Adopting Nudge Theory in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Purpose -This paper examines the nudge theory revealed by Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein in their book "Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness" and the possibilities of its applications in academic libraries to enhance library services and library use. This paper tries to identify various nudge ideas and apply them to academic library environment. Application of nudge theory shall bring new insights for library professionals to influence users. Nudge theory will help librarians to become choice architects who have the responsibility for organizing the contexts in which people make decisions.

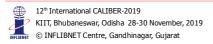**Keywords:** Academic Library, Behavioral Science in Libraries, Nudge Theory, User Services

1. Introduction

Richard H. Thaler is the Nobel Prize winner for Economics in 2017 and Cass R Sunstein is an American legal scholar. Together they published a book in 2008 titled "Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness". This book is a pioneering work in applied behavioural economics. With Thaler winning the Nobel Prize, the nudge strategies became world famous. Many governments adopted the theory for better governance. In 2010 the UK Government set up a Behavioural Insights Team, commonly dubbed a "nudge unit", to develop policies (Chu, 2017). Chu also reports that the administrations in Denmark, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands have also shown an interest on nudge ideas. Former President Barack Obama brought nudge theory to the White House to make use of behavioural science to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government programmes. The Economic Survey 2018-19 of Government of India proposed the adoption of nudge theory for bringing more positive changes to the economy. Nudge theory is now being adopted by universities and colleges to improve enrolment rate and educational achievements. It has been successful in improving graduation rates among first-generation and underrepresented students in the US (Castleman, 2017).

2. Meaning of Nudge

The dictionary meaning of the word nudge denotes a gentle push usually with one's elbow in order to draw someone's attention to something. Thaler and Sunstein (2009) use the term from the behavioral economics background which denotes any small action or arrangements that prompt people to do things which will have positive impact on their life. This is achieved in a way that doesn't involve any action of compulsion. Behavioral economists recognize that humans do not always behave rationally when making decisions (Wright-Maley, 2016). Hence nudges enable people to make better decisions for themselves. The book by the authors

gives amble examples of nudge incidents. In Sweden people preferred using escalator to the stairs. But when the stairs were transformed to a piano, 65% preferred stairs as they could listen to music while stepping up. A school cafeteria manager experimented the eating behavior of students in USA found that they select food items as it is displayed. If you arrange junk food at the first counter, students take junk food first. If you display healthy food first they take healthy food first. The nudge theory explains that we can influence the eating behavior by just making slight arrangements in the display of food items. The positive outcome is achieved not by forcing people but by nudging them. The little changes in the presentation of choices influence people unknowingly.

3. Application of Nudge in Higher Education

There are international experience using nudges and behavioural approaches in higher education to improve quality, enrolment, grades and homework completion and prevent dropouts and inequality. Castleman (2017) reports the need for behavioral insights for Federal Higher Education Policy in USA that would enhance measures for increasing the number of Americans earning college degrees and credentials. Students can be nudged by sending personalized text messages on courses they must complete, tips to earn their degrees and to encourage the use of campus-based resources. Damgaard and Nielsen (2018) informed about the increased role of nudge in education and research in attaining educational goals. It also helps to reduce student dropout, and underperformance. The European Expert Network on Economics of Education in its analytical report in 2017 suggested the adoption of nudges as they promise the triggering of positive behavioural changes involving low implementation

costs. Though adopted for economic reforms, the nudge theory is yet to find its way to Indian higher education.

4. Application of Nudge in Academic Libraries

There is a lack of literature on the adoption of nudge theory in libraries. Library and information science professionals have been using programmes and presentations similar to nudge for the last several years. Dr S.R.Ranganathan's idea of APUPA (Alien-Penumbral-Umbral-Penumbral-Alien) pattern for shelf classification can be viewed from a nudge perspective. The users who come to the library for a specific book can find it at a particular point on the shelf. This point is called Umbral region. Libraries are supposed to shelf associated documents as well as advanced documents near to the Umbral region. So a user is able to get related documents when he picks up the specific book. Advanced documents are placed at Penumbral region and related documents at Alien region. Hence, users are prompted to see and use the related documents acquired by the library on the subject. The various forms of extension services and advocacy programmes in libraries resemble nudging people to use the library. The book exhibitions and library talks are also aimed at prompting users to visit the library and thereby making them regular users. However, the library world has not conducted deliberations and research on the application of nudge in libraries as attempted by other fields of knowledge. The author could locate only one document by Chaffin (2018) from Saint Louis Libraries at Washington University that deals with nudge in libraries. Chaffin identifies nudge as a powerful concepts that can be applied to libraries to unconsciously influence positive behaviors among readers. Based on the nudge examples revealed by Thaler and Sunstein

and incidents of nudge applications in higher education, this paper proposes a model of nudge applications in academic libraries.

4.1 Library Membership to New Users: Default Members

Choice architecture or default nudge is a powerful form of nudge. It is a way of ensuring the participation of people to essential services. Academic libraries issue membership to all new students of a college or university. Sometimes, it requires that they fill out a membership form and get it signed by the head of the department. Many students who failed to perform this task remain non-members throughout the course. Libraries can make all new comers as members of the library by default. The library can use the admission data which contains details of the students with photo. Student verification can be done using the institution identity card or mobile number or email of the student. The library membership form may contain default declarations that the users consent to receive new arrival list, intimation of library programmes, overdue notices etc by default.

4.2 Library Services: Induction Programmes

The cafeteria policy is another important form of nudge that can be brought to library services. It emphasizes the shifting the order of choices available in a cafeteria. When healthy food items are placed at the beginning of the display table students consume healthy food first. In libraries we consider all items important as we selected them on some sound library selection policy. But each sector of users can be served with items important to them. For example, the new B.Tech students may be inducted for identifying the reference/textbooks for their course, using the online catalogue for

identifying books, library time and rules. The first semester of B.Tech course in Indian universities will have around 80-100 books prescribed for study. One copy of these books can be shelved separately for a view by all the students. This will enable them to set a reading task ahead. Links for e-books/free books, syllabus, online catalogue, electronic resources and previous question papers may be provided at this corner. A focused arrangement of resources may help the beginners to have a cafeteria model of nudging.

4.3 Borrowers Ticket

In many Indian universities, students who lost borrowers ticket at the beginning of their course rarely approach the library for a duplicate card as they want to avoid a fine. But they need to remit the fine at the end of course. If the library gives them duplicate card without collecting fine many students shall utilize the facility. The fine may be either debited from the caution deposit or collected at the time of issuing non liability certificate when the student leaves the campus. This would help the students to use the card to borrow and read books during the course.

4.4 Nudging For Publishing

The academic libraries have an important role in research and innovation. They can also contribute to the process of accreditation and ranking of the institution. All ranking schemes consider the number of scholarly papers and number of citations as one of the parameters of ranking process. The data required for this parameter is collected mainly from Scopus Database and Web of Science. Hence, teachers and scholars can be nudged to publish their papers in journals indexed by these databases. The cafeteria policy of nudging can be applied for motivating scholars and teachers publish more.

Libraries can design programs that deliver the importance of publishing in reputed journals. The teachers and scholars can be alerted on the total research output of the institution and the marks obtained by the institution in national and global rankings. The display of caption words like "an article from you influences the ranking and accreditation of the college/university" shall be a nudge to encourage scholars. Further, the library can bring activities that are aimed at encouraging scholars to publish more. It includes organizing author workshops, introducing the reputed platforms of publishing, process of author profile creation, introducing platforms like google scholar and google books for identifying and following scholars, classes on literature review, plagiarism, predatory journals, open access and research ethics. The library can also nudge scholars by informing every scholar of a new journal article being accepted/published from the institution.

4.5 Librarians as Choice Architectures

One of the important aspects of adopting nudge theory to academic libraries is the transformation of librarian as a choice architect. A choice architect has the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). They can impact on people's behavior. They can nudge people with a small shift in the environment that can make a big difference (Sunstein, 2014). When librarians adopt nudge, they can influence users choices in a positive way to achieve educational success and achievement.

5. Conclusion

The adoption of nudge theories to academic libraries shall bring a new role and dimension to library and information field. Librarians can easily implement nudge theories in libraries as they are familiar with management techniques and psychological lessons. Moreover, many library activities resemble nudge ideas. However, we need to develop many models of nudge application through research and practice.

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