

## Dark Pattern Marketing Practices and their Impact on Consumer Trust and Decision-Making

Jaiswal (Rai) T<sup>1\*</sup>

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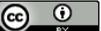
<sup>1\*</sup> Trapti Jaiswal (Rai), Assistant Professor, Govindram Seksaria Institute of Management and Research, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India.

Dark pattern marketing practices refer to deceptive digital design techniques that influence consumers to make decisions they might not otherwise choose. With the increasing use of online platforms, such practices have become common in digital marketing environments. This study examines how dark pattern marketing practices affect consumer trust and decision-making. Existing research shows that techniques such as hidden costs, misleading scarcity, and forced continuity reduce consumer autonomy and create confusion during online transactions.

The literature further indicates that while dark patterns may increase short-term conversions, they negatively impact consumer trust and long-term brand relationships. Studies also highlight that many consumers remain unaware of these practices, making them more vulnerable to manipulation. Overall, the findings suggest that dark pattern marketing practices pose ethical challenges and emphasise the need for transparent marketing strategies and stronger regulatory oversight to protect consumer trust in digital marketplaces.

**Keywords:** Dark Pattern Marketing, Consumer Trust, Consumer Decision-Making, Digital Marketing Ethics, Online Consumer Behaviour

Corresponding Author	How to Cite this Article	To Browse
Trapti Jaiswal (Rai), Assistant Professor, Govindram Seksaria Institute of Management and Research, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India. Email: <a href="mailto:traptirai23@gmail.com">traptirai23@gmail.com</a>	Jaiswal (Rai) T, Dark Pattern Marketing Practices and their Impact on Consumer Trust and Decision-Making. Int J Engg Mgmt Res. 2026;16(1):107-114. Available From <a href="https://ijemr.vandanapublications.com/index.php/j/article/view/1857">https://ijemr.vandanapublications.com/index.php/j/article/view/1857</a>	

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital platforms has significantly changed modern marketing practices. Businesses increasingly rely on websites, mobile applications, and online advertisements to influence consumer behaviour. In this digital environment, dark pattern marketing practices have emerged as a common strategy, where interface designs are intentionally created to guide consumers toward specific decisions. These practices include misleading information, hidden charges, forced subscriptions, and artificial urgency, which affect how consumers interact with digital platforms (Mathur et al., 2019).

Despite the widespread use of digital marketing, many consumers are unaware that their online decisions are often shaped by manipulative design techniques. Dark patterns reduce transparency and limit consumers' ability to make informed choices. Over time, such practices may create dissatisfaction, regret, and mistrust toward brands. The continued use of dark pattern marketing raises ethical concerns, as it prioritises short-term business gains over consumer welfare and fair decision-making (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021).

Understanding the impact of dark pattern marketing practices is essential for both marketers and consumers. Previous studies indicate that these practices negatively influence consumer trust and long-term brand relationships (Sharma & Gupta, 2025). This study is important as it highlights the ethical challenges of digital marketing and emphasises the need for transparency and responsible design practices. The findings of this study can contribute to academic research, support ethical marketing strategies, and assist policymakers in strengthening consumer protection frameworks.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the effect of dark pattern marketing practices on consumer trust and decision-making. The study also aims to identify commonly used dark pattern techniques in digital marketing, analyse their influence on consumer behaviour, and emphasise the importance of ethical and transparent marketing practices in digital environments.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review examines existing scholarly work related to dark pattern marketing practices, their classification, prevalence, ethical concerns, and impact on consumer trust and decision-making. Over the last decade, researchers from disciplines such as marketing, consumer psychology, law, and human-computer interaction have extensively studied dark patterns due to their growing presence in digital platforms. This section synthesizes global and Indian research to establish the academic foundation of the present study.

### 2.1 Conceptualization of Dark Pattern Marketing Practices

The term *dark patterns* was first introduced to describe deceptive user interface designs that manipulate consumers into making unintended choices. According to Mathur et al. (2019), dark patterns are interface design strategies intentionally created to benefit businesses at the expense of users. These practices exploit cognitive biases such as default bias, scarcity effect, and loss aversion.

Weizenbaum Institute (2025) further expands the concept by linking dark patterns with addictive digital designs. Their study highlights how repetitive nudging, forced continuity, and misleading consent mechanisms reduce consumer autonomy and encourage prolonged engagement. This conceptualization positions dark patterns not merely as unethical marketing tools but as systematic manipulation techniques embedded in digital ecosystems.

### 2.2 Classification and Types of Dark Patterns

Several studies have categorized dark patterns to better understand their functioning and impact. Mathur et al. (2019), through a large-scale empirical study of over 11,000 shopping websites, identified common types such as hidden costs, sneak into basket, forced action, confirmshaming, and obstruction. Their findings demonstrate that these patterns are widespread across e-commerce platforms.

Luguri and Strahilevitz (2021) introduced a psychological classification, grouping dark patterns based on their level of coercion and deception. The authors argue that while some dark patterns mildly influence choices, others severely impair rational decision-making. This distinction is crucial in evaluating their ethical and legal implications.

### 2.3 Dark Patterns and Consumer Decision-Making

Consumer decision-making is significantly influenced by digital interface design. Studies show that dark patterns distort the decision-making process by limiting informed choice. The Oxford accepted article on *Dark Patterns and Consumer Vulnerability* provides empirical evidence that dark patterns affect consumers across age, income, and education levels. The research highlights that even experienced users are not immune to deceptive design strategies.

The ResearchGate thesis on online booking behavior further explains how urgency cues, false scarcity, and pre-selected options pressure consumers into quick decisions. These tactics reduce deliberation time, leading to impulsive purchases and post-purchase regret.

### 2.4 Impact of Dark Patterns on Consumer Trust

Consumer trust is a critical factor in long-term brand relationships. Susipta (2024) studied dark patterns in digital marketing and found a negative relationship between deceptive practices and consumer loyalty. While dark patterns may improve short-term conversions, they significantly damage brand credibility and trust over time.

Similarly, the IJRC-AIT study on customer experience emphasizes that repeated exposure to dark patterns leads to scepticism, reduced satisfaction, and eventual brand avoidance. These findings suggest that dark pattern marketing practices undermine sustainable business growth by eroding trust.

### 2.5 Ethical and Regulatory Perspectives on Dark Patterns

Ethical concerns surrounding dark patterns have gained attention in academic and policy discussions. Sharma and Gupta (2025) analysed consumer awareness and regulatory mechanisms, concluding that most consumers are unaware of manipulation until after experiencing harm. The study stresses the need for consumer education and transparent digital practices.

Kumar (2025) examined dark patterns from a behavioural antitrust perspective in India. The research argues that dark patterns constitute a form of market manipulation that restricts fair competition.

The study highlights gaps in Indian consumer protection laws and calls for stricter enforcement aligned with global standards.

The systematic review titled *Mapping the Scholarship of Dark Pattern Regulation* consolidates global regulatory responses, revealing that while countries like the EU and USA have initiated guidelines, enforcement remains inconsistent.

### 2.6 Dark Patterns in the Indian Digital Market

Limited but growing research focuses on the Indian context. Kumar (2025) emphasizes that India's rapidly expanding digital economy makes consumers more vulnerable to manipulative designs. The lack of strong regulatory oversight and low digital literacy further intensify the problem.

Indian studies primarily focus on legal implications and consumer awareness rather than behavioural outcomes. This creates a gap in understanding how dark patterns influence trust and decision-making specifically among Indian consumers.

### 2.7 Synthesis of Literature and Research Gaps

A synthesis of existing literature reveals that dark pattern marketing practices are widespread, strategically designed, and effective in influencing consumer behaviour. However, most empirical studies are conducted in Western contexts, with limited focus on Indian consumers.

Additionally, existing research often studies either consumer decision-making or trust in isolation. There is a lack of integrated studies examining both variables simultaneously. Moreover, few studies adopt a consumer-centric approach to understand perceived manipulation and long-term trust erosion.

### 2.8 Relevance of Literature to the Present Study

The reviewed literature establishes a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for the present research. It highlights the need for a focused study on how dark pattern marketing practices affect consumer trust and decision-making in the Indian digital environment. By addressing identified gaps, the present study aims to contribute meaningfully to academic research and policy discussions.

## 3. Research Gap

A review of existing literature indicates that dark pattern marketing practices,

have been widely examined from ethical, legal, and technological perspectives. Several studies have successfully identified different types of dark patterns and documented their widespread use across digital platforms such as e-commerce websites, online booking portals, and subscription-based services (Mathur et al., 2019; Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021). However, despite the growing volume of research, significant gaps remain in the current body of knowledge.

First, most empirical studies on dark patterns are concentrated in Western contexts, with limited focus on emerging digital markets such as India. Given the rapid growth of India's digital economy and increasing online consumer base, there is insufficient research examining how Indian consumers perceive and respond to dark pattern marketing practices (Kumar, 2025). This geographical limitation restricts the generalizability of existing findings.

Second, existing studies often examine consumer decision-making and consumer trust as separate outcomes. While some research explores how dark patterns influence impulsive purchases or choice architecture, others focus on ethical concerns and loss of trust. There is a lack of integrated studies that simultaneously analyse the combined impact of dark pattern marketing practices on both consumer trust and decision-making behaviour within a single framework.

Third, much of the existing literature relies on legal analysis, interface classification, or experimental designs, with relatively fewer studies adopting a consumer-centric perspective. Limited attention has been given to understanding consumers' perceived manipulation, post-decision regret, and long-term trust erosion resulting from repeated exposure to dark patterns (Susipta, 2024).

Finally, although regulatory discussions are increasingly prominent, empirical evidence linking dark pattern practices to practical consumer outcomes remains fragmented. There is a clear need for studies that bridge the gap between theoretical classification of dark patterns and their real-world impact on consumer attitudes and behaviour.

In light of these gaps, the present study aims to address the lack of integrated, consumer-focused research by examining,

how dark pattern marketing practices influence consumer trust and decision-making, with particular relevance to the Indian digital context.

## **4. Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To understand the concept and nature of dark pattern marketing practices used in digital marketing environments.
2. To examine the impact of dark pattern marketing practices on consumer decision-making processes.
3. To analyse the effect of dark pattern marketing practices on consumer trust toward digital platforms and brands.
4. To review existing literature related to ethical issues and regulatory concerns associated with dark pattern marketing.
5. To highlight the importance of ethical and transparent marketing practices in building long-term consumer trust.

## **5. Research Methodology**

Research methodology explains the systematic approach adopted to conduct the study. It outlines the research design, data sources, methods of data collection, and analytical techniques used to achieve the research objectives. The present study follows a structured methodology to examine dark pattern marketing practices and their impact on consumer trust and decision-making.

### **5.1 Research Design**

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. Descriptive research is used to understand the nature, forms, and prevalence of dark pattern marketing practices in digital platforms, while analytical research helps in examining their impact on consumer trust and decision-making behaviour.

Previous studies suggest that descriptive-analytical designs are suitable for studying unethical digital practices and consumer behaviour patterns (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021).

### **5.2 Nature of the Study**

This research is conceptual and empirical in nature, relying primarily on secondary data. The study focuses on synthesizing existing research findings rather than collecting primary data through surveys or experiments.

This approach is appropriate because several high-quality peer-reviewed studies and empirical findings on dark patterns are already available in the literature (Mathur et al., 2019).

### **5.3 Sources of Data**

The study is based entirely on secondary data collected from reliable and authentic sources. The major sources of data include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Published research papers
- Working papers and accepted manuscripts
- Reports from academic institutions
- Doctoral theses and conference proceedings

Key sources include journals such as the *Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society*, *Journal of Legal Analysis*, *International Journal of Engineering and Management Research*, and reputed academic repositories such as Oxford Research Archive, arXiv, and Research Gate (Weizenbaum Institute, 2025; Susipta, 2024).

### **5.4 Criteria for Selection of Literature**

To ensure quality and relevance, the following criteria were used for selecting research studies:

- Studies published in peer-reviewed or indexed journals
- Research published between 2019 and 2025
- Studies focusing on dark patterns, consumer behaviour, trust, ethics, and digital marketing
- Research with empirical findings, conceptual clarity, or regulatory relevance

### **5.5 Method of Data Analysis**

The collected secondary data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings of previous studies were systematically reviewed, compared, and interpreted to identify recurring themes related to:

- Types of dark pattern marketing practices
- Influence on consumer decision-making
- Impact on consumer trust and loyalty
- Ethical and regulatory implications

Content analysis is widely used in studies examining digital manipulation and consumer vulnerability (Mathur et al., 2019; Kumar, 2025).

### **5.6 Analytical Framework**

The analysis is structured around a thematic framework, which links dark pattern practices with two key outcome variables:

1. Consumer Trust – including transparency, perceived fairness, and long-term brand credibility
2. Consumer Decision-Making – including impulsive choices, regret, and manipulation of preferences

This framework is supported by previous empirical and legal studies highlighting the behavioural consequences of deceptive interface designs (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021; Susipta, 2024).

### **5.7 Ethical Considerations**

As the study relies solely on secondary data, no personal or confidential consumer information was collected. All sources have been properly cited to avoid plagiarism and ensure academic integrity. The study adheres to ethical research practices by acknowledging original authors and maintaining transparency in data usage.

### **5.8 Scope of the Study**

The scope of the study is limited to:

- Digital and online marketing platforms
- E-commerce, subscription-based services, and online booking interfaces
- Consumer trust and decision-making outcomes

The study does not cover offline marketing practices or experimental testing, focusing instead on conceptual and empirical insights from existing literature.

## **6. Analysis and Discussion**

This section analyses and interprets the findings derived from the reviewed literature. The discussion focuses on understanding how dark pattern marketing practices influence consumer trust and decision-making across digital platforms. The analysis is based on thematic insights drawn from previously published studies.

### **6.1 Prevalence of Dark Pattern Marketing Practices**

Existing literature indicates that dark pattern marketing practices are widely prevalent across digital platforms, particularly in e-commerce, online booking portals, and subscription-based services. Mathur et al. (2019) identified the extensive use of deceptive interface designs such as hidden costs, forced continuity, and misleading urgency cues across more than 11,000 websites.

Similarly, the Weizenbaum Institute (2025) highlights that addictive designs and manipulative user interfaces are intentionally embedded to increase user engagement and conversion rates. These findings suggest that dark patterns are not isolated practices but have become systematic marketing strategies in the digital ecosystem.

### **6.2 Impact on Consumer Decision-Making**

Several studies emphasize that dark pattern marketing significantly influences consumer decision-making processes. Dark patterns often manipulate choice architecture, leading consumers to make decisions that they may not have made under transparent conditions. Luguri and Strahilevitz (2021) argue that such practices exploit cognitive biases, resulting in impulsive purchases and reduced decision autonomy.

Research on online booking behaviour also shows that scarcity messages and pre-selected options create psychological pressure, pushing consumers toward quicker and less informed decisions (ResearchGate Thesis, 2021). This manipulation undermines rational decision-making and increases post-purchase regret.

### **6.3 Effect on Consumer Trust**

Consumer trust emerges as one of the most adversely affected outcomes of dark pattern marketing. Susipta (2024) found that while dark patterns may increase short-term conversions, they negatively impact long-term consumer trust and loyalty. When consumers realize they have been misled, their confidence in digital platforms declines.

The Oxford study on consumer vulnerability further supports this argument by showing that repeated exposure to deceptive design reduces perceived fairness and credibility of online platforms. Loss of trust often results in negative word-of-mouth and platform avoidance.

### **6.4 Ethical and Legal Implications**

Dark pattern marketing raises serious ethical concerns related to transparency, fairness, and informed consumer consent. Kumar (2025) highlights that such practices blur the line between persuasive marketing and market manipulation, especially in the Indian digital context.

Regulatory discussions increasingly recognize dark patterns as unethical and potentially unlawful. However, enforcement remains limited, allowing businesses to continue exploiting regulatory loopholes. This ethical gap contributes to sustained consumer exploitation.

### **6.5 Consumer Awareness and Vulnerability**

Literature suggests that consumer awareness of dark patterns remains relatively low, particularly among first-time and less digitally literate users. Sharma and Gupta (2025) emphasize that limited awareness makes consumers more vulnerable to manipulative marketing practices.

The Oxford-accepted article further demonstrates that vulnerable consumer groups, including elderly users and inexperienced digital consumers, are disproportionately affected. This highlights the need for consumer education and transparency initiatives.

### **6.6 Short-Term Gains vs Long-Term Consequences**

While dark patterns may generate short-term benefits such as increased sales and engagement, literature consistently shows negative long-term consequences. Reduced trust, damaged brand reputation, and increased regulatory scrutiny outweigh short-term gains (Susipta, 2024; Weizenbaum Institute, 2025).

This trade-off suggests that ethical marketing practices are more sustainable for long-term consumer relationships and brand value.

### **6.7 Synthesis of Findings**

The overall analysis indicates a clear relationship between dark pattern marketing practices and negative consumer outcomes. Dark patterns distort decision-making, erode trust, and increase consumer vulnerability. Although widely used, these practices pose significant ethical and regulatory challenges.

The findings collectively reinforce the need for stricter regulations, ethical marketing frameworks, and increased consumer awareness to mitigate the harmful effects of dark pattern marketing.

## **7. Conclusion**

The present study concludes that dark pattern marketing practices have become a common feature of digital marketing environments and significantly influence consumer decision-making. The review of existing literature clearly shows that deceptive design techniques such as hidden costs, misleading information, and forced choices reduce consumers' ability to make informed decisions and often lead to unintentional actions (Mathur et al., 2019).

The findings further indicate that while dark pattern marketing may offer short-term benefits to businesses, it negatively affects consumer trust in the long run. Consumers who realise that they have been manipulated experience dissatisfaction and loss of confidence in digital platforms, which weakens brand relationships and loyalty (Susipta, 2024). Ethical and legal studies also highlight that such practices raise serious concerns related to fairness, transparency, and consumer protection (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021).

The study emphasises the growing need for ethical marketing practices and transparent digital design. Institutional and regulatory research suggests that increased consumer awareness and stronger enforcement mechanisms are essential to reduce the harmful impact of dark pattern marketing practices (Sharma & Gupta, 2025). Overall, the study contributes to existing literature by highlighting the importance of responsible digital marketing strategies that prioritise consumer trust and informed decision-making.

### **Suggestions / Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are proposed to address the issues related to dark pattern marketing practices:

1. Digital marketers should adopt transparent and ethical design practices by clearly presenting pricing, terms, and options to consumers. This can help in building long-term consumer trust and credibility.
2. Organisations should avoid the use of deceptive interface elements such as hidden costs, forced subscriptions, and misleading urgency cues,

as these practices negatively affect consumer confidence and brand reputation.

3. Consumer awareness programs should be promoted to educate users about dark pattern marketing practices so that they can make informed and conscious decisions while using digital platforms.
4. Regulatory authorities should strengthen guidelines and enforcement mechanisms related to digital marketing ethics to protect consumers from manipulative design practices.
5. Future research may focus on empirical studies using primary data to measure consumer awareness and behavioural responses to dark pattern marketing practices in different digital contexts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged:

1. The study is based entirely on secondary data collected from previously published research papers, journals, and institutional reports. No primary data has been collected directly from consumers.
2. The findings of the study depend on the availability and scope of existing literature, which may limit the generalisation of results across all digital marketing contexts.
3. The study focuses mainly on conceptual and qualitative analysis; therefore, statistical analysis and quantitative measurement of consumer behaviour are not included.
4. As dark pattern marketing practices are continuously evolving, the study may not capture new or emerging techniques developed after the selected period of literature review.
5. The research does not examine industry-specific differences, as the analysis is based on general digital marketing practices.

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