

Habit and hassle: psychological barriers to sustainable behaviour



Last year, Delft University of Technology – the university where I work – launched a mobility programme. The goal was threefold: (1) fewer cars on campus, (2) a CO2 neutral campus by 2030, and (3) dealing more smartly with space scarcity. The relevance of such a programme is clear: around 27,000 people travel to our campus every day and this number increases every year. Part of the mobility programme was to stimulate the use of e-bikes among employees, facilitated by the offer of free bike use during a trial period.

I felt pressured to participate in this e-bike programme because I am prototypical for the target group: I live less than 20 kilometres from the university, I drive a car to work, and I do this more than three times a week. I felt even more pressured because I am a climate psychologist. I study sustainable behaviour and am well aware of its importance for carbon footprint reduction. Furthermore, I like bikes. I mean, I am Dutch, and Dutch people like riding bikes as a mode of transport. I know it is healthy to cycle, and I was pretty sure it would give me a positive feeling to go to work by e-bike instead of by car. Stated differently, I had the right knowledge and the right attitude to participate in the e-bike programme. But did I enrol?

According to classic views on behaviour change, you would guess I did enrol in the e-bike programme. For example, the knowledge–attitude–behaviour continuum assumes a relation between sufficient knowledge about desired behaviour (i.e., why and how I should ride an e-bike), a positive attitude towards this behaviour, resulting in a positive behaviour change. However, this linear, rational model does not take into account important psychological mechanisms that could function as a barrier towards the desired behaviour. In reality, this chain of effects is not so straight-forward (e.g., [Bettinghaus, 1986](#)). So guess what? I did not sign up for the university's e-bike programme.

I have to admit, I did not feel good about myself. So, being a psychologist by training, I did some self-analysis to find out what prevented me from signing up. I identified that the two main psychological barriers were habit and hassle.

Habits are automatic performances of behavioural patterns triggered by context cues ([Triandis, 1980](#)). A habit is a potent and direct predictor of environmental behaviour ([Klößner, 2013](#)). In my example, taking the car to work for over 20 years is a habit with a direct impact on my carbon footprint. Habits are easy to perform, cost relatively little time and little cognitive effort, and are functional in achieving goals (e.g., [Verplanken and Aarts, 1999](#)). Therefore, habits are hard to change, as anyone who has tried can confirm.

Hassles are annoying practical problems that characterise everyday transactions. In my example, I perceived enrolling in the e-bike programme as a hassle. That is because I needed my personnel number to complete the online subscription and could not find it. Furthermore, I anticipated hassle in collecting and returning the e-bike at the university, and storing the e-bike at home. Hassles are micro-stressors that can become big stressors when they add up. And because stress is unpleasant, people tend to avoid it (e.g., [Roth & Cohen, 1986](#)). So, if you perceive accumulated hassle during your journey towards a green life, your stress levels might increase, leading you eventually to avoid taking green measures.

Having identified these two important psychological barriers to a green ride, I went looking for interventions to break my car habit and minimise hassle perceptions. That is because I still believed that I should go to work by bike instead of by car.

First, I found that in order to discontinue my habit of choosing the car as my travel mode, I had to make use of a context change. A survey at a small English university demonstrated for example that academics and non-academics who had just moved recently (and were environmentally concerned) used the car less frequently for commuting to work than employees that had not just changed residence ([Verplanken et al., 2008](#)). I am not moving, but I reckon the current COVID-19 situation, which has kept me working at home for three months already, counts as a context change as well. I plan to take the e-bike as soon as the COVID-19 measures allow me to return to the university.

Second, I mapped out what hassles I expected to encounter during my journey to a green ride. Moreover, I wrote down how to deal with them. One by one. I got the inspiration for this intervention from one of my own research projects. We found that people perceive hassle during different stages: when they are informing themselves about green measures, when they consider taking a measure, and when they make the decision to invest in it ([de Vries, Rietkerk, & Kooger, 2019](#)). Being aware of hassles, and tackling or accepting them one-by-one took away my stress because it increased the feeling that I have control over them.

So, I am ready to hop on the e-bike. Now let's see if my good intentions lead to long-term behaviour change.



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