilities for what these factors

can be are seemingly endless as they might be subtle differences in environment, time, people, presentation of the request, etc. For instance, commitments made in public result in more compliance than commitments made in private since there is greater accountability (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Commitments perceived as intrinsically motivated are also more effective in obtaining compliance than commitments perceived as forced or coerced. Additionally, active commitments are more effective than maintaining passiveness in obtaining compliance (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Cioffi & Garner, 1996). An active commitment is when a person does something that reflects a certain value and then adopts or accepts that value (Cioffi & Garner, 1996).

There are numerous other factors that influence the effectiveness of the different commitment strategies. For example, the effectiveness of small initial requests can be maximized by telling people that they are free to say yes or no to the request, a phenomenon called “free will” compliance (Joule et al., 2007). “Free will” compliance refers to explicitly telling people that they are free to say yes or no to their request, thus inducing the sense of freely choosing to comply with a request. Other research has shown that using different requesters for the initial and target requests in addition to increasing the length of time between the requests generally improves rates of compliance compared to using the same requester and presenting the target request immediately after the initial request (Pascual et al., 2016).

Another moderator is the irrevocability of a preparatory act; the more irrevocable the act, the stronger the commitment will be (Joule et al., 2007). Commitments also tend to be stronger when the requester makes physical contact with the participant while making the request (e.g., touching their arm; Joule et al., 2007). Further, providing positive feedback on a person’s character tends to result in greater compliance and commitment (see Burger, 1999; Joule et al., 2007; Pascual et al., 2016 for reviews).

It is important to note that much of the research done on commitment and consistency utilizes experimental research designs where multiple conditions (e.g., situations or circumstances) are examined and compared. Typically, there is at least one experimental condition where the commitment strategy is presented to participants, and one control condition where the commitment strategy is not presented to participants (or a communication opposite of the commitment strategy is presented to participants). For example, in the case of the foot-in-the-door technique, the experimental condition involves the researcher preceding the target request with a preparatory act, and in the control condition the target request is made right away. The researcher then compares whether participants from the experimental condition are more likely to comply to the target request than participants in the control condition. Experimental research designs are also frequently used in the study of moderators; the effect of a moderator is examined at different levels of the moderator (e.g., comparing conditions where the preparatory act is done in public versus in private). Research that uses experimental designs tend to result in more valid and reliable research findings.

5. Conclusion

Because commitment and consistency respond to the inherent human nature of maintaining consistency with self-concepts, behaviour change via commitment and consistency is a low-cost and easily implemented option. These reasons make commitment and consistency appealing for use in a variety of domains. Hence, research has focused largely on understanding when, why, and to what extent commitment strategies work in order to more widely implement them in areas such as intergroup relations, marketing and sales, social justice, political behaviour, and aggression. For instance, research found that interventions that engaged the hypocrisy effect (i.e., utilizing psychological discomfort toward one's inconsistency between

their attitudes and behaviours to influence behaviour change) had long-lasting effects on intergroup attitudes (e.g., collective blaming of entire groups, support for ant-immigrant policies; Bruneau, Kteily, & Urbiola, 2020). In another instance, researchers used binding communication strategies to raise awareness about climate change and increased pro-environmental behaviours among high school students (Parant et al., 2017).

Commitment and consistency as a means for behaviour change has a long history in social psychology. As the research has shown, the mechanisms of commitment and consistency are important motivators that powerfully shape human behaviour. Moreover, further research is exploring the question of how powerful the processes of commitment and consistency can really be through the different ways in which requests and commitments can be made, and also which domains of behaviour are most likely to change through the means of commitment and consistency.

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