

Dark patterns explained by online media expert

August 4 2021, by Jasmine McNealy



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Dark patterns are design elements that deliberately obscure, mislead, coerce and/or deceive website visitors into making unintended and possibly harmful choices.

Dark patterns can be found [in many kinds of sites](#) and are used [by several kinds of organizations](#). They take the form of deceptively labeled buttons, choices that are difficult to undo and graphical elements like color and shading that direct users' attention to or away from certain options.

Dark patterns in subscriptions are a common example of these kinds of design choices, given the ubiquity of online subscriptions and free trials for all kinds of products and services. This kind of dark pattern might make it difficult for a user to unsubscribe, or it might automatically convert a free trial into a paid subscription.

To demonstrate how common these kinds of design practices are, and to illustrate the various harms they can cause, designer and public interest technologist [Stephanie Nguyen](#) and [I](#) launched the zine [I, Obscura](#). The zine publishes case studies of different dark patterns and what can and should be done to protect users from these practices. I, Obscura was launched with help from student authors Ryan Tan, Kaylee Doty and Kally Zheng, and in collaboration with the [Stanford University Digital Civil Society Lab](#) and the [UCLA Center for Critical Internet Inquiry](#).

Why dark patterns matter

The inability to unsubscribe from a service results in a specific monetary harm: It makes people spend money they didn't intend to. But dark patterns can cause other kinds of harms, as well.

These can take the form of emotional manipulation, like when a site places a countdown clock on an offer to accelerate a customer's decision-making, even though time has no bearing on the sale or the use of the product or service. Or the harm could be the loss of privacy, as when an app forces users to turn off [data collection](#) in two different settings instead of making privacy settings easy to find.

A [power imbalance](#) exists between users and organizations, which makes it nearly impossible for individuals to always protect themselves from deceptive design practices. We created I, Obscura to help educate web users about the possibilities.

Consumer protection is important, as well. The [Federal Trade Commission](#) and state attorneys general have enforced [consumer protection](#) regulations against organizations that use deceptive design practices, especially those with apps that [target children](#). It is important for policymakers to prohibit the use of dark patterns and to require organizations to make interactions as transparent and simple as possible.

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