"Nudging": Here's How Your Habits Are Being Hijacked for Profit

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Did You Know?

By George Calder on • (2 Comments)

From government forms to social media and shopping apps, hidden design choices are shaping what you believe, buy, and eat – and you probably haven't even noticed.

Why Do You Keep Returning to That App? It Was Built That Way.

Have you ever considered that your decisions might be subtly made by someone (or something) else? The illusion of choice is stronger today than ever.

You didn't *decide* to spend 18 minutes scrolling after replying to a message.

You didn't *choose* to check your phone 54 times before lunch.

You didn't *plan* to tip 20% for average service or sub-par food.

But you did. And it wasn't really up to you.

We're not just being influenced anymore. We're being nudged – engineered, in fact.

This isn't a conspiracy theory. *Nudging* is simple, effective, and now even profitable behavioural science in action. It was originally developed by psychologists and economists to – in theory – help people make better choices. But now nudging is everywhere. It's widespread and mostly unregulated. It's utilised by retailers, governments, apps, websites, and everything in between, with the goal to subtly and predictably influence our behaviour. And it's so effective that nobody ever notices.

So, What Is a Nudge?

The concept was popularised in a 2008 book, Nudge, published by Nobel Prize winners Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein. A nudge is a design feature that changes how options are presented, in a way that doesn't technically restrict the freedom to choose, but subtly pushes individuals towards a particular, predictable choice. Nudges exploit known cognitive biases such as loss aversion, social proof, or default bias, and operate within the psychological margins of decision-making. In the authors' own words:

"A nudge… is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options." — Thaler & Sunstein, Nudge (2008)

How It Works: The Psychology Shaping Your Decisions

There are several deep-rooted psychological mechanisms that are easily exploited by digital design:

- **Loss Aversion**: Individuals fear losses more than they value gains
- **Social Proof**: People are easily influenced by what other people are doing
- **Default bias**: It's easier to stick with default, pre-selected options than to actively make a decision to change it
- **Present bias**: Rewards that come immediately are more favorable than long-term benefits; the present is more valuable than the future
- **Cognitive Load**: When distracted or under pressure, individuals tend to pick whatever's easiest

Nudging for Good

As a concept, nudging can be used to influence people to make better life choices:

- In the Netherlands, fruit was moved to eye-level near cashiers in the train station kiosks, significantly increasing fruit purchases and improving passengers' diets, simply by exploiting **cognitive ease**, where simpler = more likely

- In South Africa, during the 2015-2018 water crisis, nudging was used to inform households of their neighbors' water usage, publicly praising green homes, and making smart meter data visible – water consumption reduced by 25%. This is **social proof** in action.
- In the UK, automatic enrolment into pension schemes became a legal requirement in 2012 in an attempt to increase retirement pots for working people. Opting out is fast and easy, but still requires some manual action from the individual. Participation surged from 45% to 88% of eligible employees, with total savings exceeding £114 billion since its introduction. This is an example of **default bias** for good.

So When Did We Start to Lose Control? A Timeline of Nudging for Profit

Here's a short overview of how tech and commerce have gradually but deeply adopted behavioural design in the digital age:

- 2006-2008: *Nudge* is published, and early adoption is seen in public policy in the UK and US (and beyond)
- 2012: **Netflix** introduces autoplay on their platform – a seemingly tiny change which redefined content binging. Removing natural pause points drastically changes our watching habits, and nowadays they even tailor content thumbnails depending on user psychology. [Source: Cybernews]
- 2014: **Booking.com** begins adding urgency nudges to its listings – "only 1 room left!" or "5 people booked in the last hour". This artificial urgency increases booking rates, but UK regulators have criticized the company for misleading practices. [Source: UX Collective]
- 2015: **Amazon** changes how their personalised recommendations work – later contributing to 35% of their total sales [Source: McKinsey]
- 2017: **Uber** introduces pre-set tipping options, boosting average tip amounts even though customers can technically still choose zero. Since this boost, some Uber drivers report that the platform has started keeping 50% of their tips
- 2018: **McDonald's** self-service kiosks roll out across the West, increasing order sizes by 15% on average as they were nudged into adding desserts, extras, and sides. Removing £ and $ symbols from menus also introduces "*payment decoupling*" by making prices feel less real. [Source: LinkedIn]
- 2020-2023: Platforms like **Temu** and **Shein** accelerate their gamified nudging approach, utilising spin wheels, limited-time offers, and flash sales. This has increased impulse buying and customers report post-purchase regret. [Source: Fastcompany]

Nowadays, nudge-based design is standard. It's no longer a novel concept. It's used to influence your every click, swipe, and scroll. In 2025, we've officially moved from occasional nudges to seemingly perpetual behavioural control.

Financial and Mental Health Consequences

It's not just about how people can be exploited financially, but there is a valid, growing concern about the even more damaging cost to our mental health.

- The "digital choice architecture" we are a part of every day is increasingly optimised for revenue and engagement – *not* our wellbeing.
- Push notifications, in-app nudges, and limited-time deals have been linked to higher levels of anxiety, particularly in younger users, according to the Journal of Behavioural Addictions
- In 2022, the Behavioural Insights Team found that e-commerce nudges increased average consumer spending by 13-25%

"Nudging doesn't just shape what we do — it shapes how we feel about what we've done." — *Dr. Adam Alter, NYU Stern School of Business*

Dark Patterns: When Influence Becomes Manipulation

The ethical debate started when nudges stopped being used for public interest, and started being used to maximise profits. Where health campaigns successfully used nudging to increase exercise, we're now seeing digital platforms maximise our screen time. And after being nudged away from smoking with higher taxes and restricting availability, today's forces are doing the exact opposite – lowering prices, increasing accessibility – to drive conversions and increase microtransactions.

Dark patterns are deceptive interface designs that trick users into doing something they might not otherwise consider. These are often much closer to manipulation than influence, and include making subscriptions difficult to cancel, guilt messaging to start or stop someone doing something, or deliberately misleading language.

MIT Technology Review has warned us about "addictive intelligence". Behavioral design can be ethical or exploitative. The difference lies in transparency, consent, and intent. And with the integration of machine learning and AI, nudging is getting exponentially more sophisticated and personal. Automated algorithms are already capable of real-time nudging updates, combining user behaviour, location, history, and even *mood* – this is known as *hypernudging.*

According to the article 'Hypernudge' by Karen Yeung (2017), "Big Data analytic nudges are extremely powerful and potent due to their networked, continuously updated, dynamic and pervasive nature (hence 'hypernudge')."

What Can You Actually Do About It?

It's worth highlighting that it's not necessarily desirable to eliminate nudging altogether. Some of its uses improve public wellbeing or safety, and simplify necessary choices. It's also now totally unfeasible that it can ever be undone. However, the thin line between

support and subtle coercion is becoming almost totally invisible. To remain aware of what's happening, you can:

- Disable non-essential notifications: Removing unnecessary pings reduces behavioural triggers
- Pause at the point of choice: Ask yourself whether it is actually your decision, or if you're being directed in a particular direction
- Be mindful of your usage: Check screen time reports to see where your attention is being drawn to
- Use privacy tools: Explore resources like Terms of Service; Didn't Read to spot any potential red flags in digital platforms

Final Thought

Nudging isn't inherently negative. Used in the right way, it can encourage people to make better decisions. But when deployed invisibly, everywhere, and mostly for profit, it becomes a subtle but remarkably effective form of manipulation. And who decides what is the "right" choice to make for you?

In today's digital age, autonomy is no longer about being able to choose – it's about knowing when you're being quietly guided.

When everything feels effortless, ask yourself who made it that way – and why?

Join the Conversation

Have you ever realised you were being nudged? What design tricks frustrate you the most? Share your experience in the comments – and help others spot the subtle systems at work.

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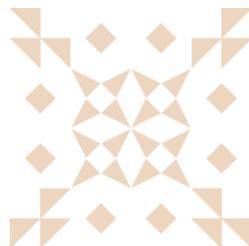to publish lies and propaganda on their
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