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Kelly Campbell

*University of British Columbia*, [kelly@csusb.edu](mailto:kelly@csusb.edu)

James J. Ponzetti

*University of British Columbia*

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### Recommended Citation

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The moderating effects of rituals on commitment in premarital involvements

Kelly Campbell

University of Georgia

James J. Ponzetti, Jr.

The University of British Columbia

The authors contributed equally to this paper and are listed alphabetically. The study is based on a graduate thesis by the first author under the direction of the second. An earlier version of this research was presented at the International Association of Relationship Research conference, Madison, Wisconsin, July, 2004. The authors would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Dan Perlman on an earlier draft. Direct all correspondence to Dr. James Ponzetti, School of Social Work and Family Studies, 2080 West Mall, Vancouver, B.C., V6T 1Z2. E-mail: [james.ponzetti@ubc.ca](mailto:james.ponzetti@ubc.ca)

### Abstract

This study examined how rituals were associated with commitment, and to what extent rituals moderated the investment model variables (i.e., satisfaction level, investment size, and alternatives) on commitment. Although rituals promote commitment in marital and family relationships, the salience of rituals to commitment in premarital involvements has not been investigated. University students (N=100) who agreed to participate were in a couple relationship but not married. Findings indicated that rituals were significant predictors of commitment; however, no unique variance was accounted for once investment model variables were taken into consideration. Rituals significantly moderated the relationship between alternatives and investments, and commitment. Implications for future research are discussed.

Key words: rituals, commitment, investment model

### The moderating effect of rituals on commitment in premarital involvements

Commitment is an essential factor in determining the persistence of intimate involvements. It reflects a dynamic process that shapes the degree to which individuals intend a particular relationship to persist into the future because it fulfills personal needs and expectations in the present (Adams & Jones, 1999). Past research has espoused rituals as vital elements of premarital involvements (Baxter, 1987; Bossard & Boll, 1950; Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs, Poltrock, & Baker, 2002). Thus, rituals provide an important means for understanding commitment.

Rituals serve as guides in close relationships especially during significant life events and stressful periods. The magical quality of rituals is embedded in their capacity to make transitions manageable. Simply knowing which rituals lay ahead during a day, a year, or lifetime quells uncertainty and tempers feelings of anxiety (Fiese, 1992; Schuck & Bucy, 1997; Shipman, 1982). Accordingly, rituals are particularly beneficial during adolescence and early adulthood because this is a unique time for establishing intimate involvements (Compan, Moreno, Ruiz, & Pascual, 2002; Eaker & Walters, 2002; Mize, 1995). Further, whether such involvements persist or end is related to commitment (cf., Kelley, 1983). These conclusions suggest a link between rituals and the development of commitment in premarital relationships.

### *Rituals*

Rituals are symbolic events that are repeated in a predictable manner over time. They are highly valued because they reflect the special experiences and unique interaction that partners create and share together. Whether rituals emerge from deeply felt religious convictions or consist of secular customs whose origin has been forgotten over the years, the need for rituals

seems universal. Rituals connect the past with the present and give shape and meaning to the future.

*Characteristics.* Five characteristics are definitive of rituals. First, a ritual is a structured endeavor. Although there is a reticence to vary a ritual, it can change in subtle and gradual ways if necessary. Second, a ritual is prescribed. Rituals mean precision in procedure. Using familiar symbols, actions, and words, rituals are enacted in this way, not that. Third, rituals recur. Repetition is salient to the prescribed form. As a ritual is repeated over and over, there gradually emerges a sense of rightness about it. Fourth, a ritual is ascribed special meaning for those involved. It may be more expedient, less expensive, or more efficient to do it another way, but it does not impart the special meaning ascribed to it when it is not done the right way. The signs and symbolic actions of ritual embrace meaning that cannot always be easily expressed in words. Finally, rituals reinforce relationships. Through their execution and repetition, these characteristics enable rituals to serve a variety of covert processes as well as explicit functions (Fiese et al., 2002; Viere, 2001; Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

*Functions.* Rituals serve important and diverse functions in daily interpersonal involvements especially marital and family relationships. The first and most prominent function is to bind people together and sustain ongoing interaction. For example, conjugal rituals strengthen marital bonds, clarify marital role expectations, and enhance marital satisfaction (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Bruess & Pearson, 1997; Bruess & Pearson, 2002). As family members share rituals, they develop a sense of belonging and connectedness as family. Family rituals can transmit common values and beliefs, reiterate family history and heritage, and gather members together during major changes (Baxter & Clark, 1996; Friedman & Weissbrod, 2004; Schvaneveldt & Lee, 1983). Second, rituals extend feelings of belonging by creating a sense of

distinctiveness. Personal development within the familial context is supported by rituals (Fiese, 1992; Giblin, 1995; Mize, 1995). Rituals also increase feelings of intimacy and solidify a shared identity (Chesser, 1980; Moriarity & Wagner, 2004). When individuals establish a common identity, they also articulate to one another the way to live together (Bennett, Wolin, & McAvity, 1988). In addition, dysfunctional patterns that undermine family interaction can be altered through the use of rituals (Leon & Jacobvitz, 2003). Finally, rituals are powerful organizers and can facilitate relationship stability and continuity (Cheal, 1988; Denham, 2003; Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993; Kiser, Bennett, Heston, & Paavola, 2005; Oswald, 2002). Research clearly demonstrates the protective role rituals provide for coping with uncertainty and change (Bennett, Wolin, Reiss, & Tietlebaum, 1987; Cheal, 1988; Giblin, 1995).

Interpersonal rituals serve as a means of dealing with both normative and non-normative stressors. For example, normative transitions, such as that from adolescence to adulthood (Fiese, 1992; Meredith, Abbott, Lamanna, & Sanders, 1989), to early parenthood (Fiese et al., 1993), or to the later years (Albrecht, 1962; Meske, Sanders, Meredith, & Abbott, 1994), are eased by rituals. Further, rituals facilitate adjustment to non-normative disruptions, such as illness (Bush & Pargament, 1997; Denham, 2003; Markson & Fiese, 2000), alcoholism (Bennett et al., 1987; Fiese, 1993; Wolin, Bennett Noonan, & Tietlebaum, 1980; Wolin & Bennett, 1984), marital dissolution (Berg-Cross, Daniels, & Carr, 1992; Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992), remarriage (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Whiteside, 1989), and single-parent families (Moriarity & Wagner, 2004; Olson, & Hayes, 1993). The prescriptive and repetitive nature of rituals imparts predictability and order to interpersonal life. The multitude of functions requires assorted types of rituals.

*Types.* Ritual types range from formal structured occasions like weddings to less articulated interactions like mealtime. Some rituals celebrate normative transitions, such as graduations and funerals, but others are emergent rituals in response to unexpected or nonnormative occurrences, such as a divorce or health crisis. There are daily practices, (such as the reading of a bedtime story or expressing affection for a partner) and rituals that occur on a weekly or monthly basis (such as going to a favorite restaurant). In addition, some rituals are recognized by the whole community; for example, seasonal events such as Thanksgiving, religious observances such as Passover, or national holidays such as Independence Day. Others are exclusive to a particular couple (e.g., anniversaries), recognize new generations (e.g., birthdays or baptisms), or affirm entire family units (e.g. special holiday gatherings or reunions). Given previous work concerning rituals in marriage and family relationships, it is surprising that the association between rituals and commitment in premarital relationships has not been studied (Fiese & Kline, 1993; Rogers & Holloway, 1991; Viere, 2001; Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

#### *The Investment Model of Commitment*

One of the leading theoretical frameworks for understanding commitment is the investment model developed by Rusbult (1980, 1983). Extensive research has supported the investment model and its theoretical claims (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2004). The model is cross-culturally generalizable, accounting for commitment processes in the United States, the Netherlands, and Taiwan (Lin & Rusbult, 1995; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997).

The investment model is based on interdependence theory which uses economic models to explain the process by which individuals develop a sense of commitment. Interdependence

theory proposes that as individuals become involved with a particular other, they are more likely to want the involvement to continue if they experience rewarding outcomes from it. When individuals experience more rewards than costs from their involvement, commitment emerges as a condition of their dependence. The degree of interdependence is enhanced as both satisfaction with and investment in the involvement increase and the quality of alternatives to their involvement decrease (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). The investment model accordingly defines commitment in terms of three interrelated components; namely, satisfaction level, investment size, and quality of alternatives (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Satisfaction level is conceptualized as the extent to which a relationship is worthwhile. Investment size refers to resources, both tangible (such as money and possessions) and intangible (e.g., self-disclosure, emotional involvement), an individual contributes to a relationship that is non-recoverable if the relationship were to end. The quality of alternatives consists of an individual's perceptions of available options that would be more rewarding than the current relationship. Investment model variables have been shown to predict commitment across a wide array of relationships, such as friendships, dating relationships, marital relationships, gay and lesbian relationships, and abusive relationships (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001; Rusbult, 1980a; Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991).

The purpose of the present study was two-fold. The main goal of this study was to investigate the link between rituals and commitment. While the association between the investment model variables and commitment has been demonstrated, whether rituals were significant predictors of commitment in premarital involvements, and, if so, whether



commitment was explained beyond that accounted for by investment model variables. The second purpose was to examine to what extent rituals moderated the relationship between investment model variables and commitment. Rituals were hypothesized to moderate feelings of commitment, especially during difficult times, because both satisfaction level and investment size typically decrease and alternatives to the relationship increase.

### *Method*

*Participants.* One hundred undergraduate students (27 men, 73 women) at a large university in western Canada, who were in couple relationships but not married, volunteered to take part in the study. The majority of participants (70%) were exclusively dating at the time they completed the questionnaire. Participants had been involved with their partners for 22.5 months on average. The mean age of the participants was 22 years (S.D. =2.7 years, range 19-33). The majority of respondents were either Euro-Canadian (47%) or Chinese-Canadian (22%) which reflected the composition of the student body.

*Measures.* The Premarital Rituals Scale (PRS) was designed to assess rituals in premarital relationships. The PRS consisted of 45 items that assessed five dimensions of nine ritual types (see Table 1 for a sample subscale from the PRS). Content for the PRS was based on a qualitative study of marital rituals by Bruess and Pearson (1997). Nine of the twelve ritual types identified by Bruess and Pearson (1997) were pertinent to premarital involvements: enjoyable activities, intimacy expressions, togetherness rituals, communication rituals, favorites, private codes, patterns/habits/mannerisms, escape episodes, and play rituals. Three were excluded because they were less relevant to premarital involvements: routines and tasks, spiritual rituals, and celebration rituals. The opportunity to partake in routine tasks may be compromised because premarital involvements typically do not involve a shared residence that

would facilitate interaction on a regular daily basis. Both spiritual and celebration rituals were considered less salient because occurrence was either infrequent or sporadic. Premarital involvements are often shorter in duration than marital or family relationships and do not encounter societal expectations and support for prescribed activities, which may jeopardize the shared participation in spiritual rituals and celebration rituals.

The format of the PRS was adapted from the Family Rituals Questionnaire (FRQ; Fiese & Kline, 1993). Fiese and Kline identified eight dimensions relevant to family rituals, five of which pertained to premarital involvements: occurrence, repetitiveness, affect, meaning, and deliberateness. Three were excluded: attendance, continuance, and roles. Rituals emerge in a relationship as partners spend time together so attendance was necessary for rituals to occur in the first place. Continuation was not relevant because premarital involvements do not span generations. Finally, the roles dimension was redundant with the roles and patterns ritual type described by Bruess and Pearson (1997).

Each of the 45 PRS items were measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = lowest score, and 4 = highest score). The range of each participant's summed rituals score was from 45-180. The mean rituals score for the sample was 128, with a standard deviation of 21.5, and a median of 129. The distribution was not significantly skewed (skewness = -.29, S.E. = .24) and it approximated a normal distribution. Reliability analyses revealed acceptable coefficients for the PRS. The Cronbach alpha for the overall PRS was 0.93. Internal consistency scores were computed for the PRS subscales representing ritual type. Cronbach alphas were 0.74 for leisure, 0.48 for intimacy, 0.69 for couple time, 0.68 for communication, 0.78 for favorites, 0.80 for private codes, 0.72 for roles, 0.68 for escape episodes, and 0.67 for play.

Commitment and the investment model variables (i.e., satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size) were assessed using the Investment Model Scale (IMS). The IMS is a self-report 37-item scale questionnaire consisting of four subscales (Rusbult et al., 1998). Participants were asked to rate how well each question represents their thoughts or feelings on a 9-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from 0 to 8. The commitment subscale consists of seven global items. The range of possible scores is from 0 to 56. The mean commitment level score was 44, with a standard deviation of 13.5, and a median of 48. The distribution was skewed (skewness = -1.39; SE = .24). The satisfaction, alternatives, and investments subscales each consist of five items. The possible summed range of scores is from 0 to 40. The mean satisfaction level score was 32, with a standard deviation of 9.7, and a median of 35. The distribution was skewed (skewness = -1.8; SE = .24). The mean quality of alternatives score was 14, with a standard deviation of 10, and a median of 13. The distribution approximated a normal distribution (skewness = .70; SE = .24). The mean investment size score was 26.5, with a standard deviation of 9.2, and a median of 29. The distribution approximated a normal distribution (skewness = -.75; SE = .24). Although the distributions for satisfaction level and commitment level were skewed, these findings are consistent with previous research (cf., Rusbult et al., 1998). The internal consistencies (i.e., Cronbach alpha scores) for the IMS were high with a range from 0.86 (for investments) to 0.98 (for satisfaction). These results were also comparable to research by Rusbult and her colleagues (1998).

*Procedure.* Participants were recruited from lower division courses at a large university in western Canada. Classes were informed about the purpose of the study then surveys were distributed and completed voluntarily outside of class. Surveys were returned at the following class meeting. Participants were assured all responses would be anonymous and confidential.

*Data analysis.* Labovitz (1970; 1972) supported the use of interval statistics on ordinal-level variables and it is common practice in work on the investment model by Rusbult and her colleagues (1980b, 1983). Analyses were completed in four steps. First, sex differences were examined using independent-groups t tests. Descriptive statistics, t values, and intercorrelations between variables are displayed in Table 2. Second, main effects of rituals on commitment were examined using simple linear regression. Third, the significance of rituals on commitment controlling for the investment model variables was assessed with hierarchical multiple regression. Finally, moderation was tested by following the procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). Variables were standardized prior to the analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). Commitment was initially regressed on each investment model variable and rituals. Then, an interaction term (i.e., the product of the variables already entered) reflecting the two-way interactions was entered at the second step of the equation to discern any moderating effects. Moderation is indicated by a significant interaction term regardless of the effects measured in previous steps.

### *Results*

No significant differences were noted between males and females so further consideration was not necessary. Rituals were a significant predictor of commitment ( $B = 0.52$ ,  $F = 36.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ) accounting for 27% of the variance. However, rituals contribute no unique variance to commitment when investment model variables are taken into account (see Table 3).

Table 4 shows the interaction effects of rituals and investment model variables on commitment. For satisfaction, no interaction effect was found. However, the interaction effect of investment size was significant, explaining 7% of the variance in commitment. Significant interaction effects were also noted for the quality of alternatives, explaining 5% of the variance.

The simple slopes of the regression of significant investment model variables on commitment at low and high values were computed to gain further perspective on two-way interactions. Values one standard deviation above the mean were considered high and values one standard deviation below the mean were considered low, which is standard for variables for which there is no theoretical rationale for determining high and low values (Aiken & West, 1991).

For investment size, if participants reported low investment (i.e., below the mean), more rituals predicted more commitment. Yet, when participants reported high investment, more rituals also predicted more commitment though not as great (see Figure 1). On the other hand, if participants reported high quality of alternatives (i.e., above the mean) or they perceived they had more options than their current involvement, then more rituals predicted less commitment. However, for participants who reported low quality of alternatives or few options to involvement, more rituals predicted more commitment (see Figure 2).

### *Discussion*

Previous research has focused exclusively on marital and family relationships, neglecting premarital involvements. This study extended previous research regarding rituals in marital and family relationships to premarital involvements. Rituals in premarital involvements were a significant predictor of commitment. An increase in rituals predicted commitment whereas lower commitment was predicted by a decrease in rituals. These results provided a preliminary indication of the import of rituals for premarital involvements in early adulthood.

The association between the investment model predictors and commitment replicated previous research (Le & Agnew, 2003). Individuals who were more satisfied, invested more, and perceived fewer alternatives to their relationships, reported more commitment. Yet the

results of this study indicated the association between investment size and quality of alternatives, and commitment was moderated by rituals.

Rituals relation to commitment was not significant when satisfaction was considered. Satisfaction seems to be a stronger predictor of commitment than rituals. The strong positive relationship between satisfaction level and commitment appears to override the influence of rituals. Satisfaction with a relationship may be a necessary condition for commitment regardless of rituals.

The association between investment size and commitment was moderated by rituals. The level of investment in the premarital involvements promoted commitment. This finding may be explained if rituals are considered another form of investment. From this perspective, the presence or absence of rituals was unimportant because if investments were high, the addition of rituals would increase commitment as it would if investments were low. The fact that increases in commitment were stronger when participants did not invest in their involvements may be due to rituals making up for the lack of other investments.

Rituals change the relationship between the quality of alternatives and commitment. If alternatives to the current relationship are high, then more rituals did not predict more commitment. That is, low rituals did predict high commitment. On the other hand, if alternatives are low, then more rituals fostered more commitment. When potential alternatives to particular heterosexual involvements are better than remaining in it, more rituals may not compensate for the difference. Yet, if the desirability of alternatives is low, more rituals predicted more commitment. By definition, rituals emerge from and characterize the special nature of particular involvements. Thus, rituals supplement the influence of alternatives on commitment.

Several factors may limit the interpretation of the current findings. The first limitation concerns sample representativeness. Participants included college-age individuals who were queried about premarital involvements. Only one member of any particular couple completed the questionnaire so these findings are individual rather than dyadic effects. In future research, diverse groups (e.g. nonheterosexual relationships, common law partnerships) and both partners of a couple, including each partner's perception of the others' ritual enactment, could be investigated. Second, the data reported were subject to the limitations of similar research designs. The causal relations between rituals and commitment cannot be addressed. These and other possible interpretations remain to be explored in subsequent studies. Nevertheless, several notable strengths about the import of rituals in maintaining premarital relationships may be drawn from the results.

Despite these limitations, this study is important for several reasons. First, it examined how rituals are linked to commitment in premarital heterosexual involvements. Prior to this study, the focus of research on rituals was on marital and family relationships. Previous studies have described the constructive influence of marital and family rituals. The findings reported here suggested that rituals are similarly associated with commitment in premarital involvements. However, to be succinct, rituals in premarital involvements did not predict commitment beyond the explanation accounted for by investment model variables.

A second contribution pertains to rituals moderation of the relationship between investment model variables and commitment. Results from this study indicated that rituals altered the prediction of commitment for investment size and quality of alternatives.

This study provided foundational information about rituals, investment model variables, and commitment in premarital involvements. Building on these findings, future researchers are left with exciting avenues for extending the literature on rituals in close relationships.



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Table 1: Sample subscale from the PRS

**ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES**

Examples of enjoyable rituals could include going out for dinner, playing sports, going to the movies, going for walks, and participating in hobbies together.

*Instructions:* Think of typical enjoyable or recreational rituals in your relationship.

**Circle ONE letter which best describes your current relationship.**

Really True	Sort of True		OR		Sort of True	Really True
1. A	B	We regularly engage in enjoyable activities in our relationship.	OR	We rarely engage in enjoyable activities in our relationship.	C	D
2. A	B	In our relationship everything about time is scheduled; enjoyable activities always occur at set times.	OR	In our relationship enjoyable activities are flexible. We take part in them whenever we can.	C	D
3. A	B	In our relationship we feel strongly about engaging in enjoyable activities together.	OR	In our relationship it is not that important if we engage in enjoyable activities together.	C	D
4. A	B	In our relationship enjoyable activities have a special meaning.	OR	In our relationship enjoyable activities are just done to pass time.	C	D
5. A	B	In our relationship there is little planning around enjoyable activities.	OR	In our relationship enjoyable activities are planned for in advance.	C	D

Note: In each subscale, one item was reverse scored so in the example above question 5 was reversed scored.



Table 2: Descriptive statistics, t values, and intercorrelations

	Females		Males		T value	Total sample		IM variables		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Rituals	Satisfacti on	Invest- ments
Rituals	125.8	21.4	133.8	21.2	1.68	127.9	21.5			
Satisfaction	31.6	10.6	33.3	6.9	0.96	32.0	9.7	0.60 **		
Investments	25.8	9.7	28.4	7.7	1.43	26.5	9.2	0.44 **	0.47 **	
Alternatives	14.5	10.6	13.9	9.9	-0.27	14.3	10.4	-0.50 **	-0.58 **	-0.59 **
Commitment	44.1	14.2	44.4	11.8	0.12	44.2	13.6	0.52 **	0.78 **	0.67 **

\*\* p < 0.01 level.

TABLE 3: Standardized regression coefficients for commitment: Main effects

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2
Investment Model variables		
Satisfaction (S)	0.48 ***	0.50 ***
Investments (I)	0.27 ***	0.28 ***
Alternatives (A)	-0.29 ***	-0.30 ***
Rituals (R)		-0.05
Adjusted R2	0.76	0.76
F change	106.20 ***	79.48 ***

\*\* p < .02, \*\*\* p < .001

TABLE 4: Standardized regression coefficients for moderating influences of rituals

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Satisfaction	0.78 ***	0.72 ***	0.91 **
Rituals		0.09	0.22
S X R			-0.29
Adjusted R2	0.60	0.60	0.60
F change	148.92 ***	1.12	0.46
Investments	0.67 ***	0.55 ***	2.06 ***
Rituals		0.28 ***	1.00 ***
I X R			-1.95 ***
Adjusted R2	0.45	0.50	0.57
F change	81.04 ***	12.75 ***	16.86 ***
Alternatives	-0.73 ***	-0.63 ***	-1.79 ***
Rituals		0.21 **	-0.09
A X R			1.07 ***
Adjusted R2	0.53	0.56	0.61
F change	114.25 ***	7.42 **	12.36 ***

\*\*p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001

Figure 1: Interaction of investment size and rituals on commitment

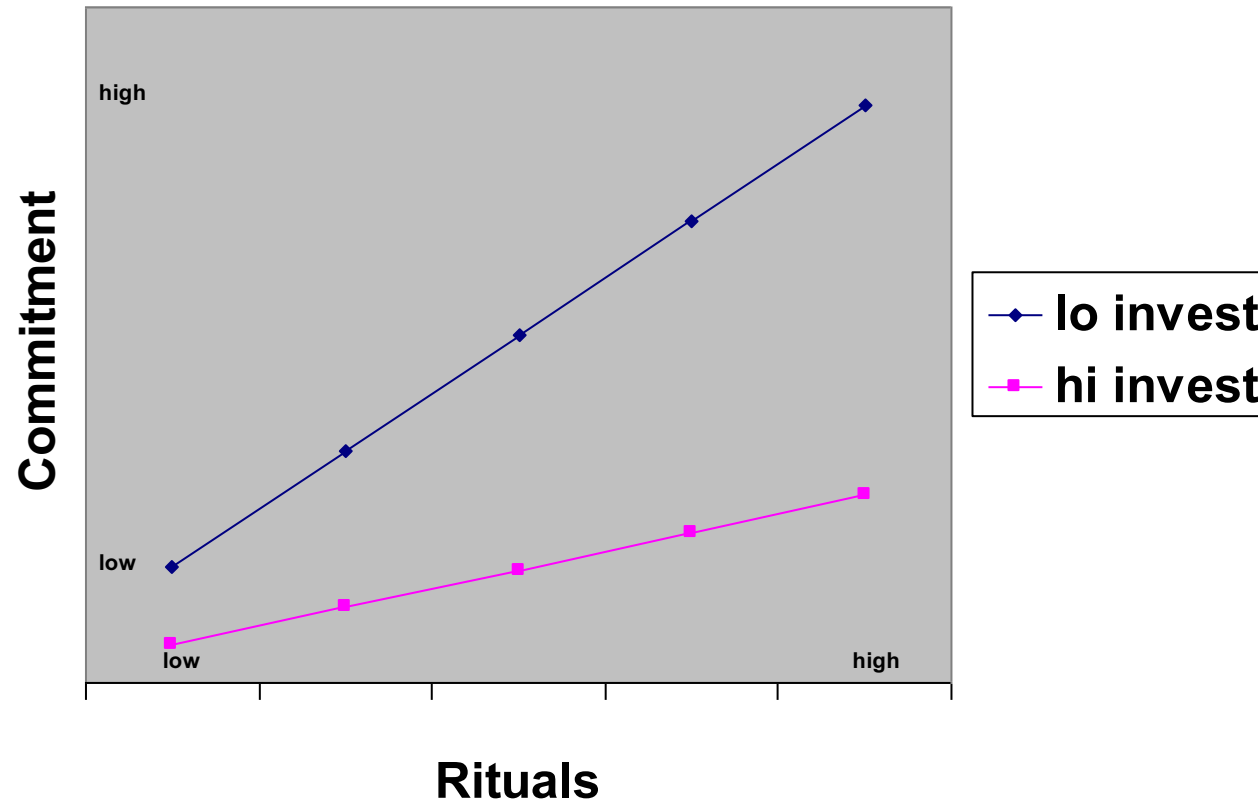


Figure 2: Interaction of alternatives and rituals on commitment

