

# DARK INTENTIONS OR PERSUASION?

## UX DESIGNERS' ACTIVATION OF STAKEHOLDER AND USER VALUES

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### ABSTRACT

Formalized frameworks that reference ethics and values have received increasing attention in the HCI community. These methods emphasize the importance of values in relation to design but provide little guidance to reveal the values that are present or have impact on designers' decision making. In this work-in-progress, we identify the values considered by student UX designers when conducting an authentic design task, allowing for interrogation of the possible intentions that underlie their decision making. Our exploratory analysis revealed that participants had sensitivity towards user values, but often contradicted these values through dark, often tacit, intentions to persuade users, thereby achieving stakeholder goals. We provide provocations for future research on the role of ethics and values in practice and design education.

### BACKGROUND

The importance of ethics in design and HCI activity has been well studied [1,4,5,7] and there have been numerous calls for an explicit commitment to ethics in design education to prepare practitioners for their ethical role (e.g., [2]). However, tools and methods to build and reinforce ethical awareness and the importance of values in design are scarce, even as scholars have called for better connections among academic research and the realities of practice [5]. This work-in-progress focuses on identifying patterns of ethical decisions and related intentions that emerge in UX design as designers complete an authentic task, including the balancing of user and stakeholder values. This was observed through a protocol study to understand the ethical intentions student designers reveal through their design process when completing a design task. We address the following research questions:

1. What were the user values considered in designers' decisions, and why were they considered?
2. What underlying designer intentions pointed towards either user or stakeholder values?

#### USER VALUE

#### DESCRIPTION

##### Right to Information

Designers identified improving presentation of information on the website as a priority. The user value "right to information" was considered the most essential to maximize conversion rates, and was translated into infographics, statistics and images in the solutions. While an appropriate value was activated and used in positive ways, the dark intention in relation to that value resulted in trade-offs between the ethics of presenting valid statistics and inflating the numbers to persuade, thus attracting more donations.

##### Flexibility

Another common value in play was flexibility and its relation to freedom of choice. A designer in group 1 identified no freedom of choice for the donors in terms of the donation amounts and payment methods, with the goal of increasing donations taking precedence over user agency. Designers in this group implemented a flexible entry of donation amounts by providing an empty box with hint text. Designers also provided the users with flexible choices of payment methods (e.g., PayPal, Venmo) to encourage donors with fewer payment barriers. In these examples, freedom of choice—a common usability heuristic—was in conflict with persuading the user to take on the stakeholder's goals, resulting in a more explicit conversation about stakeholder versus user needs.

##### Optimization, Automation, Usability and Security

These criteria had similar implicit dark intention trade-offs; the way in which these guided the design process varied by context and participant group, but generally resulted in a streamlining of the current site to address major usability or UX pain points, rather than deeply interrogating the ethics of potential outcomes. In this way, these intentions and their implications were often inaccessible, even to the participants.

### FUTURE WORK

What might methods look like that allow the designer access to their tacit and embodied knowledge, and its relation to potential tensions in user and stakeholder needs/goals?

How might methods that provide generative guidance in the pragmatist ethics tradition allow greater access to one's normative position, and also facilitate the generation of more novel design outcomes?

Future elaboration of the connections among values, intentions, and outcomes to characterize the impact of value-related frameworks from HCI and STS literature, including ways to influence participants to foreground stakeholder goals and values. More work is needed to illustrate connections among design moves, and leading to a more nuanced visualization of value interplay.

### PROTOCOL STUDY DESIGN



### ANALYSIS OF DESIGN COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE

The cleaned transcript was coded to mark the problems, solutions, human values considered and dark intentions behind the decisions in every design move resulting in the sequence analysis. An existing analytic approach [8] was used to locate problem identification, provisional or final solution, and the relationship between these elements and the final goal. In the dialogue surrounding each design move, we identified both explicit and implied values. In this structure, the <intention> indirectly activates the user values considered by the designers. For example:

"this donate link is hard to see <problem>. Which should be, uh, made easier to access <intention of implementing the feature> because that's what they want <user mental model/need>."

### FINDINGS

Common user values considered by the designers included: right to information, usability, security, flexibility, automation, optimization, trust, and aesthetics. Each of these values, described in the table below, pointed towards intentions that designers embodied and relied upon in guiding their decision-making process. Often these intentions were dark, often tacit, with the goal of persuading users. By dark intentions, we refer to designers' values that are activated in relation to user needs, but shift through design decisions to become more aligned with stakeholder needs, often at odds with known and defined user goals.

### DISCUSSION

The sensitivity of designers towards user values did not necessarily impact their decisions or ethically-focused outcomes. In many cases, user values were acknowledged, only then to be leveraged in persuading users towards stakeholder-directed outcomes, activating potentially dark intentions on the part of the designer. We see a relation here to the persuasive principles formulated by Fogg [3] and characterizations of dark patterns [6]. Currently, there is little guidance regarding how students and practitioners should recognize, articulate, and act upon their values in appropriate ways. Further investigation into the relationship between VSD and designers' tendencies to enact unduly persuasive or dark patterns is needed to ensure ethically sound practice.

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