



## Let technology make your irrational life more sustainable

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Tomorrow, contrary to initial plans, only brought more delays. I had planned to do more, but wasn't able to for one reason or another. I ended up spending more time on one task than I should have.

Now, many tasks are behind schedule and the approaching deadline is a bit too soon. If only there was a system to track and remind us of our own plans which we sometimes fail to meet! Sound familiar? A trivial example, perhaps but a pointer to the most basic of problems that technology can help us to address if only it is designed right.

Whenever I am asked about my research, I often get a startled look when I say my research focuses on the design of persuasive systems. At first mention, it always seems like an alien concept, plus persuasion and technology in the same sentence does not make for sound reading. At least, until I give an example of the systems, like social media sites, which we frequently use and have come to rely on for more than just regular day-to-day communication.

These systems are inherently persuasive as their main aim is to get us to either share, inform, or learn from one another. They do that by providing interactive and engaging experiences that encourage regular visits. For example, how many times do we feel an urge to check a notification or decide to visit the social sites for a few minutes only to find ourselves still scrolling a while later?

### Persuasive systems design can make our behaviours more sustainable

Computers were initially meant for simple tasks like calculation, retrieval, and storage of data. Through innovation they have become ubiquitous and embedded in almost everything we do. For example, it is now possible to independently and remotely learn (a new language or subject), monitor our health or wellbeing, become greener and more energy efficient, save money, overcome an addiction, and so forth.

Persuasive systems are interactive systems that motivate change in users without the use of coercion or deception. These are systems developed to enable people to accomplish tasks they either would like to do or already like doing but don't have the requisite motivation for.

Our lives are now increasingly intertwined with technology. Thus, studying how technology influences our everyday actions and how we can achieve positive and sustainable behaviour change through the use of these technologies is of utmost importance. Furthermore, with the many opportunities technology now avails, it is important to develop appropriate solutions that match users' needs and this is where persuasive systems design can help.

The design of persuasive systems is user-centred, grounded in social psychological and environmental factors, and involves developing systems that meet the users' primary goals, facilitate interaction, are credible, and provide opportunities for social interaction.

However, persuasive systems design is often driven by a rationalist perspective which often assumes that given clear instructions and if people are motivated, they will easily follow all the steps needed to meet their objectives. But research by Dan Ariely and others has shown that this is far from the case. We are "predictably irrational."

Therefore, among the aims of my research has been to understand the role context plays in users' decision making. And to translate this understanding into the design of persuasive systems and behaviour change programs that users stick to. As Jodi Forlizzi stated in her keynote address at the persuasive technology 2015 conference, "If we are in the behaviour change area, we need to have a deep understanding of the problem area—users and the contexts they own."

#### Tags:

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