

Chapter 3: Nudging

Discussion case #1

Julia loves to shop on e-commerce sites. She begins to notice a pattern of notifications and information displayed on many of her favorite sites, including pop-ups advertising a 10-minute flash sale, statements like “only 2 items remaining” and “500 people are viewing this item right now,” and the fact that some of these items seem to be perpetually 40% off. She wonders whether they are *ever* sold at full price at all. She has noticed in herself that especially the flash sale produces in her a sense of urgency. She learns that these statements are often false and generated by the app’s algorithm; even that knowledge, paired with the knowledge that nobody is forcing her to buy anything, doesn’t stop her from feeling a sense of urgency.

1. These nudges seem to encourage impulsive purchasing and are not obviously consistent with good deliberation; is this a fair characterization of them, and are they morally permissible?
2. Is it morally wrong for sites to deceive users about sales and discounts?

Discussion case #2

Jolene sees an advertisement for a free mobile game on YouTube and downloads it with excitement. But the game isn’t exactly as advertised. For instance, she progresses quickly at first, but things begin to slow down. As her progress slows down, she feels pressured to buy ways to speed up progress, especially in the form of in-game character boosts and equipment. The game relies heavily on notifications and prominent displays of streaks that she could easily break if she doesn’t make these purchases. She knows that she isn’t being coerced by the game, but she also knows that she, as a normal human, has a strong aversion to loss.

1. Is this a morally permissible form of game design?
2. Does it matter whether Jolene is a child, adolescent, or adult?