

Dark patterns: The secret sauce behind addictive tech

30 January 2020, by Dr Kate Raynes-Goldie



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Think you're pretty internet savvy? You may be falling for app and web design tricks without even realizing it ...

Do you ever check your Instagram or Facebook then end up shopping after clicking on an ad? Or open YouTube and an hour later you're still watching videos, thanks to autoplay?

You're not alone. Apps and websites are designed to keep users scrolling for as long as possible and use plenty of tricks to do so.

There's a term for this technique of manipulating users—dark patterns.

Coined by [user experience consultant Harry Brignull](#) in 2010, dark patterns deceive users into doing something they didn't intend to, such as a subscription or purchase.

Dark patterns

Infinite scrolling is a common dark pattern you may be familiar with if you use Twitter or Facebook. Content continuously loads as the user scrolls down the page, so they never need to click to the next page.

[Darkpatterns.org](#) educates users to "defend themselves" against these deceptive tactics. The worst examples are listed on their [Hall of Shame](#) on Twitter.

Some fun recent examples include making you opt out of 100 marketers, individually, so they won't collect data about you. Or, timers that count down to the end of a special deal that is not a special deal at all—they just start when you arrive on the website.

These are part of a standard set of tricks that get deployed, such as "sneak into basket," which adds extra items to your shopping cart, and ads disguised as content to entice you to click on them.

An unethical practice?

Gary Barber is a Perth-based human centered service designer. He helps design websites and apps in a way that serves the needs of users, not advertisers.

He's not a fan of dark patterns.

"The practice is unethical and uses design and psychological principles against people," Gary says. "You would be surprised who has used dark patterns."

"Discount airlines, online retailers, newspapers and [media outlets](#), online gaming and gambling, [social media](#), any subscription-based app and even government departments."

Light patterns

But don't despair. There are light patterns that counteract the dark.

[The Light Phone](#), which was named one of [Time's 100 Best Inventions for 2019](#), is an example.

The device is designed to serve users' needs, not companies trying to distract and monetize your attention.

It helps keep you focused and doesn't feature feeds, social media, advertisements, news or email.

Staying in the light

As part of a larger [techlash](#), there's a growing push against dark patterns, including [discussion in the United States about banning autoplay and endless scrolling](#).

Until that happens, Gary recommends being vigilant.

"If, for example, a product you really want is cheap, there will be a catch," he says.

"You have to look around the app or site pages when buying the product. Is there anything ticked or additional costs that seem a little high?"

"Do you have to agree to something you wouldn't normally agree to or put your credit card details in before you have selected the product?"

As the old saying goes, if it looks too good to be true, it probably is!

This article first appeared on [Particle](#), a science news website based at Scitech, Perth, Australia. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by Particle

APA citation: Dark patterns: The secret sauce behind addictive tech (2020, January 30) retrieved 21 October 2021 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-01-dark-patterns-secret-sauce-addictive.html>

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