

# PERCEPTIONS OF NUDGED BEHAVIOR

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Across three scenarios, **default nudged agents** are perceived as **less accountable**, **less competent**, **more malleable**, and **less deliberative** than **active choice agents**.

- ❖ Criticisms suggest nudges can impair autonomy. Elsewhere, we have found that people subjected to nudges do not themselves experience lowered autonomy (Michaelsen et al., 2020; [psyarxiv.com/utx3e](https://psyarxiv.com/utx3e)). However, little is known of how others perceive the agency of someone subjected to a nudge.
- ❖ If acting in line with a nudge robs an agent of perceived decision competence and agency, people that would have engaged in a behavior regardless of the nudge's presence may lose social value merely from being subjected to the nudge\*.
- ❖ As nudging becomes increasingly prevalent in society, potential agency deprivation risk diminishing the net effect –broadly construed– of nudge interventions.
  - \* In theory, this would predict that highly nudge- and self-aware individuals may actively reject otherwise beneficial nudges as a way of preserving a favorable social image.

## Methods

- ❖ Participants (N=306) judged agency-relating attributes for “vignette-agents”, a Person X and a Person Y, that made choices in decision scenarios. In each scenario, the two agents made the same (“affirmative”) choice, and only differed in that one had been subjected to a default nudge (“**nudged agent**”), whereas the other chose identically without having been subjected to a nudge (“**active choice agent**”).
- ❖ The attributes which participants rated concerned the agents’ competence, accountability, malleability, and deliberativeness. Participants also rated the agents for engagement with their decision, and with the decision topic.
- ❖ Each participant rated both agents side-by-side in a joint evaluation format, and in one of three scenarios. The three scenarios concerned 1) compensating for carbon emissions when booking a flight ticket, 2) selecting green shipping for an online purchase, and 3) enlisting in a Save More Tomorrow-retirement savings program upon starting a new job.

## Results

- ❖ In line with preregistered hypotheses (<https://osf.io/wdzhr>), in all scenarios we found that participants judged an agent acting in line with a default nudge as less accountable, less competent, more malleable and less deliberative, compared to an agent engaging in the same behavior without having been subjected to a nudge (paired t-tests, all  $ps < .001$ ). Means and standard deviations for participants’ ratings are presented in the visualizations (apologies that you need to zoom in a bit!).
- ❖ Additionally, participants perceived nudged agents as being less engaged in their decision than active choice agents in all three scenarios (paired t-tests, all  $ps < .001$ ), and similarly less engaged in the decision topic (paired t-tests, all  $ps < .001$ ).

## Discussion

- ❖ Initial findings strongly indicate that people perceive nudges to steal agency from agents.
- ❖ Magnitude of effects are however likely boosted from nudged & non-nudged agents evaluated side-by-side, and should be smaller in most real world-situations, where joint comparison-formats are elusive.
- ❖ Generalizability to real world-situations will further be limited by people’s opportunity and ability to recognize nudge interventions taking place.
- ❖ Follow-ups explore rejection of nudges, and extensions to other nudges and between-group designs.

