

**“I’ll Do It If You Do”:  
The Persuasive Power of Conditional Commitment**

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## ABSTRACT

Consumers often want to persuade others to join them in taking particular actions (e.g., ordering dessert, donating to charity). A common way for one person (an initiator) to encourage another (a responder) to take an action is to commit to the action themselves (e.g., “I’m going to order dessert”). Yet 12 studies (8 in the main text and 4 in the web appendix; total  $N = 9,831$ ) demonstrate that it is often more persuasive to make a commitment that is *conditional* on the responder taking the action (e.g., “I’ll order dessert if you do”). Conditional commitments are more persuasive than unconditional commitments for two reasons, both stemming from the fact that they tie the initiator’s outcome to the responder’s. First, the responder feels more like they and the initiator are making a joint decision, and as a result they expect the subsequent consumption experience to be more socially connecting. Second, because the responder’s decision directly influences the initiator’s, the responder expects to feel especially guilty if they do not take the action that the initiator prefers. Beyond introducing and testing a novel form of social influence, this research illustrates how joint agency can powerfully shape individual consumption decisions and experiences.

*Keywords:* social influence, decision making, commitment, joint agency, social connection, parallel consumption

Consumers often seek to persuade others to join them in taking particular actions. Consider someone who wants to order dessert at the end of a restaurant meal but feels guilty about doing so alone; to alleviate their guilt, they might encourage others at the table to order dessert as well (Lowe & Haws, 2014). Likewise, a parent who wants to increase the chances that a fundraiser for their child's school reaches its fundraising goal might try to convince other parents to join them in donating. Similarly, someone who wants to exercise more might seek accountability by inviting a friend or colleague to sign up for a workout class together.

When trying to influence another person to take a particular action, a straightforward approach is to leverage social proof by committing to take the action oneself (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). For example, someone who wants to order dessert (an *initiator*) might tell their friend (the *responder*) that they plan to order a dessert, then ask if their friend wants to do so. Although each person is free to make their own choice, one person's commitment to ordering dessert can signal to the other that ordering dessert is normal and socially acceptable. If the responder was initially unsure whether to order dessert, they should be more likely to do so upon learning that the initiator will do so (Allcott, 2011; Goldstein et al., 2008; Huh et al., 2014).

In this article, we investigate whether committing to take an action can be even more persuasive when it is *conditional* on the responder's behavior (e.g., "I'll order dessert if you do"), rather than *unconditional* (e.g., "I'm going to order dessert"). Conditional commitments have clear real-world precedent, yet their effectiveness as a social influence tactic has not been empirically investigated. Our research examines whether, when, and why they are more persuasive than unconditional commitments, in contexts where multiple consumers are facing the same decision in parallel. By using unconditional commitments as a benchmark, we can pinpoint

exactly which aspects of conditional commitments are influential, above and beyond the fact that both types of commitments invite the responder to take an action in parallel with the initiator.

We propose that conditional commitments are especially persuasive for two reasons. First, conditional commitments evoke a sense of *joint agency*. That is, because the initiator's decision is tied to the responder's, the responder feels more like they and the initiator are *deciding together* whether to take the action. As a result, they expect the subsequent consumption experience—having arisen from a joint decision-making process—to be more socially connecting. Second, by making a conditional commitment, the initiator cedes control over their own decision to the responder. Because choosing not to take the action might mean preventing the initiator from doing so, the responder expects to feel more guilty if they choose not to take the action. In sum, conditional commitments are persuasive because they evoke joint agency (e.g., “let's decide together ...”), while also inviting the responder to make the final decision (e.g., “... but it's ultimately up to you”). By simultaneously amplifying both social connection and guilt, conditional commitments can be a powerful lever of social influence.

## COMMITMENT AS A FORM OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

In this research, we examine social influence in contexts where multiple consumers are making the same decision in parallel (i.e., at the same time or in quick succession). In such contexts, an *initiator* who is faced with a choice between two options might seek to persuade a *responder* to choose a particular option (typically, whichever option they prefer to take themselves). For example, when two friends are deciding whether to order dessert at the end of a restaurant meal, one of them might try to convince the other to order a dessert. Even though each

person *could* order a dessert on their own, the initiator might prefer an outcome in which both individuals order dessert to one in which they are the only one who orders dessert. There are many reasons why one might prefer to engage in a behavior in parallel with someone else rather than doing so alone. For instance, in some cases the initiator might feel guilty about engaging in the behavior alone (Lowe & Haws, 2014), whereas in other cases they might be motivated to create accountability for themselves while pursuing a goal (Fishbach & Tu, 2016; Gershon et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2015), personally help the responder (e.g., cheering up a sad friend), or boost support for a prosocial cause (Fischbacher et al., 2001; Frey & Meier, 2004).

When an initiator seeks to persuade a responder to join them in taking an action, perhaps the most straightforward approach is to commit to take the action themselves. Just as a consumer who wants to order dessert might first declare that they are going to order a dessert and then ask if their friend wants to do so, someone who cares about a particular charitable cause might first donate to the cause and then tell a friend about it or share about it on social media. When an initiator commits to take an action, they convey confidence in their decision, which should facilitate persuasion (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Price & Stone, 2004; Tormala & Rucker, 2007; Zarnoth & Snizek, 1997). Indeed, in a pilot study reported in the web appendix, we incentivized 120 initiators to select a risky (vs. sure) bonus *and* persuade a responder to select the risky bonus (via live chat). One of the most common tactics initiators used was making a commitment to choose the risky option (37.5%), surpassed only by arguing for the objective superiority of the risky option (38.3%). This suggests that committing to take an action is a common strategy that people use when trying to influence others to take that action.

A wealth of research supports the common intuition that committing to take an action is a highly effective form of social influence. Though they may deny it, people frequently conform to

others' behavior (Asch, 1956; Bandura et al., 1961; Latane & Darley, 1968). This means that when one person takes an action (e.g., littering), observers are more likely to take that action as well (Cialdini et al., 1990). Some have even argued that after observing another person make a particular choice, people view that choice as the default option and only deviate from it if they have a good enough reason to do so (Huh et al., 2014). Importantly, people are not only influenced by others' behavior when they directly observe it; merely learning about someone else's behavior can induce conformity. In one study, for example, public radio listeners made larger donations when they were told that another listener had donated \$300 than when they were told that another listener had donated \$75 (Shang & Croson, 2009). Simply knowing that someone else has taken a particular action makes one more likely to take that action.

Because people are so heavily influenced by others' choices, social proof is one of the most widely used tools for influencing consumer behavior. For instance, informing hotel guests that most others reuse their towels has been used to increase towel reuse rates (Goldstein et al., 2008); informing households that they consume more energy than their neighbors has effectively reduced energy consumption (Allcott, 2011; Nolan et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2007); and pre-filling a donation box with a seemingly larger amount of cash has been used to boost donations (Martin & Randal, 2008). The range of behaviors that are susceptible to social influence cannot be understated. Social norms influence not only socially beneficial behaviors like donating to charity (Frey & Meier, 2004; Shang & Croson, 2009), voting (Gerber & Rogers, 2009), and refraining from stealing (Cialdini et al., 2006); but also personal decisions like visiting the gym (Milkman et al., 2021), quitting smoking (Bruvold, 1993), and saving for retirement (Duflo & Saez, 2002). The power of social proof is especially evident in the widespread use of online

reviews (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012) and word of mouth (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009; Leskovec et al., 2007) to make purchase decisions.

Existing research offers two broad explanations for why people are so heavily influenced by others' behavior. First, people use others' behavior as a source of information about how to behave appropriately or correctly (Cialdini, 2009; Liu et al., 2020). This is especially true in uncertain situations, where people lack information about appropriate behavior (e.g., Sherif, 1936). Second, people want to be liked and accepted by others, and conforming is a straightforward way to secure social approval (Asch, 1956; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). Although these two classes of motives may be at play to different degrees across individuals, groups, and contexts (Cialdini et al., 1999; H. Kim & Markus, 1999), both support our baseline assumption that committing to take an action is an effective way to influence others to take that action.

## **CONDITIONAL VERSUS UNCONDITIONAL COMMITMENTS**

We propose that when seeking to influence another person's behavior, making a commitment that is *conditional* on the responder taking a particular action (e.g., "I'll donate if you do") can be even more persuasive than committing to take the same action *unconditionally* (e.g., "I'm going to donate"). Importantly, both types of commitments direct the responder towards a particular action and invite them to take that action in parallel with the initiator, leaving the responder's potential consumption experience unchanged (at least on the surface). The key feature that differentiates conditional from unconditional commitments is that they explicitly tie the initiator's behavior to the responder's. We find that this has two important psychological consequences that help to explain why conditional commitments are especially

persuasive. First, the responder feels more like they and the initiator are making a joint decision, and thus they expect the subsequent consumption experience to be more socially connecting (the *connection-seeking* account). Second, given that the responder knows their choice will determine the initiator's outcome, they are more sensitive to the initiator's preferences. If they believe the initiator personally wants to take the target action, they expect to feel guilty if they directly prevent this outcome (the *rejection-aversion* account). We outline both accounts below.

### Connection-Seeking Account

Making a conditional commitment not only coordinates the initiator's and responder's outcomes (i.e., whether or not each person ultimately engages in the target behavior), but also coordinates their decision-making process. We propose that arriving at a joint outcome through a joint decision-making process is more socially connecting than arriving at the same outcome through an individual decision-making process, thus helping to explain why conditional commitments are more persuasive than unconditional commitments.

Prior research has repeatedly demonstrated that people feel more connected with others when they take coordinated actions. Consumers feel closer with others who choose to spend their time and money in similar ways (Lowe & Haws, 2014), and when people are motivated to socially connect they strategically choose options preferred by potential interaction partners (Mead et al., 2011). Even actions as simple as mimicking others' facial expressions can increase feelings of closeness (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Lakin & Chartrand, 2003). Taking the same action in parallel with others may be socially connecting for several reasons. For example, it may signal that both individuals share a positive attitude toward the action (Raghunathan & Corfman,



2006; Ramanathan & McGill, 2007), increase trust (Woolley & Fishbach, 2017), or simply draw greater attention to the experience (Boothby et al., 2014; Shteynberg, 2015).

We propose that what makes conditional commitments socially connecting is not merely that they coordinate which actions the initiator and responder take, but that they do so through a joint decision-making process. To illustrate this distinction, consider again a pair of individuals deciding whether to order dessert. Any outcome in which both or neither of them order dessert is what we refer to as a *joint outcome*. Such an outcome can arise from many different decision-making processes. Perhaps the simplest is an individual decision-making process, in which each person weighs the personal costs and benefits of ordering dessert and decides whether to do so on their own. By contrast, using a *joint decision-making* process, the same individuals might instead discuss whether they both will order dessert and then arrive at a single shared decision (Gorlin & Dhar, 2012; Simpson et al., 2012). Joint decisions do not have to yield a joint outcome, just as a joint outcome need not arise from a joint decision-making process.

We propose that social influence tactics can change the extent to which a given joint outcome feels like it arose from a joint decision-making process. We use the term *joint agency* to refer to the extent to which individuals subjectively feel as though they are making a joint decision. This concept is drawn from a literature in philosophy that argues that individuals often attribute actions taken in parallel with others to shared intentions, not merely to their own personal intentions (Bratman, 1992, 2009; Gilbert, 1992; Searle, 1995). For instance, when someone is recounting a restaurant meal during which they and a friend each ordered dessert, they might say “we decided to order dessert” instead of “I decided to order dessert,” even if each person decided to order dessert on their own. We expect that the more an individual feels like

they and another person are *jointly* deciding whether to take an action, the more connected they feel with that person upon taking the action (Woolley & Lim, 2023).

When consumers are motivated to socially connect with one another, they should be more willing to take actions that feel as though they are arising from a joint decision-making process. Consistent with this idea, prior research finds that framing a personal action as a collective one can be persuasive (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2008). Relative to merely communicating a descriptive norm (e.g., that many others have donated to a charity), inviting consumers to “join in” or “work together” can be even more influential (Howe et al., 2021). Importantly, framing an individual action as a joint action can be motivating even when the action has no material impact on others, such as deciding to exert effort on a task (Carr & Walton, 2014). In each of these contexts, people seemed to be motivated by the idea that they were acting together with others, even though the other people involved were anonymous strangers (e.g., other study participants).

Although there are undoubtedly many other ways to initiate a joint decision-making process, we suggest that making a conditional commitment is a particularly effective way to persuade a responder to take a *specific* action. For instance, an initiator might also leverage joint agency by saying to a responder “I’ll do whatever you do” or asking them “What shall we do?”. Although these other tactics likely increase social connection, they fail to direct the responder toward any particular action, and thus they may not influence the responder’s behavior to the same extent as making a conditional commitment to take a specific course of action.

Rejection-Aversion Account

Whereas an unconditional commitment gives the responder control over only their own outcome, a conditional commitment gives the responder the additional responsibility of determining the initiator's outcome. If the responder chooses to take the target action, the initiator will take the action; but if they choose *not* to take the action, the initiator will *not* take the action. We argue that, as a result, the responder becomes more sensitive to the initiator's preferences. Because the initiator is assumed to prefer taking (vs. not taking) the action, the responder expects to feel guilty if they choose not to take the action.

When making decisions that influence others' outcomes, consumers often value and seek out information about others' preferences. Before choosing a restaurant or a movie for joint consumption, for example, it is common for one person to proactively ask co-consumers which of several options they prefer (Liu & Min, 2020). If a co-consumer refrains from expressing a preference, the choice can become even more difficult for the decision maker, who assumes that the other person does indeed have a preference yet chose to conceal it (N. Y. J. Kim et al., 2023). It follows that a responder who is responsible for deciding whether both they and an initiator will take an action should be highly attuned to any information about the initiator's preferences.

Regardless of whether an initiator commits to take an action unconditionally or conditionally, it should not be difficult for others to infer their preferences. While making an unconditional commitment directly communicates that the initiator prefers to take the target action, we argue that making a conditional commitment *leaks* information about the initiator's preferences (McKenzie & Nelson, 2003; Sher & McKenzie, 2006). After all, a conditional commitment can be framed in different (logically equivalent) ways. Rather than conditionally committing to take the target action (e.g., "I'll order dessert if you do"), one could instead conditionally commit *not* to take that action (e.g., "I won't order dessert if you don't") or simply

commit to whichever course of action the responder chooses (e.g., “I’ll do whatever you do”). Because initiators should generally be expected to select the frame that aligns with their preferences (Levin, 1987; Levin et al., 1988, 1998), it is reasonable for responders to infer that an initiator who conditionally commits to take a particular action *prefers* taking that action.

Given that the responder knows the initiator prefers to take the target action, they may expect to feel guilty if their actions directly prevent this outcome. As evidence from economic games has repeatedly shown, people find it aversive to prevent others from obtaining desired outcomes. In one study, participants (dictators) were asked to divide \$10 between themselves and an anonymous receiver who would learn about their allocation decision. However, dictators also had the option to exit the game with \$9, in which case the receiver would receive \$0 but would not learn how their outcome was determined. Though exiting the game would reduce their potential payout from \$10 to \$9, 28% of dictators chose to do so (Dana et al., 2006). In other words, many people were willing to incur a personal cost to prevent others from learning that they had been denied an opportunity to receive money. This suggests that people are willing to sacrifice their own material welfare to ensure that (even anonymous) others do not *feel* rejected.

Note that our rejection-aversion account predicts that conditional commitments will not be persuasive unless the responder believes that the initiator wants to take the target action. If the initiator explicitly states that they do not have a strong preference, or if the structural features of a conditional commitment are externally imposed—and thus cannot leak information about an initiator’s preferences—then conditionally commitments may not be any more influential than unconditional commitments (or may even *reduce* the responder’s likelihood of taking the action).

## OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

In eight preregistered experiments, we investigate whether, when, and why conditional commitments are persuasive. Study 1 demonstrates that conditional (vs. unconditional) commitments are more effective at persuading others to take financial risks (e.g., gambling, investing). Study 2 finds that this effect holds not only for vice behaviors but also for virtuous behaviors, suggesting that conditional commitments do not merely work by licensing indulgence. Study 3 provides initial support for our connection-seeking and rejection-aversion accounts, finding that the persuasiveness of conditional (vs. unconditional) commitments is simultaneously mediated by anticipated social connection and anticipated guilt. Studies 4–5 test both accounts via moderation. In study 4, we find that conditional commitments become less persuasive when the responder does not want to socially connect with the initiator (supporting the connection-seeking account). In study 5, we find that the persuasiveness of conditional (vs. unconditional) commitments depends on how strongly the initiator wants to take the target action (supporting the rejection-aversion account). Studies 6a–6b use incentivized financial decisions to examine how the joint decision-making structure of a conditional commitment influences behavior when it is externally imposed, thus eliminating any cues of the initiator’s preferences. Results suggest that in order for conditional commitments to be persuasive, they must *both* tie the initiator’s outcome to the responder’s *and* communicate the initiator’s preference. Finally, study 7 documents an additional boundary condition: whether the target action could harm the initiator. Conditional commitments can backfire for behaviors that put the initiator’s welfare at risk.

All studies were preregistered. Preregistrations, materials, data, and code are available at [https://researchbox.org/1791&PEER\\_REVIEW\\_passcode=OWYQVO](https://researchbox.org/1791&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=OWYQVO). Supplemental studies, manipulations, measures for all studies, and additional analyses are detailed in the web appendix.

## STUDY 1

Study 1 investigated whether conditional commitments are more effective than unconditional commitments at persuading consumers to make risky financial decisions. Participants were asked to imagine that a friend commits to engage in a target behavior (e.g., buying a lottery ticket) either unconditionally or conditionally, and then indicated whether they would engage in the behavior themselves. Although our primary aim was to examine how each type of commitment influenced responders' behavior, we also began to explore their psychological consequences. Specifically, we explored whether conditional commitments elevate joint agency and anticipated social connection, as our connection-seeking account predicts.

### Method

*Participants and Design.* We requested 800 U.S.-based participants from Prolific and received 801 complete submissions. As preregistered, we excluded all responses from participants who opened the survey more than once under the same participant ID or IP address ( $n = 3$ ). Our final sample thus consisted of 798 participants (gender: 49.6% man, 48.9% woman, 1.5% another identity; mean age = 38.7 years). Participants were randomly assigned to condition in a 2 (commitment type: unconditional vs. conditional) by 4 (scenario: lottery ticket, car raffle, investment, sports bet) full-factorial design.

*Procedure.* Participants first entered the first name of a friend into an open-ended text box. They then considered one of four scenarios in which this friend (the *initiator*) invites them (the *responder*) to engage in a target behavior: buying a lottery ticket while on a road trip;

buying a raffle ticket for the chance to win a car; buying a share in a local restaurant chain that recently went public; or placing a bet on the outcome of a sports game. In all conditions, the initiator asks whether the participant would like to engage the target behavior (e.g., “Do you want to [buy a lottery ticket]?”). For half of participants, the initiator then commits to engage in the target behavior *unconditionally* (e.g., “I’m going to [buy one]!”); for the rest, the initiator commits to do so *conditionally* (“I’ll [buy one] if you do!”). Table S1 in the web appendix provides more specific information on the scenarios used in this and all subsequent studies.

Participants then indicated whether they would engage in the target behavior (yes or no). On a separate page, they completed six additional measures in random order. These included a measure of *joint agency*: “To what extent does the decision of whether to [engage in target behavior] feel like a joint decision with [friend’s name]?”; and a measure of *anticipated social connection*: “To what extent would [engaging in target behavior] strengthen your friendship with [friend’s name]?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). See the web appendix for a full list of measures included in every study, including those that are not reported in the main text.

## Results and Discussion

*Decision to Engage in Target Behavior.* Our primary analysis was a logistic regression with the choice to engage in the target behavior (1 = yes, 0 = no) predicted by commitment type, with fixed effects for each scenario. Consistent with our preregistered prediction, participants who received a conditional commitment were more likely to say that they would engage in the target behavior (62.3%) than those who received an unconditional commitment (54.2%),  $b =$

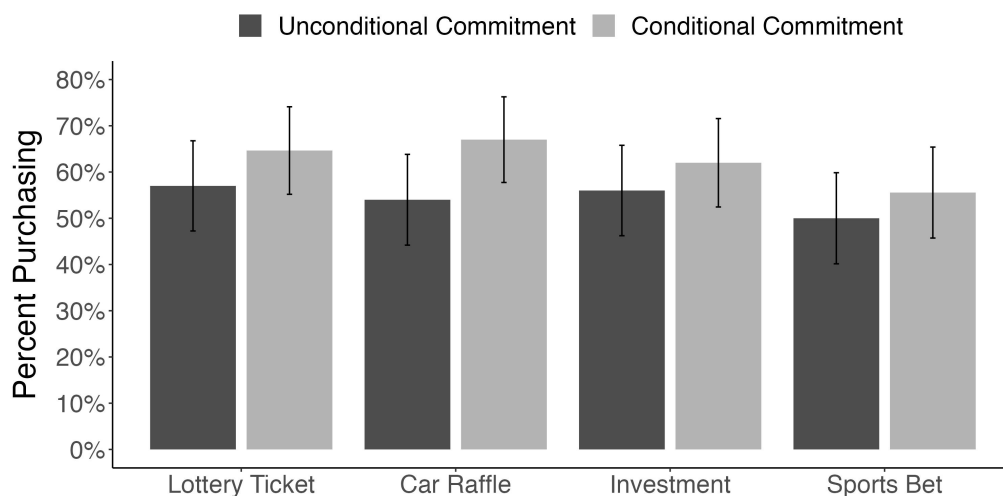
0.33,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $z = 2.31$ ,  $p = .021$ ,  $OR = 1.40$ . The direction of this effect was consistent with the overall effect for all four target behaviors (figure 1).

*Joint Agency.* Participants felt to a greater extent like they were making a joint decision with the initiator if they received a conditional commitment ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) rather than an unconditional commitment ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ),  $b = 1.33$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t(793) = 9.99$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Anticipated Social Connection.* Participants also expected the target behavior to be more socially connecting if the initiator committed to engage in it conditionally ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) rather than unconditionally ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ),  $b = 0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $t(793) = 5.10$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**FIGURE 1**

PROPORTION OF PARTICIPANTS CHOOSING TO ENGAGE IN TARGET BEHAVIOR AS A FUNCTION OF COMMITMENT TYPE FOR EACH SCENARIO (STUDY 1).



NOTE.—Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

*Summary.* Study 1 supported our central prediction that conditional commitments would be more persuasive than unconditional commitments. Exploratory analyses also yielded support for a component of our connection-seeking account: Upon receiving a conditional (vs.



unconditional) commitment, participants felt more like they and the initiator were making a joint decision and expected the target action to be more socially connecting. We return to the connection-seeking account and test it via mediation and moderation in studies 3–4.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 examined whether conditional commitments are more or less persuasive for behaviors perceived as vices relative to those perceived as virtues. When deciding whether to engage in behaviors that seem impulsive, risky, or indulgent (i.e., vices), consumers may *want* to engage in such behaviors yet believe that they *should* not do so (Milkman et al., 2008; Wertenbroch, 1998). For instance, someone may enjoy playing the lottery yet refrain from buying a lottery ticket because they believe that gambling is irresponsible. Conditional commitments may be especially persuasive in such contexts because they provide justification for engaging in socially disapproved behaviors—for example, by reducing negative emotions or fears of social judgment (Lowe & Haws, 2014; Ratner & Hamilton, 2015)—in which case they should be more effective for vices than virtues. But if they work by amplifying anticipated social connection and guilt, as we propose, then they may be just as effective for virtues as for vices.

### Method

*Participants and Design.* We requested 1,200 U.S.-based participants from Prolific and received 1,199 complete submissions. As preregistered, we excluded all responses from participants who opened the survey more than once under the same participant ID or IP address

( $n = 35$ ) or failed an attention check ( $n = 52$ ). Our final sample included 1,112 participants (gender: 49.3% man, 49.6% woman, 1.1% another identity; mean age = 41.5 years). This study employed a 2 (commitment type: unconditional vs. conditional; between-subjects) by 2 (consumption type: vice vs. virtue; within-subjects) mixed factorial design.

*Procedure.* Participants first entered the first names of two friends into open-ended text boxes. They then considered two scenarios, one in which a friend invites them to purchase an extra item at a coffee shop and another in which a friend invites them to make a financial decision while on a walk. One scenario was randomly assigned to the *vice* condition, and the other was assigned to the *virtue* condition. In the *coffee shop* scenario, participants considered ordering either a cupcake (vice condition) or a fruit cup (virtue condition) along with their drink. In the *financial decision* scenario, they considered purchasing a \$5 lottery ticket (vice condition) or making a \$5 donation to charity (virtue condition). The two scenarios were presented in random order, one per page. We randomized which friend was the initiator in which scenario.

In the *unconditional* commitment condition, participants were asked to imagine that their friend committed to engage in the target behavior and then invited them to do so (i.e., “Do you want to [order a cupcake]? I’m going to!”). In the *conditional* commitment condition, participants were instead asked to imagine that their friend committed to engage in the behavior only if the participant did so as well (i.e., “Do you want to [order a cupcake]? I will if you do!”).

For a given scenario, participants indicated whether they would engage in the target behavior (1 = definitely no, 2 = probably no, 3 = probably yes, 4 = definitely yes). On a separate page, they completed three additional measures, including a manipulation check that assessed the extent to which the target behavior was perceived as a vice: “To what extent does [engaging in target behavior] have negative long-term consequences?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Finally,

they completed an attention check that asked which of two scenarios they had *not* read about in the study. As preregistered, those who answered incorrectly were excluded from all analyses.

## Results

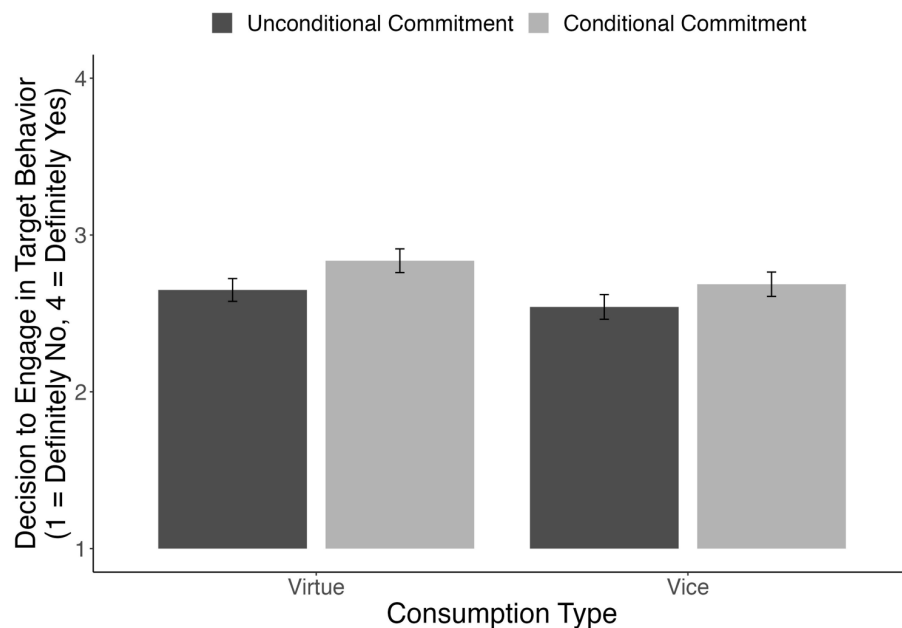
*Manipulation Check.* Confirming that our consumption type manipulation succeeded, vices ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) were perceived as having more negative long-term consequences than virtues ( $M = 1.46$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ),  $b = 0.57$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t(1,110.00) = 13.53$   $p < .001$ .

*Decision to Engage in Target Behavior.* We conducted a linear mixed-effects regression with the scale-based choice measure predicted by commitment type ( $-0.5 = \text{unconditional}$ ,  $+0.5 = \text{conditional}$ ), consumption type ( $-0.5 = \text{virtue}$ ,  $+0.5 = \text{vice}$ ), and their two-way interaction, with random intercepts for scenario and participant. As predicted, participants were more willing to engage in the target behavior if the initiator committed to do so conditionally ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) rather than unconditionally ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ),  $b = 0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t(1,110.00) = 3.74$ ,  $p < .001$ . Overall, they were less willing to engage in vice behaviors ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) than virtuous behaviors ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ),  $b = -0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(1,109.00) = -3.95$ ,  $p < .001$ . Of particular interest, however, the interaction between commitment type and consumption type was not significant,  $b = -0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(1,109.02) = -0.64$ ,  $p = .526$ , indicating that conditional commitments were no more or less effective for vices than for virtues (figure 2).

*Summary.* Study 2 conceptually replicated the results of study 1 and found that conditional commitments were just as persuasive for virtues as they were for vices. These results suggest that conditional commitments are not more persuasive than unconditional commitments merely because they make consumers feel licensed to engage in socially disapproved behaviors.

Rather, they were persuasive even for socially desirable behaviors, which suggests an alternative mechanism (e.g., because they amplify social connection and guilt).

**FIGURE 2**  
WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE IN TARGET BEHAVIOR AS A FUNCTION OF  
COMMITMENT TYPE FOR CONSUMPTION OF VICES VS. VIRTUES (STUDY 2).



NOTE.—Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

We further probed the robustness of our results in appendix studies A and B. Appendix study A tested whether conditional commitments are any more or less persuasive when initiators in both conditions explicitly communicate a desire to engage in the target behavior *together* (e.g., “wouldn’t it be great if we both signed up for karaoke?”). It is possible that conditional commitments were effective in studies 1 and 2 primarily because they conveyed a desire for both individuals to take the action, whereas unconditional commitments did not. If so, the effect of

making a conditional (vs. unconditional) commitment should be reduced or eliminated when the initiator separately expresses a desire for both individuals to engage in the target behavior. However, we found that making this desire explicit did not moderate the effect, suggesting that our findings are unlikely to be explained by this particular alternative explanation.

Appendix study B examined whether the persuasiveness of conditional commitments hinges on the number of initiators. We found that, although participants were more likely to take a target action when three friends (vs. one friend) committed to take the action, conditional (vs. unconditional) commitments were no more or less effective in either case. This suggests that the effects we observe are not limited to one-on-one interactions, which are our primary focus.

### STUDY 3

Study 3 investigated our connection-seeking and rejection-aversion accounts via mediation. According to our theory, conditional commitments are persuasive for two reasons: First, they evoke joint agency, which makes the target action seem more socially connecting (the *connection-seeking* account). Second, they put responsibility for the initiator's outcome in the hands of the responder. Given that *not* taking the target action means preventing the initiator from doing so, the responder expects to feel more guilty if they do not take the action (the *rejection-aversion* account). To examine both accounts simultaneously, we measured anticipated social connection and anticipated guilt and tested whether either or both of these factors statistically mediated the effect of conditional (vs. unconditional) commitments on choice.

#### Method

*Participants and Design.* We requested 1,200 U.S.-based participants from Prolific and received 1,195 complete submissions. As preregistered, we excluded all responses from participants who opened the survey more than once under the same participant ID or IP address ( $n = 31$ ). Our final sample thus consisted of 1,164 participants (gender: 49.2% man, 48.6% woman, 2.1% another identity; mean age = 40.4 years). Participants were randomly assigned to condition in a 2 (commitment type: unconditional vs. conditional) by 4 (scenario: lottery ticket, donation, vegan burger, cupcake) full-factorial design.

*Procedure.* Participants first entered the first name of a friend into an open-ended text box. They then considered one of four scenarios in which this friend invites them to engage in a target behavior: buying a lottery ticket, making a \$5 donation to charity, ordering a cupcake at a coffee shop, or ordering a vegan burger at a restaurant. In all conditions, the initiator asks whether the participant would like to engage the target behavior (e.g., “Do you want to [buy a lottery ticket]?”) and then commits to engage in the target behavior *unconditionally* (“I’m going to!”) or *conditionally* (“I will if you do!”).

Participants indicated whether they would engage in the target behavior (yes or no). They also completed four additional measures : a measure of *joint agency*, a measure of *anticipated social connection*, a measure of *perceived control* over the initiator’s outcome, and a measure of *anticipated guilt* (i.e., the extent to which they expected to feel guilty if they chose not to engage in the target behavior). Responses were elicited on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We randomized whether the dependent variable appeared before or after the additional measures.

## Results and Discussion

*Decision to Engage in Target Behavior.* We conducted a logistic regression with the choice to engage in the target behavior (1 = yes, 0 = no) predicted by commitment type, with fixed effects for each scenario. As predicted, participants were more likely to agree to the target behavior in response to a conditional commitment (74.6%) than an unconditional commitment (62.7%),  $b = 0.63$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $z = 4.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $OR = 1.88$ . The direction of this effect was consistent with the overall effect for all four target behaviors.

*Joint Agency.* Participants felt a stronger sense of joint agency if the initiator made a conditional commitment ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) than if the initiator made an unconditional commitment ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ),  $b = 1.24$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t(1,159) = 11.04$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Anticipated Social Connection.* Participants also expected engaging in the target behavior to strengthen their friendship with the initiator to a greater extent if the initiator made a conditional commitment ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) rather than an unconditional commitment ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ),  $b = 0.65$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t(1,159) = 5.98$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Perceived Control Over Initiator's Outcome.* Participants perceived that they had greater control over whether the initiator could engage in the target behavior when the initiator made a conditional commitment ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ) rather than an unconditional commitment ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ),  $b = 2.40$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t(1,159) = 22.84$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Anticipated Guilt.* Participants who received a conditional commitment also expected that they would feel more guilty if they decided not to engage in the target behavior ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ) than did those who received an unconditional commitment ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ),  $b = 0.57$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t(1,159) = 5.33$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Mediation Analyses.* Next, we tested for the joint mediating roles of anticipated social connection and anticipated guilt using PROCESS Model 4 with 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2017). This model included commitment type (-0.5 = unconditional, +0.5 = conditional) as the independent variable, anticipated social connection and anticipated guilt as parallel mediators, and choice as the dependent variable, with scenario dummy variables as covariates. The 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects through anticipated social connection (indirect effect = 0.34, 95% CI: [0.22, 0.48]) and anticipated guilt (indirect effect = 0.17, 95% CI: [0.09, 0.27]) both excluded zero, consistent with mediation. This suggests that both anticipated social connection and anticipated guilt helped to explain the persuasiveness of conditional commitments, supporting our connection-seeking and rejection-aversion accounts.

As specified in our preregistration, we also conducted exploratory serial mediation analyses to test for the mediating roles of (1) the path from joint agency to anticipated social connection and (2) the path from perceived control over the initiator's outcome to anticipated guilt. For these analyses, we used PROCESS Model 6 with 10,000 bootstrapped samples. The first model yielded support for mediation through the path from joint agency to social connection, as evidenced by a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect that excluded zero (indirect effect = 0.28, 95% CI: [0.20, 0.37]). The second model also yielded support for mediation through the path from perceived control to guilt, as evidenced by a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect that excluded zero (indirect effect = 0.32, 95% CI: [0.22, 0.43]).

*Summary.* This study yielded correlational support for our connection-seeking and rejection-aversion accounts: When the initiator committed to take an action conditionally (vs. unconditionally), participants expected the action to be more socially connecting, while also



expecting to feel more guilty if they chose *not* to take the action. Both of these forces helped to explain the influence of conditional commitments on responders' behavior.

## STUDY 4

Study 4 provided a causal test of our connection-seeking account. Thus far, we have found correlational support for the idea that conditional commitments make the target action seem more socially connecting, in part explaining their persuasiveness. A further prediction of this account is that conditional (vs. unconditional) commitments should be less persuasive when the responder does *not* want to socially connect with the initiator. Study 4 tested this prediction.

### Method

*Participants and Design.* We requested 600 U.S.-based participants from Prolific and received 599 complete submissions. As preregistered, we excluded all responses from participants who opened the survey more than once under the same participant ID or IP address ( $n = 16$ ) or failed an attention check ( $n = 40$ ). Our final sample thus consisted of 543 participants (gender: 27.1% men, 70.2% women, 2.8% another identity; mean age = 31.3 years). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (commitment type: unconditional vs. conditional) by 2 (desire for social connection: high vs. low) between-subjects design.

*Procedure.* Participants considered a scenario in which they run into a friend's boyfriend, Alan, at a farmer's market. Participants in the *high* desire for social connection condition were told only that they had met Alan once before. Participants in the *low* desire for social connection

condition received the same information, plus an additional piece of negative information that we expected to reduce their desire for affiliation. Specifically, they were told that Jessica had told them one day earlier that Alan had been cheating on her for the past few months. All participants were told that after a short exchange, Alan pointed to a nearby doughnut stand and committed to buy a doughnut either *unconditionally* (“That place has the best doughnuts. I’m going to get one!”) or *conditionally* (“That place has the best doughnuts. I’ll get one if you do!”).

Participants indicated how likely they would be to buy a doughnut (1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely), and then completed four additional measures in random order. These included a manipulation check for desired social connection, which assessed the extent to which participants would want to strengthen their bond with Alan; and a manipulation check for commitment type, which assessed the extent to which participants felt that they had influence over whether Alan bought a doughnut (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Finally, as an attention check, we asked participants to recall which of two scenarios they had not encountered during the study. As preregistered, those who answered incorrectly were excluded from all analyses.

## Results

*Manipulation Checks.* Confirming that our manipulation of desired social connection was successful, participants reported greater interest in strengthening their bond with Alan in the high desire for social connection condition ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) than in the low desire for social connection condition ( $M = 1.37$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ),  $b = 2.65$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t(539) = 25.54$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Confirming that the commitment type manipulation was successful, participants thought they had

more influence over Alan's decision when he committed conditionally ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ) rather than unconditionally ( $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $b = 2.66$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t(539) = 20.65$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Likelihood of Engaging in Target Behavior.* As preregistered, our primary analysis was a linear regression with the likelihood of buying a doughnut predicted by commitment type ( $-0.5 =$  unconditional,  $+0.5 =$  conditional), desire for social connection ( $-0.5 =$  low,  $+0.5 =$  high), and the two-way interaction between these variables. The main effect of commitment type was not significant,  $b = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t(539) = -0.34$ ,  $p = .731$ , indicating that participants were overall no more likely to buy a doughnut when Alan committed to do so conditionally rather than unconditionally. The main effect of desire for social connection was significant,  $b = 2.12$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t(539) = 15.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that participants with a high desire to bond with Alan were more likely to buy a doughnut than those with a low desire to bond. Of particular interest, the interaction between commitment type and desire for social connection was significant,  $b = 0.97$ ,  $SE = 0.28$ ,  $t(539) = 3.44$ ,  $p < .001$ . We decomposed this interaction by examining the simple effect of commitment type when the desire for social connection was high versus low.

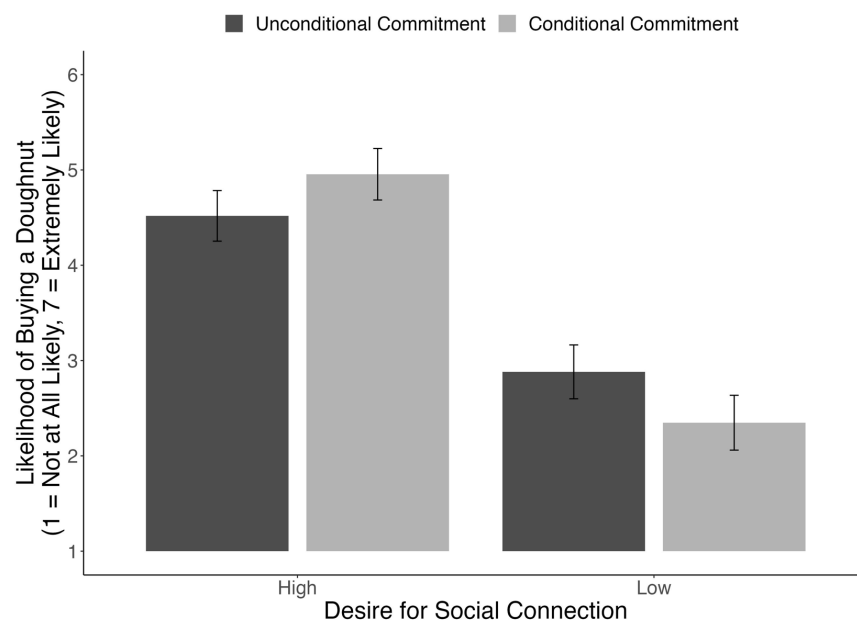
Among participants with a high desire to connect with Alan, the likelihood of buying a doughnut was significantly greater when Alan made a conditional commitment ( $M = 4.95$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ) than an unconditional commitment ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ),  $b = 0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $t(539) = 2.18$ ,  $p = .030$ . By contrast, among participants with a low desire to bond with Alan, this effect reversed: The likelihood of buying a doughnut was significantly *lower* if Alan made a conditional commitment ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ) rather than an unconditional commitment ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ),  $b = -0.53$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $t(539) = -2.68$ ,  $p = .008$ . Results are displayed in figure 3.

*Summary.* Study 4 provides causal evidence for a prediction of our connection-seeking account. Conditional commitments were especially persuasive when the responder was

motivated to bond with an initiator, but they were especially *unpersuasive* when the responder was less motivated to bond. This is consistent with the idea that responders perceive conditional commitments as an opportunity to socially connect. When the responder does not have a strong desire to socially connect with the initiator, receiving a conditional (vs. unconditional) commitment can make them even *less* likely to engage in the target behavior.

**FIGURE 3**

LIKELIHOOD OF BUYING A DOUGHNUT AS A FUNCTION OF COMMITMENT TYPE  
AND DESIRE FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION (STUDY 4).



NOTE.—Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

## STUDY 5

Having found support for our connection-seeking account, we proceeded to investigate our rejection-aversion account. This account suggests that conditional commitments make the responder feel more guilty about turning down the initiator's request, given that this could prevent the initiator from taking the target action. Crucially, this explanation should only hold if the responder believes that the initiator *wants* to take the action. Otherwise, the responder should not feel especially guilty about preventing the initiator from taking the action and thus may not be persuaded to take the action. Study 5 varied whether the initiator did not specify a preference (as in our previous studies), expressed a strong preference, or expressed a weak preference for taking the target action. We expected that conditional commitments would be more persuasive than unconditional commitments when the initiator expressed a strong or unspecified preference, but that they would become less persuasive when the initiator expressed a weak preference.

## Method

*Participants and Design.* We requested 1,400 U.S.-based participants from Prolific and received 1,402 complete submissions. As preregistered, we excluded all responses from participants who opened the survey more than once under the same participant ID or IP address ( $n = 31$ ). Our final sample thus consisted of 1,371 participants (gender: 49.8% men, 48.7% women, 1.5% another identity; mean age = 42.9 years). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (commitment type: unconditional vs. conditional) by 3 (initiator's preference: unspecified vs. weak vs. strong) full-factorial design.

*Procedure.* Participants first entered the first name of a friend into an open-ended text box. They then considered a scenario in which this friend (the *initiator*) mentions that they just

heard about an upcoming 5K run taking place at a local park and asks whether the participant would like to sign up (“Do you want to sign up for the 5K?”).

In the *unspecified preference* condition, the initiator simply commits to sign up for the 5K either *unconditionally* (“I’m going to”) or *conditionally* (“I will if you do”). In the *weak preference* condition, they indicate that they do not have a strong desire to sign up for the 5K (“I don’t really want to do it, ...”) and then commit to do so either unconditionally (“... but I’m going to”) or conditionally (“... but I will if you do”). In the *strong preference* condition, they express a strong desire to sign up for the 5K (“I really want to do it, ...”) and then commit to do so either unconditionally (“... so I’m going to”) or conditionally (“... but I only will if you do”).

Participants indicated whether they would sign up for the 5K (yes or no). On a separate page, they completed a measure of *anticipated guilt*, which assessed the extent to which they expected to feel guilty if they chose not to sign up (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). As a manipulation check for the initiator’s preference strength, participants rated the extent to which they believed the initiator personally wanted to sign up for the 5K (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

## Results

*Manipulation Check.* To confirm that our manipulation of the initiator’s preference was successful, we regressed perceived preference strength on a variable for the initiator’s preference manipulation. As intended, relative to the unspecified preference condition ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ), the initiator was perceived to have a stronger desire to sign up for the 5K in the strong preference condition ( $M = 6.01$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ),  $b = 0.86$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t(1,368) = 9.12$ ,  $p < .001$ , and a

weaker desire in the weak preference condition ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ),  $b = -2.45$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t(1,368) = -25.73$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Decision to Sign Up for the 5K.* We conducted a series of linear regressions to examine how the initiator's preference strength influenced the persuasiveness of conditional commitments. The overall pattern of results is displayed in figure 5.

First, to test whether expressing a strong preference *increased* the persuasiveness of conditional commitments, we compared the strong and unspecified preference conditions. We regressed the decision to sign up for the 5K (1 = yes, 0 = no) on commitment type (-0.5 = unconditional, +0.5 = conditional), preference strength (-0.5 = unspecified, +0.5 = strong), and their two-way interaction. Overall, participants were more likely to indicate that they would sign up for the 5K if the initiator committed to do so conditionally (51.2%) rather than unconditionally (42.2%),  $b = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(913) = 2.74$ ,  $p = .006$ . The main effect of the initiator's preference was not significant,  $b = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(913) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .104$ , nor was its interaction with commitment type,  $b = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(913) = 1.10$ ,  $p = .272$ .

Next, we tested whether expressing a weak preference to sign up for the 5K *decreased* the persuasiveness of conditional commitments by comparing the weak and unspecified preference conditions. We regressed the decision to sign up for the 5K on commitment type (-0.5 = unconditional, +0.5 = conditional), preference strength (-0.5 = unspecified, +0.5 = weak), and their two-way interaction. Overall, participants were less willing to sign up for the 5K when the initiator made a conditional (vs. an unconditional) commitment,  $b = -0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(907) = -2.12$ ,  $p = .034$ , and when the initiator's preference was weak (vs. unspecified),  $b = -0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(907) = -2.05$ ,  $p = .041$ . However, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction,  $b = -0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(907) = -3.79$ ,  $p < .001$ . When the initiator did not specify a

preference, making a conditional commitment directionally but non-significantly increased participants' willingness to sign up (46.7%) relative to an unconditional commitment (41.3%),  $b = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(907) = 1.19$ ,  $p = .236$ . However, when they expressed a weak preference, making a conditional commitment *reduced* participants' willingness to sign up (27.9%) relative to an unconditional commitment (46.9%),  $b = -0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(907) = -4.17$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Finally, to compare the weak and strong preference conditions, we regressed the decision to sign up for the 5K on commitment type (-0.5 = unconditional, +0.5 = conditional), preference strength (-0.5 = weak, +0.5 = strong), and their two-way interaction. Participants were overall no more willing to sign up for the 5K if the initiator made a conditional (vs. an unconditional) commitment,  $b = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(910) = -1.00$ ,  $p = .317$ , though they were more likely to sign up if the initiator expressed a strong (vs. weak) preference,  $b = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(910) = 3.71$ ,  $p < .001$ . Again, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction,  $b = 0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(910) = 4.92$ ,  $p < .001$ . Whereas making a conditional (vs. an unconditional) commitment *reduced* sign-ups when the initiator's preference was weak,  $b = -0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(910) = -4.17$ ,  $p < .001$ , conditional commitments *increased* sign ups (55.7%) relative to unconditional commitments (43.0%) when the initiator's preference was strong,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(910) = 2.78$ ,  $p = .006$ .

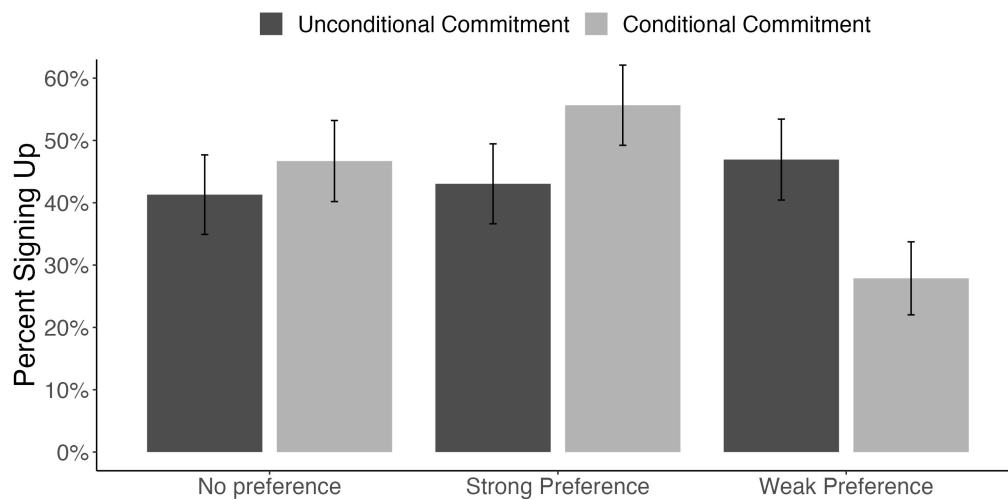
*Summary.* Study 5 provides support for our rejection-aversion account. We found that when the initiator expressed a weak preference to engage in the target behavior, conditional commitments *reduced* the responder's willingness to engage in the behavior. By contrast, expressing a strong preference to engage in the target behavior did not make conditional commitment significantly more persuasive, at least relative to not specifying any preference. These patterns are consistent with our theorizing that in the absence of explicit preference information, the act of making a conditional commitment leaks a preference for engaging in the



target behavior. Such inferences can explain why responders expect to feel especially guilty if they reject a conditional commitment. The next study further investigates this process by manipulating whether responders have *any* source of information on the initiators' preferences.

**FIGURE 4**

PROPORTION OF PARTICIPANTS INDICATING THEY WOULD SIGN UP FOR 5K AS A FUNCTION OF COMMITMENT TYPE AND INITIATOR'S PREFERENCE (STUDY 5).



NOTE.—Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

## STUDIES 6A AND 6B

The next set of studies built on study 5 to further clarify how knowledge of the initiator's preferences influences the persuasiveness of conditional commitments. Specifically, we investigated what happens when responders have control over an initiator's outcome but have no way of knowing the initiator's preferences. According to our rejection-aversion account, the reason responders expect to feel especially guilty about turning down a conditional commitment

is that this directly prevents the initiator from taking the action they want to take. This suggests that if the responder has no way of knowing the initiator's preferences, they will not necessarily be swayed in either direction when given control over the initiator's outcome.

To eliminate all possible cues of the initiator's preferences, we created a new paradigm that eliminates direct communication between the initiator and responder. Participants were ostensibly placed into anonymous initiator-responder dyads, though they were all in fact assigned to the responder role. We randomly assigned them to one of three conditions, which varied (a) whether receiving the target option—conditional on selecting it—hinged on *both* participants selecting this option and (b) whether the responder knew which option the initiator had selected while making their own decision. Specifically, some participants learned that the initiator had selected the target option but had no influence over the initiator's outcome. Others learned that they and the initiator could only receive the target option if they both selected it, but did not learn which option the initiator preferred. Finally, some learned *both* that the initiator had selected the target option *and* that neither participant could receive the target option unless both selected it. If knowing the initiator prefers to take the target action is an important part of what makes conditional commitments more persuasive than unconditional commitments, then both components should be more persuasive than either component on its own.

This new paradigm helped us test the robustness of our effects in three ways. First, by eliminating direct communication between the initiator and responder, we could examine whether the effect holds in the absence of any subtle linguistic cues that might make conditional commitments persuasive when communicated verbally, as well as any information leaked by the initiator's choice to make a conditional commitment in the first place. Second, this paradigm allowed us to examine real, consequential decisions (donating a bonus in study 6a; entering a

gamble in study 6b). Third, because participants made real choices, we were able to explore how the features of a conditional commitment actually influenced their subsequent experiences. Of particular interest, whereas prior studies assessed the *anticipated* social connection of taking a target action, this study captured *actual* feelings of social connection upon taking the action.

## Method

*Participants and Design.* We requested 900 U.S.-based participants from Prolific for each study. We received 897 complete submissions for study 6a and 901 complete submissions for study 6b. As preregistered, we excluded all responses from participants who opened the survey more than once under the same participant ID or IP address (study 6a:  $n = 42$ ; study 6b:  $n = 52$ ) and those who failed an attention check at the end of the survey (study 6a:  $n = 1$ ; study 6b:  $n = 7$ ). Our final sample for study 6a thus included 854 participants (gender: 35.8% men, 61.9% women, 2.1% another identity; mean age = 38.2 years) and our final sample for study 6b included 842 participants (gender: 38.2% men, 58.7% women, 3.1% other identity; mean age = 38.1 years). Participants in both studies were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions: an *unconditional outcome* condition, a *conditional outcome—initiator’s preference unknown* condition, and a *conditional outcome—initiator’s preference known* condition.

*Procedure.* In both studies, participants made a real choice between two options. In study 6a, they chose between receiving a \$0.10 bonus payment (“Option A”) and donating \$0.10 to charity (“Option B”). In study 6b, participants chose between receiving a \$0.10 bonus payment (“Option A”) and having a 50% chance to receive \$0.05 and a 50% chance to receive \$0.20 (“Option B”). After learning about both options, but before making their selection, participants

were told that they would be matched with another participant in the study. Unbeknownst to participants, they were not matched with a real participant; this allowed us to ensure that all participants in a given condition received the same information about their partner's selection.

The *unconditional outcome* condition was designed to be structurally similar to the unconditional commitment condition in our previous studies. Participants were told that their partner would choose between Option A and Option B first, and that they would learn which option their partner had chosen before making their own selection. They learned that their partner had selected Option B (the target option), and then they made their own selection.

The *conditional outcome—initiator's preference unknown* condition was designed to be similar to the conditional commitment condition in our previous studies, with the exception that participants did not know which outcome the initiator preferred. Participants were told that they would make their selection at the same time as their partner and that the other participant's outcome may depend on their selection: If both participants chose Option B, they would both receive Option B; however, if *either* participant chose Option A, then both participants would receive Option A. Participants made their own selection, and then learned that their partner had selected Option B.

The *conditional outcome—initiator's preference known* condition was designed to be structurally similar to the conditional commitment condition in our previous studies, in that participants also learned the initiator's preference before making their selection. Participants received the same information on how outcomes would be determined as in the conditional outcome—initiator's preference unknown condition. However, they were also told that their partner would choose first and that they would learn which option their partner had chosen

before making their own selection. As in the unconditional outcome condition, they learned that their partner had selected Option B. They then they made their own selection.

Participants in both studies then completed several additional measures, including a measure of *social connection*, which assessed the extent to which participants bonded with their partner (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). As a manipulation check for the conditional outcome manipulation, participants also indicated the extent to which they had influence over which option their partner received (1 = not at all, 7 = very much so). We also included an attention check measure in both studies that asked participants to select the number 3 on a 7-point scale; as preregistered, those who failed to do so were excluded from all analyses.

## Results

*Manipulation Check.* Confirming that our conditional outcome manipulation was successful, relative to participants with unconditional outcomes (study 6a:  $M = 1.37$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ; study 6b:  $M = 1.42$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ), those with conditional outcomes felt that they had more influence over their partner's outcome, both when they knew which outcome their partner preferred (study 6a:  $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 2.49$ ,  $t(378.86) = 11.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ; study 6b:  $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ,  $t(383.48) = 12.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and when they did not (study 6a:  $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ;  $t(412.56) = 9.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ; study 6b:  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ,  $t(408.53) = 9.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Decision to Receive Target Option.* We were primarily interested in whether participants would be more likely to choose the target option if the initiator's outcome was conditional (vs. unconditional) on their choice, and whether those with conditional outcomes would be more likely to choose the target option if they knew that the initiator preferred this option.

In study 6a, in which the target option involved donating an endowed \$0.10 bonus to charity, participants whose outcomes were conditional on an initiator's but who did not know the initiator's preference were no more likely to donate (51.1%) than those whose outcomes did not depend on an initiator's (50.2%),  $X^2(1, N = 854) = 0.04, p = .834$ . However, participants whose outcomes were conditional on an initiator's *and* who knew the initiator preferred to donate were significantly more likely to donate (68.1%) than those in the unconditional outcome condition,  $X^2(1, N = 854) = 18.88, p < .001$ , and the conditional outcome—initiator's preference unknown condition,  $X^2(1, N = 854) = 17.10, p < .001$  (figure 5).

We observed a similar pattern of results in study 6b, in which the target option was a gamble offering the chance to receive either \$0.20 or \$0.05 (vs. receiving \$0.10 for sure). Relative to participants whose outcomes did not depend on an initiator's (54.0%), those with conditional outcomes who did not know if the initiator preferred the (target) gamble option were no more likely to select this option (51.4%),  $X^2(1, N = 842) = 0.37, p = .544$ . However, those whose outcomes were conditional on the initiator's *and* knew the initiator preferred the gamble option were significantly more likely to choose this option (68.0%) than those in the unconditional outcome condition,  $X^2(1, N = 842) = 11.49, p < .001$ , and the conditional outcome—initiator's preference unknown condition,  $X^2(1, N = 842) = 16.09, p < .001$  (figure 5).

The results of both studies indicate that participants were most likely to select the target option if they were both responsible for their partner's outcome *and* knew that their partner preferred this option; neither being responsible for the initiator's outcome nor knowing which option the initiator preferred was sufficiently persuasive on its own.

*Social Connection.* We also explored the extent to which participants in each condition felt socially connected with the initiator *after* making a decision. Note that those in the

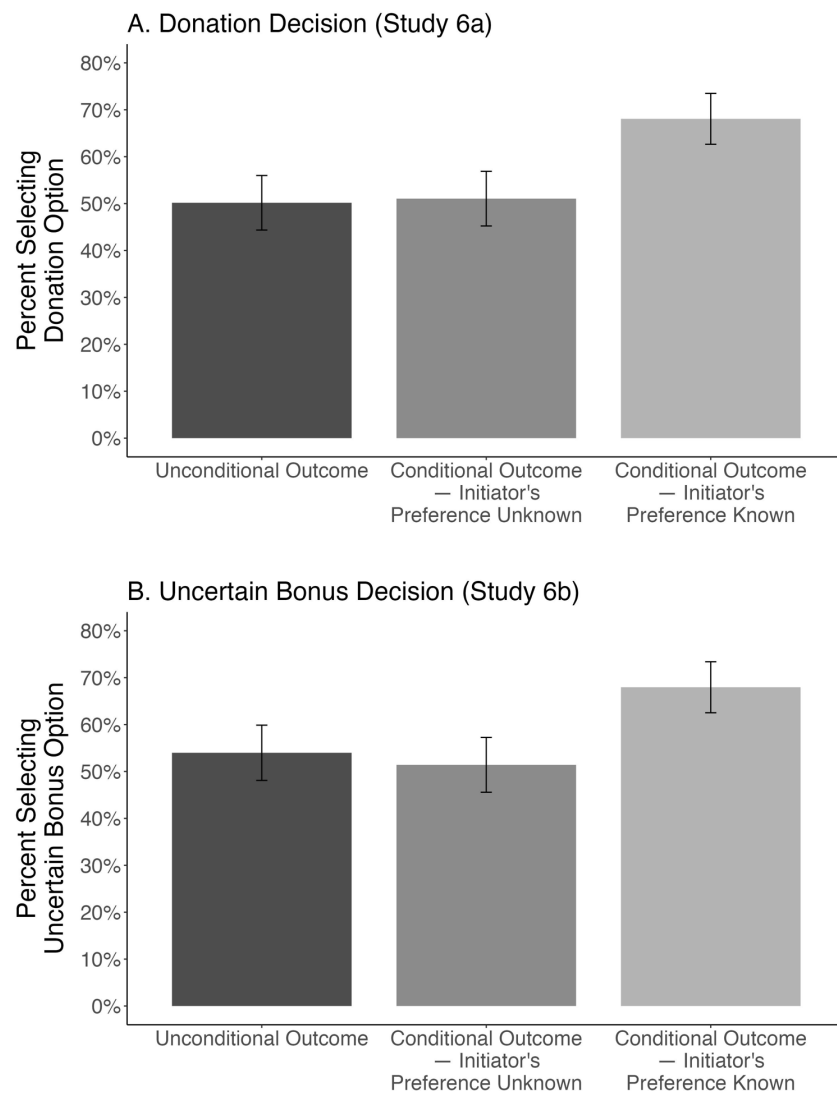
conditional outcome—unknown preference condition learned that the initiator had selected the target option after making their own decision, but before completing any additional measures. This means that participants across all conditions knew their partner's preference while reporting on their felt social connection. In study 6a, relative to participants with unconditional outcomes ( $M = 2.09, SD = 1.58$ ), those with conditional outcomes reported feeling a stronger bond with the initiator, both when they did not know the initiator's preference ( $M = 2.46, SD = 1.74$ ),  $t(561.73) = 2.68, p = .008$ , and to an even greater extent when they knew the initiator preferred donating ( $M = 2.76, SD = 1.80$ ),  $t(558.83) = 4.72, p < .001$ . Within the conditional outcome conditions, those who knew the initiator's preference reported feeling a stronger bond with them than those who did not know the initiator's preference,  $t(566.43) = 2.00, p = .046$ . A similar pattern emerged in study 6b. Relative to participants with unconditional outcomes ( $M = 1.87, SD = 1.38$ ), those with conditional outcomes reported feeling a stronger bond with their partner, both when they did not know the initiator's preference ( $M = 2.35, SD = 1.60$ ),  $t(546.63) = 3.84, p < .001$ , and when they knew the initiator preferred the uncertain bonus option ( $M = 2.67, SD = 1.71$ ),  $t(539.04) = 6.10, p < .001$ . As in study 6a, those with conditional outcomes who knew the initiator's preference reported feeling even more socially connected than those who did not know the initiator's preference,  $t(562.09) = 2.26, p = .024$ .

*Summary.* The results of studies 6a and 6b suggest that knowing the initiator prefers the target option is a crucial aspect of what makes conditional commitments persuasive. Participants who knew their choice determined whether their partner could receive a target option, but did not initially know which option their partner preferred, were no more likely to choose the target option than those who could not influence their partner's outcome. Only those who both had

control over their partner's outcome *and* knew their partner preferred the target option were swayed toward this option.

**FIGURE 5**

PROPORTION OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CHOSE THE TARGET OPTION IN EACH  
CONDITION (STUDIES 6A–6B).



NOTE.—Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.



Moreover, in line with our connection-seeking account, participants who had influence over their partner's outcome reported feeling more socially connected with their partner even *after* making a decision. Those who knew their partner's preference beforehand—who were the most likely to select the target option—reported feeling an even stronger bond with their partner than those who learned their partner's preference after the fact. This suggests that jointly deciding upon a *particular* course of action is especially socially connecting. Note that these increases in social connection emerged despite the fact that responders neither communicated with their partner directly nor shared in the subsequent consumption experience—two features that were present across all of our previous studies.

## STUDY 7

In our final study, we tested an additional boundary condition. Though we have repeatedly found that conditional commitments boost persuasion, our studies thus far have examined behaviors that are relatively benign. If the target behavior posed a direct threat to the initiator's welfare, however, the responder might react very differently to a conditional commitment. After all, if the responder controls whether the initiator will engage in the target behavior, they should be much more sensitive to the impact of this behavior on the initiator's welfare. Study 7 tested this prediction by manipulating whether the initiator could be harmed by engaging in the target behavior, while holding the target behavior constant. We expected that conditional commitments would be more persuasive than unconditional commitments when participants had no reason to think the initiator would be harmed, but that this effect would

attenuate or reverse when participants received additional information about the initiator that would make it especially harmful for the initiator to engage in the target behavior.

## Method

*Participants and Design.* We requested 600 U.S.-based participants from Prolific and received 599 complete submissions. As preregistered, we excluded all responses from participants who opened the survey more than once under the same participant ID or IP address ( $n = 16$ ) or failed an attention check at the end of the survey ( $n = 3$ ). Our final sample thus included 580 participants (gender: 22.6% men, 74.8% women, 2.6% other; mean age = 29.4 years). This study employed a 2 (commitment type: unconditional vs. conditional; between-subjects) by 2 (potential harm: low vs. high; within-subjects) mixed factorial design.

*Procedure.* Participants considered two scenarios in random order, one in which a friend invites them to order a brownie at a coffee shop and another in which a friend invites them to buy a lottery ticket while on a road trip. Each scenario had a low-harm and a high-harm version. For each participant, one scenario was randomly assigned to the low-harm condition while the other was assigned to the high-harm condition. In the high-harm version of the coffee shop scenario, participants were told that their friend was pre-diabetic and had been trying to cut down on sugar. In the high-harm version of the lottery ticket scenario, they were told that their friend had struggled with a gambling addiction in the past, lost all of their life savings, and had not gambled in over a year. The low-harm versions were identical except that they omitted the information about potential harms.

As in our earlier studies, participants assigned to the *unconditional* commitment condition learned (in both scenarios) that their friend was planning to engage in the target behavior and asked if they wanted to do so (e.g., “Do you want to buy one?”). Meanwhile, participants in the *conditional* commitment condition learned that their friend would engage in the target behavior if they did so (e.g., “Do you want to buy one? I’ll buy one if you do!”). Participants then indicated whether they would personally engage in the behavior (yes or no).

For each scenario, participants completed three additional measures, including a commitment type manipulation check assessing the extent to which they had influence over the initiator’s decision; and a potential harm manipulation check assessing the extent to which the target behavior would be harmful to their friend (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Finally, participants answered an attention check question that asked them to recall which of two scenarios they had not encountered during the study. As preregistered, those who answered incorrectly were excluded from all analyses.

## Results

*Manipulation Checks.* Confirming that our commitment type manipulation was successful, participants believed they had more influence over the initiator’s decision if the initiator made a conditional commitment ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ) rather than an unconditional commitment ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ),  $b = 1.82$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t(1,155) = 16.99$ ,  $p < .001$ . Confirming that our manipulation of potential harm was successful, participants expected that engaging in high-harm behaviors would be more harmful to the initiator ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) than low-harm behaviors ( $M = 1.73$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $b = -3.94$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(1,155) = -52.67$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Decision to Engage in Target Behavior.* As preregistered, our primary analysis was a logistic regression with the decision to engage in the target behavior predicted by commitment type (-0.5 = unconditional, +0.5 = conditional), potential harm (-0.5 = high, +0.5 = low), and the two-way interaction between these variables. We included fixed effects for each scenario and clustered standard errors by participant. Overall, participants were marginally more likely to agree to the target behavior when the initiator committed to do so conditionally rather than unconditionally,  $b = -0.30$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $z = -1.88$ ,  $p = .060$ . Participants were also more likely to agree to the behavior if it posed low, rather than high, harm to the initiator,  $b = 2.63$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $z = 15.93$ ,  $p < .001$ . Of particular interest, the interaction between commitment type and potential harm was significant,  $b = 1.91$ ,  $SE = 0.33$ ,  $z = 5.81$ ,  $p < .001$ . We followed up by examining the simple effect of commitment type for low-harm and high-harm behaviors separately.

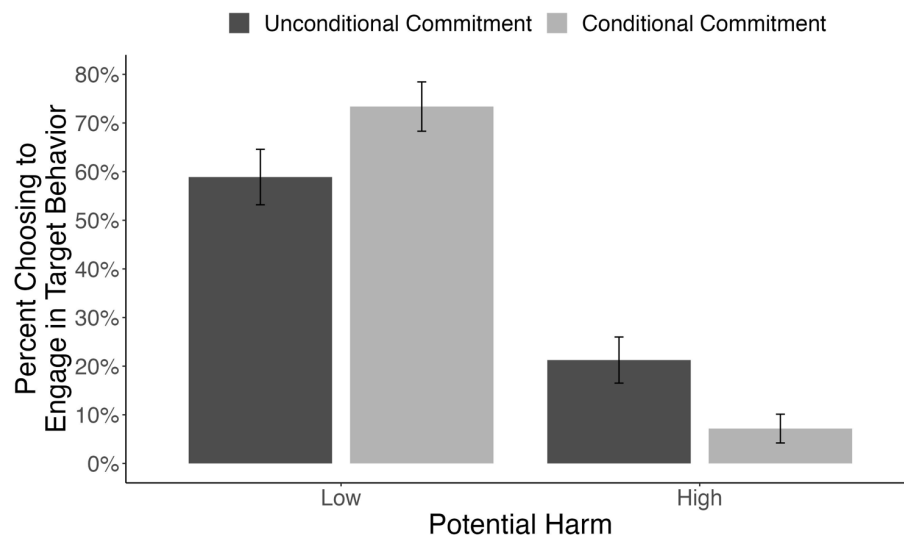
When considering low-harm behaviors—which posed minimal risk to the initiator—participants were more likely to comply with conditional commitments (73.4%) than unconditional commitments (58.9%),  $b = 0.66$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ,  $z = 3.69$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, when considering high-harm behaviors—which threatened the initiator’s welfare—participants were significantly *less* likely to comply with conditional commitments (7.2%) than unconditional commitments (21.2%),  $b = -1.25$ ,  $SE = 0.27$ ,  $z = -4.66$ ,  $p < .001$  (figure 6).

*Summary.* Study 7 identifies an additional boundary condition on the persuasiveness of conditional commitments. Specifically, conditional commitments can be less persuasive, and in this case even backfired, when the target behavior could pose harm to the initiator. Our results suggest that conditional commitments heighten sensitivity not only to the initiator’s preferences (as we found in study 5), but also to the initiator’s welfare. When an initiator proposes a target

behavior that puts themselves at risk, the responder may prioritize the initiator's welfare over other factors and actively *avoid* agreeing to a conditional commitment.

**FIGURE 6**

PROPORTION OF PARTICIPANTS CHOOSING TO ENGAGE IN TARGET BEHAVIOR AS A FUNCTION OF COMMITMENT TYPE AND POTENTIAL HARM (STUDY 7).



NOTE.—Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across eight main studies (and four reported in the web appendix), we investigate whether, when, and why conditional commitments are persuasive. Our studies reveal several key findings. First, committing to take an action conditionally (e.g., “I’ll do X if you do”) can be more effective at persuading others to take that action than committing unconditionally (e.g., “I’m going to do X”). Second, the persuasiveness of conditional commitments is explained in part by two psychological processes, which we refer to as the *connection-seeking* and *rejection-*

*aversion* accounts. When an initiator makes a conditional (vs. an unconditional) commitment, the responder not only expects to feel closer with the initiator upon taking the action, but also expects to feel more guilty if they do not take the action. We propose that this is because conditional commitments increase feelings of joint agency while ceding control of the outcome into the hands of the responder. When the responder feels that they are deciding together with the initiator, they expect the subsequent consumption experience to be more socially connecting. But when the responder can determine both individuals' outcomes, they feel guilty about the possibility of preventing the initiator from obtaining their preferred outcome.

Our studies provide support for both accounts across a range of hypothetical and real consumption decisions. We examine our two mechanistic accounts through mediation (study 3) and moderation (studies 4–5). We find that, consistent with our theorizing, conditional commitments are more effective when the responder wants to socially connect with the initiator (study 4), when they know that the initiator personally wants to take the target action (studies 5 and 6a–6b), and when they have no reason to believe that the target action would harm the initiator (study 7). Furthermore, we find that conditional commitments are persuasive not only when they are verbally communicated by an initiator (studies 1–5 and 7) but also when their structural features are externally imposed (studies 6a–6b).

Our research makes several contributions to the literature on social influence. First, we introduce a novel influence tactic and demonstrate its effectiveness in a variety of consumer-relevant contexts. Second, whereas the social influence tactics studied most extensively in previous research leverage conformity motives, we identify a form of social influence that operates through the decision-making *process*. The potential to conform is held constant across conditions, because agreeing to either an unconditional or a conditional commitment results in

taking the same action as the initiator. Third, we examine not only how conditional commitments influence the responder's *decision* to consume, but also their *construal* of the subsequent consumption experience. Whereas previous research has examined how socially connected consumers feel as a function of whether their choices match (vs. do not match) others' choices (e.g., Lowe & Haws, 2014), we hold the potential consumption outcome constant. We find that conditional commitments affect the extent to which a responder expects to bond with an initiator *contingent* on both individuals taking the proposed action, which suggests that they are persuasive because of the shared decision-making process and not the outcome itself.

To explain why an identical consumption experience that occurs in parallel with another person can seem more or less socially connecting depending on how it is initiated, we introduce the concept of joint agency. Joint agency—which we define as the subjective feeling that one is jointly deciding to take an action—is a concept that has received considerable attention in philosophy (Gilbert, 2009; Searle, 1990) but relatively little attention in consumer behavior (Bagozzi, 2000). Existing research on shared consumption has drawn a clear distinction between individual and joint decision making, as well as between individual and joint consumption outcomes (Gorlin & Dhar, 2012; Simpson et al., 2012). Within research on joint decision making, consumers often have to arrive at a single joint outcome, such as when they are choosing a restaurant for dinner (N. Y. J. Kim et al., 2023; Liu & Min, 2020). By contrast, we examine contexts in which multiple consumers face the same set of options and decide in parallel, but are free to make different choices given that each person's outcome is separate from others'. Nevertheless, we find that the way in which one person commits to a particular course of action can heavily influence the extent to which others *feel* like they are making a joint decision.

The connection-seeking and rejection-aversion processes we propose may shed light on previous findings. First, the link between joint agency and social connection could help to explain why normative appeals are especially effective when they invite people to “join in” or “work together” toward a common goal (Carr & Walton, 2014; Howe et al., 2021). Our findings suggest that the more consumers feel as though they are deciding to take an action together with others, the more socially connected they expect to feel upon taking the action. Second, our results may help to reconcile mixed findings in prior research on the effect of joint decision making on behavior. For instance, whereas joint decision making has been found to increase unethical behavior (Nikolova et al., 2018) and decrease investor overconfidence (Piehlmaier, 2023), other studies have failed to find effects of joint decision-making on charitable donations (Proulx et al., 2022). Our findings (particularly in studies 6a–6b) suggest that externally imposing a joint decision-making structure is not likely to change aggregate behavior, unless those deciding together have a sense of one another’s preferences. In contexts where people are reluctant to share their preferences or do not have strong preferences, the outcomes of joint decisions may not differ systematically from the outcomes of individual decisions.

For marketers, this research may offer guidance on how to best leverage social information for persuasion, particularly when trying to encourage socially beneficial behaviors. Marketing appeals often promote desirable behaviors like donating to charity or recycling by highlighting that many people are engaging in those behaviors. Although this tactic is known to be effective (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Goldstein et al., 2008), we suggest that it can be even more persuasive to make consumers feel as though others’ actions are *conditional* on theirs (and vice versa). One way marketers might do this is by framing the impact of individual actions in collective terms (e.g., “if 1,000 people reduced their television usage for a week, they would



prevent 1,190 lbs of CO<sub>2</sub> being released into the environment”; Camilleri & Larrick, 2019). A more direct approach is to make a desired outcome contingent on the actions of multiple individuals (cf., Anik et al., 2014). The crowdsourcing platform Kickstarter, for instance, uses a funding model in which funds are returned to donors if a project does not reach its goal. In contrast to platforms that deliver funds regardless of how much is raised (e.g., Indiegogo), Kickstarter’s model may be more successful if, like a conditional commitment, it makes potential donors feel guilty about *not* contributing or feel connected with others upon donating. Appendix study C ( $N = 586$ ), reported in the web appendix, tested in an incentive-compatible paradigm whether people were more likely to donate to charity when their donation would only be made if at least 40% of participants donated, relative to when they were simply told that 40% of other participants had donated. We found that making outcomes contingent on others marginally increased the donation rate, and also generated a significant boost in feelings of joint agency and anticipated social connection. These results suggest that the psychology of conditional commitments may scale beyond the one-on-one interaction contexts we focus on. Future research could explore other ways to leverage conditional commitments on a larger scale.

This research also offers several directions for future research. One open question is whether conditional commitments are more or less persuasive for some behaviors than others, and if so, which types of behaviors they are particularly effective for. We identify three features of the context that can influence their persuasiveness: the extent to which the responder wants to socially connect with the initiator, how strongly the initiator wants to take the target action, and whether the initiator could be harmed by the target action. However, we do not pinpoint specific *behaviors* for which conditional commitments are more or less effective. The results of study 2 suggest that conditional commitments work just as well for vices as for virtues. However, given

that we focused on relatively low-cost, everyday consumption decisions, it is possible that we would find different results for higher-stakes decisions. On the one hand, conditional commitments may not be as effective for decisions that are more costly (e.g., committing to a monthly yoga membership vs. signing up for a single yoga class). But on the other hand, costlier decisions might also offer greater opportunities for social connection, which could make conditional commitments even more persuasive if the individuals are motivated to connect.

Future research can also investigate how initiators decide whether to use conditional commitments in the first place. Although we find that responders are generally more persuaded by conditional than unconditional commitments, it is possible that initiators do not use conditional commitments as often as they should in practice. Initiators might systematically mispredict the consequences of conditional commitments—for example, by underestimating their benefits (e.g., persuasion, social connection) or overestimating their costs (e.g., guilt, pressure)—akin to how consumers mispredict the negative repercussions of expressing no preference when making joint decisions (N. Y. J. Kim et al., 2023). A related consideration is whether the persuasiveness of conditional commitments decays over time with repeated use. Whereas our studies examined only isolated decisions, it is possible that with repeated use conditional commitments lose their advantage over unconditional commitments. Initiators may recognize the benefits and costs of making a conditional commitment in the short-term, yet still choose not to do so because they expect it to weaken their future persuasion attempts. If the effects of conditional commitments do indeed shift over time, it may be interesting to investigate *when* initiators are most likely to use them as opposed to other social influence tactics.

Finally, while the present research identifies one way to leverage joint agency for social influence, we expect that feelings of joint agency may also vary across contexts, individuals, and

relationship types. First, our data suggests that certain actions may be more naturally construed as joint decisions than others. For instance, when controlling for commitment type, participants in study 3 reported feeling a stronger sense of joint agency when deciding whether to donate \$5 to charity than when deciding whether to buy a \$5 lottery ticket,  $b = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $t(1,159) = 3.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ; the same pattern emerged in the likelihood of agreeing to these actions,  $b = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t(1,159) = 5.65$ ,  $p < .001$ . Future research could explore which features of a behavior predict feelings of joint agency, independent of how the behavior is initiated. Individual consumers may also differ in the extent to which they construe decisions made alongside others as joint decisions, perhaps as a function of their personality (e.g., extraversion) or cultural background (e.g., collectivism). Even for a given individual, feelings of joint agency may vary for different relationships (e.g., friends vs. coworkers) or as a function of relationship length. In general, given that joint agency was strongly predictive of behavior in our studies, pinpointing the factors that influence feelings of joint agency could be a fruitful avenue for future research.

In conclusion, this research introduces a novel form of social influence and undertakes a thorough investigation of its psychological underpinnings across a broad range of consumption contexts. Our evidence suggests that conditional commitments can powerfully shape consumer decisions—not only by influencing whether or not responders choose to take a particular action, but also by changing how they interpret the subsequent consumption experience.

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