



PART 3

Read the text below and answer questions 27–40.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WASTE AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

A

Waste is commonly framed as an engineering defect: insufficient sorting capacity, flawed logistics, or inadequate infrastructure. Yet the more stubborn “failure” is often psychological. Discarding is not a neutral response to objects; it is a patterned behaviour shaped by habit, moral self-concept, and socio-economic variables that determine what is feasible under time pressure. This is why informational interventions—however evidence-based—frequently deliver modest results. People can endorse waste reduction in principle while acting otherwise, not necessarily from hypocrisy, but because self-reports are distorted by impression management and because intention is an unreliable proxy for action. The gap is widened by cognitive load: when attention is scarce, individuals revert to routines that minimise effort. In addition, cognitive dissonance is routinely managed through rationalisation (“the system is corrupt,” “my contribution is negligible”), allowing a person to preserve a pro-environmental identity while maintaining convenient habits. Moral licensing can also occur: a single “good” act may subconsciously justify later indulgence. Seen this way, waste is best understood as a behavioural outcome produced by competing motives under constraint, rather than as a simple deficit of knowledge.

B

A principal barrier is present bias, formalised in behavioural economics as hyperbolic discounting. The immediate inconvenience of rinsing containers, carrying reusables, or sorting correctly is concrete and personally borne; the environmental benefits are delayed, probabilistic, and largely invisible at the household scale. The mind therefore overweights near-term hassle and underweights distant collective gain. Even individuals with strong values may defect at the decisive moment when bins are far away, signage is ambiguous, or categories vary across settings. Crucially, moral exhortation can increase aspiration without resolving the frictions that cause failure. By contrast, measures that reduce decision-costs—standardised icons, fewer categories, consistent bin placement, and intuitive labels—often shift behaviour without requiring ideological conversion. They function by changing what convenience means at the point of choice, where a split-second judgement determines whether an item is sorted, discarded, or abandoned.

C

Behaviour is also governed by normative influence. In shared spaces, people infer what is acceptable by observing what appears typical, particularly when they are uncertain or



rushed. Descriptive norms (“what people do here”) can silently overpower injunctive norms (“what people say is right”). A tidy recycling station, clear signage, and orderly surroundings imply shared vigilance; neglected environments—overflowing bins, litter, or grime—signal permissiveness and weak enforcement. These signals generate self-fulfilling dynamics: when individuals perceive carelessness as normal, they become careless; when they perceive compliance as normal, they comply. Pluralistic ignorance intensifies the problem when many individuals privately approve of low-waste behaviour yet mistakenly believe others do not, leading them to mimic the apparent majority. In offices, campuses, and neighbourhoods, visible reuse—mugs on desks, refill bottles in meetings—can therefore operate as social proof more persuasive than formal messaging, because it translates ethics into an ambient expectation.

D

Norms, however, are filtered through identity. For some individuals, low-waste practice is integrated into self-concept and therefore remains stable across contexts: it is experienced as authentic and self-endorsed. For others, “green” practices are coded as signals of a particular social group—linked to status, class, or moral theatre—and may be rejected to avoid appearing performative. Social identity processes predict such resistance: people adopt behaviours that affirm in-group belonging and resist those that imply deference to an out-group. When the behaviour becomes a badge, advice can trigger reactance, and cognitive dissonance invites sophisticated justifications that preserve self-esteem without altering action. The distinction between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation matters here. If low-waste habits are self-chosen—aligned with autonomy and competence—they generalise; if they feel like surveillance, social scoring, or reputational compliance, they fragment, producing narrow rule-following in monitored settings and abandonment elsewhere.

E

Given these constraints, many programmes favour choice architecture: altering the environment of decision rather than attempting to persuade beliefs. Defaults, prompts, and friction can reshape behaviour predictably. Smaller plates reduce over-serving in cafeterias; online checkouts can default to minimal packaging; delivery platforms can require an explicit opt-in for disposable cutlery; and “last chance” reminders at disposal points can redirect items away from general waste. These nudges exploit status quo bias, limited attention, and satisficing—the tendency to accept the first adequate option. Yet choice architecture can be brittle if underlying incentives remain misaligned. If disposability is consistently rewarded by cheap virgin materials and underpriced landfill, nudges may generate short-lived improvements that fade once novelty disappears. Poorly



designed external levers may also crowd out intrinsic commitment, teaching people to interpret pro-environmental action as coerced compliance rather than as civic agency.

F

Emotions can both motivate and derail behavioural change. Guilt may prompt immediate corrective action, but sustained guilt often produces avoidance when people feel judged, overwhelmed, or incapable; shame is particularly corrosive because it targets identity rather than behaviour. Pride can be more durable when framed as progress and competence rather than moral superiority, reinforcing habits through self-efficacy. Disgust is an underestimated barrier: messy stations, ambiguous cleanliness standards, and contamination fears can activate aversion strong enough to override stated intentions, even among motivated individuals. The affect heuristic means that a foul-smelling recycling area does not simply seem unpleasant; it alters perceived risk and social cost, pushing people toward refusal or careless disposal. Effective design therefore treats emotion as infrastructure: clean facilities, clear rules, neutral prompts, and feedback that rewards improvement without humiliating mistakes reduce the affective spiral in which moralisation collapses participation.

G

The most durable changes integrate feedback loops with perceived fairness and institutional trust. Generic advice invites vague aspiration; specific, timely information enables adjustment. When households can track their waste over time, compare performance to a local benchmark, or receive immediate contamination warnings, behaviour becomes learnable rather than merely aspirational. Smart bins that display contamination rates exemplify this principle by turning hidden system outcomes into signals at the moment of choice. Yet feedback works only when the system is credible. Charges for bags or landfill may be accepted as rational if alternatives are genuinely accessible, but resented as regressive penalties when socio-economic constraints limit time, transport, or storage space. Trust is therefore the hinge variable: if citizens suspect that recycling is symbolic, mismanaged, or not actually processed, motivation collapses because the behaviour loses meaning. Lasting waste reduction is achieved not by lecturing people about what is “right,” but by designing environments in which the low-waste option is easy, normal, fair, and believable.

Questions 27–31

Choose the correct heading for each paragraph.

List of Headings

i Emotional mechanisms that stabilise or sabotage environmental habits



- ii Identity-protective reasoning and resistance to moralised “green” norms
- iii Defaults and micro-frictions as instruments of behavioural governance
- iv Why short-term convenience defeats long-term collective benefit
- v How visible conduct and environmental cues construct “normality”
- vi The claim that increasing fines is the most reliable lever for reform
- vii Why information campaigns work best when they emphasise statistics
- viii Why financial rewards always produce lasting environmental behaviour

27 Paragraph B

28 Paragraph C

29 Paragraph D

30 Paragraph E

31 Paragraph F

Questions 32–36

Which paragraph contains the following information? Choose the correct letter, **A–G**. **NB** You may use any letter more than once.

32 A discussion of how policy charges can be accepted or rejected depending on whether people judge them to be equitable and trustworthy.

33 An explanation for why supplying correct facts may still fail to produce consistent day-to-day disposal practices.

34 A warning that behavioural redesign can lose its effect if the wider system continues to subsidise throwaway choices.

35 The idea that the visible state of a shared space can silently communicate what behaviours are socially permissible.

36 A point that revulsion and contamination anxiety can deter participation even among those who support recycling in principle.

Questions 37–40



Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

37 The passage implies that reducing small practical obstacles to sorting can change behaviour even when people's underlying beliefs remain unchanged.

38 Poorly designed external incentives may weaken people's internal commitment to low-waste behaviour.

39 The passage reports that smart bins have been shown to cut contamination by a specific percentage in real-world trials.

40 The passage suggests that suspicion about whether recyclables are genuinely processed can weaken willingness to take part.

Answer Key

27. iv

28. v

29. ii

30. iii

31. i

32. G

33. A

34. E

35. C

36. F

37. TRUE

38. TRUE

39. NOT GIVEN

40. TRUE