

Dark patterns on the Internet

December 27, 2022

In news— Some Internet-based firms have been tricking users into agreeing to certain conditions or clicking a few links. These are examples of “dark patterns,” also known as “deceptive patterns.”

What are dark patterns?

- Such patterns are **unethical user interface designs that deliberately make your Internet experience harder or even exploit you.** In turn, they benefit the company or platform employing the designs.
- **By using dark patterns, digital platforms take away a user’s right to full information** about the services they are using, and reduce their control over their browsing experience.
- **The term is credited to UI/UX (user interface/user experience) researcher and designer Harry Brignull,** who has been working to catalogue such patterns and the companies using them since around 2010.
- **Social media companies and Big Tech firms such as Apple, Amazon, Skype, Facebook,** LinkedIn, Microsoft, and Google **use dark or deceptive patterns to downgrade the user experience to their advantage.**
- Amazon came under fire in the EU for its confusing, multi-step cancellation process for the Amazon Prime subscription.
- In social media, LinkedIn users often receive unsolicited, sponsored messages from influencers. Disabling this option is a difficult process with multiple steps that requires users to be familiar with the platform controls.
- **As Meta-owned Instagram pivots to video-based content to compete against TikTok,** users have complained that they **are being shown suggested posts they did not wish to see** and that they were unable to permanently set

preferences.

- **Another dark pattern on the application is sponsored video ads** getting scattered between reels and stories that users originally opted to view, tricking them for several seconds before they can see the small “sponsored” label.
- **Google-owned YouTube nudges users to sign up for YouTube Premium with pop-ups**, obscuring the final seconds of a video with thumbnails of other videos – a way of disrupting what should have been an otherwise smooth user experience.

Impact of dark patterns on users-

- **Dark patterns endanger the experience of Internet users and make them more vulnerable to financial** and data exploitation by Big Tech firms.
- **Dark patterns confuse users, introduce online obstacles, make simple tasks time-consuming**, have users sign up for unwanted services/products, and force them to pay more money or share more personal information than they intended.
- In the U.S., the Federal Trade Commission [FTC] has taken note of dark patterns and the risks they pose. In a report released in September 2022, the regulatory body listed over 30 dark patterns, many of which are considered standard practice across social media platforms and e-commerce sites.
- These include “baseless” countdowns for online deals, conditions in fine print that add on to costs, making cancellation buttons hard to see or click, making ads appear as news reports or celebrity endorsements, auto-playing videos, forcing users to create accounts to finish a transaction, silently charging credit cards after free trials end, and using dull colours to hide information that users should know about.
- However, dark and deceptive patterns don’t just stop

with laptops and smartphones.

- The FTC report has warned that as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) platforms and devices grow in usage, dark patterns will likely follow users to these new channels as well.