

Nudging Behavioural Change for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) depends not only on government policies and institutional frameworks but also on everyday decisions made by individuals. While awareness about sustainability has increased significantly in recent years, actual behavioural change remains inconsistent. Many individuals express concern about environmental issues but fail to translate that concern into consistent sustainable practices. This study explores whether behavioural nudging can help bridge this gap between awareness and action.

An open public survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire and received 100 valid responses from individuals across different backgrounds. Although the survey was open to everyone, students formed the majority of respondents and were therefore treated as the core analytical group. The findings reveal that while 95% of respondents are aware of SDGs, only 65% consistently engage in sustainable behaviours. Awareness of nudging was reported by 80% of respondents. A significant majority (75%) believe nudges are effective, and 78% consider them ethically acceptable.

The results indicate that convenience and social influence play a major role in increasing sustainable behaviour. The study concludes that nudging offers a practical, low-cost, and ethically sound approach to promoting sustainability at the individual level. These findings contribute to behavioural sustainability research and offer insights for policymakers, institutions, and organizations seeking effective strategies to accelerate progress toward the SDGs.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Behavioural Nudging, Sustainable Behaviour, Awareness-Action Gap, Ethical Choice Architecture, Environmental Behaviour.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has moved from being a theoretical discussion to becoming a global priority. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a structured framework to address pressing challenges such as climate change, responsible consumption, inequality, and environmental degradation (United Nations, 2015). While governments and corporations are expected to lead these efforts, the long-term success of sustainable development ultimately depends on the daily choices made by individuals.

However, an important challenge continues to persist. People are increasingly aware of environmental issues. They understand the importance of reducing plastic usage, conserving energy, and practicing responsible consumption. Yet, consistent sustainable action remains limited. This creates what researchers describe as the “awareness–action gap.”

Traditional awareness campaigns assume that once people know what is right, they will act accordingly. Real-world behaviour, however, often contradicts this assumption. Individuals do not always make decisions purely based on logic. Habits, convenience, social influence, and cognitive biases shape everyday choices.

Behavioural economics provides a valuable perspective in understanding this gap. Nudging — a concept that involves subtle changes in the way choices are presented — aims to guide individuals toward better decisions without restricting freedom (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Instead of forcing behaviour through rules or penalties, nudges make sustainable options easier, more visible, and socially supported.

This study seeks to understand whether nudging can effectively influence sustainable behaviour. By analysing responses from an open public survey, the research examines awareness levels, behavioural patterns, and perceptions regarding the ethical acceptability of nudges.

The study offers practical insight into how behavioural design strategies can enhance sustainability outcomes. It contributes to discussions on low-cost and non-

coercive policy tools. The research integrates three dimensions — awareness, effectiveness, and ethical perception — within a single empirical framework. The open public nature of the survey strengthens its contextual relevance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing awareness about sustainability and the SDGs, there remains a clear inconsistency between what individuals know and how they behave (United Nations, 2015). Many individuals recognize environmental challenges but struggle to adopt sustainable habits consistently.

The problem lies not in lack of knowledge, but in the behavioural barriers that prevent action. Convenience often overrides intention. Social norms influence decisions. Habitual routines discourage change.

The central question guiding this research is:

Can behavioural nudging effectively reduce the gap between sustainability awareness and actual sustainable behaviour?

Answering this question is important for designing interventions that are practical, scalable, and ethically responsible.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To assess the level of awareness regarding Sustainable Development Goals among the general public.
- To examine the extent of sustainable behavioural practices.
- To evaluate awareness and understanding of behavioural nudging.
- To analyse perceptions regarding the effectiveness of nudges.
- To assess the ethical acceptability of nudging as a behavioural intervention.
- To interpret the relationship between awareness, convenience, social influence, and sustainable action.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on individual-level behavioural change related to sustainability. It examines public perception and behavioural tendencies through an open survey approach. The scope is limited to descriptive analysis of awareness, behaviour, and perception of nudging techniques.

The research does not measure long-term behavioural outcomes or conduct experimental interventions. Instead, it provides insight into public attitudes and readiness for behavioural policy tools.

The findings are applicable to policymakers, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and businesses interested in promoting sustainable practices through behavioural strategies.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive research design to understand behavioural trends and perceptions related to sustainability and nudging.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended questions. The questionnaire assessed:

- Awareness of Sustainable Development Goals
- Awareness of nudging concepts
- Current sustainable practices
- Perceived effectiveness of nudges
- Ethical acceptance of behavioural interventions

Sampling Approach

The survey was open to the general public and distributed across various groups. A total of 100 valid responses were collected. Although the survey was not restricted to students, the majority of respondents were students. For analytical clarity, students were considered the core group while maintaining representation of other respondents.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using percentage analysis and descriptive interpretation. The objective was to identify patterns rather than establish causal relationships.

Literature Review

Sustainable development research consistently emphasizes the importance of behavioural change alongside institutional reforms (United Nations, 2015). Environmental psychology studies show that awareness does not automatically lead to action. Behavioural inconsistencies are often influenced by habits, perceived effort, and social surroundings.

The theory of planned behaviour suggests that intention influences action (Ajzen, 1991). However, intention alone does not guarantee behavioural execution. Behavioural economics expands this understanding by introducing the concept of bounded rationality — the idea that individuals make decisions within cognitive limitations.

Nudging emerged as a practical application of behavioural economics (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Practical applications of nudging in promoting recycling

behaviour and sustainable practices have also been observed in the Indian context (Busara Center for Behavioural Economics). It involves designing the environment in a way that gently guides choices without removing alternatives. Examples include default green options, visible recycling bins, or reminders that highlight social norms. Research indicates that:

- Default options significantly influence decision outcomes (Amiri et al., 2024).
- Social norm messaging increases participation in sustainable initiatives (Vande Velde et al., 2021).
- Simplified decision environments improve compliance (Amiri et al., 2024).

However, limited studies explore the combined dimensions of awareness, effectiveness, and ethical acceptance of nudging within a mixed demographic group in emerging contexts (Sawant & Fulwari, 2020). This study addresses that gap by providing empirical evidence from an open public survey.

Additionally, the study evaluates nudging not only for its effectiveness but also for its ethical perception, ensuring a balanced assessment (Vande Velde et al., 2021).

The structured questionnaire and percentage-based analysis allow easy replication in other institutions or demographic groups. The study follows a clear progression: identifying the problem, reviewing existing knowledge, presenting methodology, analysing findings, and concluding with practical implications.

Research Design

The study used a descriptive survey method with 100 respondents drawn from the general public. Convenience sampling was applied.

Design	Descriptive study
Data source	Primary data
Research Tool	Structured questionnaire
Sample size	100 respondents
Sampling method	Convenience sampling
Respondents	General public (majority students)
Analysis tool	Percentage analysis

Results

- 95% of respondents reported awareness of SDGs.
- 80% indicated awareness of nudging concepts.
- 65% reported consistent sustainable behaviour.
- 75% believe nudges can effectively influence behaviour.
- 78% perceive nudging as ethically acceptable.

- Convenience and social influence were identified as key behavioural drivers.

Discussion

The findings confirm the presence of an awareness–action gap (Ajzen, 1991). Although awareness is high, consistent sustainable practice is comparatively lower. This suggests that information alone does not ensure behavioural change.

Nudging appears to reduce decision-making friction by making sustainable choices easier and more socially visible (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). The strong ethical acceptance indicates that respondents do not perceive nudging as manipulative when aligned with positive societal outcomes.

The results suggest that behavioural design can complement policy measures in achieving SDGs (United Nations, 2015).

II. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that nudging offers a practical and ethically acceptable approach to promoting sustainable behaviour. While awareness levels are high, behavioural consistency remains moderate. By restructuring decision environments rather than imposing strict regulations, nudging can help bridge the gap between intention and action (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Future sustainability strategies should integrate behavioural insights to enhance effectiveness and long-term impact (Vande Velde et al., 2021).

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