

# “NOTHING COMES BEFORE PROFIT” ASSHOLE DESIGN IN THE WILD

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers in HCI and STS are increasingly interested in describing ethics and values relevant for design practice, including the formulation of methods to guide value application. However, little work has addressed ethical considerations as they emerge in everyday conversations about ethics in venues such as social media. In this late breaking work, we describe online conversations about a concept known as “asshole design” on Reddit, and the relationship of this concept to another practitioner-focused concept known as “dark patterns.” We analyzed 1002 posts from the subreddit ‘/r/assholeddesign’ to identify the types of artifact being shared and the interaction purposes that were perceived to be manipulative or unethical as a type of “asshole design.” We identified a subset of these posts relating to dark patterns, quantifying their occurrences using an existing dark patterns typology.

## BACKGROUND

The importance of ethics in design and HCI activity has been well studied [8] and there have been numerous calls for an explicit commitment to ethics in design education to prepare practitioners for their ethical role [4]. 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. Our goal in this work-in-progress is to identify and describe relationships among “asshole” design and other frameworks such as “dark patterns” that we have evaluated in previous work [2, 4], focusing on identifying patterns of ethical decisions and related intentions that emerge in non-UX practitioners’ conversations in online social media spaces. The term dark patterns, coined in 2010 by Harry Brignull, has been used by practitioners to describe “a user interface that has been carefully crafted to trick users into doing things [...] that do not have the user’s interests in mind” [1]. Analysis of physical artifacts in tandem with findings from Greenberg et al. [5] allow us to conclude that existing dark pattern strategies have relevance in describing physical forms of manipulation, particularly those forms that remediate patterns found in digital form.

We address the following research questions:

1. What ethical concerns are present in the artifacts shared through the subreddit posts?
2. How do these artifacts relate to existing dark pattern strategies?
3. How do posts containing physical artifact relate to screen-based dark patterns?

## OUR APPROACH

We collected and analyzed a set of artifacts posted by members of the subreddit ‘/r/assholeddesign,’ comprising real-world examples where corporations or individuals were deemed to have designed with a malicious intent. Through the Reddit API, we collected a portion of all posts to the subreddit in a sixteen-month period (July 2017 to November 2018; n=4775). We compiled all available metadata and media content into a MySQL database; 1002 of the total posts were randomly selected for analysis using a random number generator. This subset forms our dataset for this study.

A team of five researchers with experience in UX design performed a content analysis [7] of the dataset. Each artifact and its associated post information were coded to confirm whether it was an example of “asshole design” by the subreddit’s definition. Additionally, each artifact was coded for the type of modality present, the interaction domain/s and purpose/s, and whether or not one of the five strategies of dark patterns from our typology [4] was present in the artifact (Figure 3). We carried out this content analysis iteratively, with three rounds of thematic analysis and member checks supporting the creation of a codebook for each content characteristic. Upon the completion of coding, we used descriptive statistics to characterize the dataset and answer our research questions.

R/ASSHOLEDESIGN RULES	
1. Posts Must Pass Hanlon's Razor	▼
2. No, it's Not Literal	▼
3. Don't be Subtle	▼
4. Be Civil	▼
5. No Recent Reposts	▼
6. No Brigading or Witch Hunting	▼
7. Use Screenshots	▼
8. Posts must display aspects of design	▼
9. No low-effort content	▼

FIGURE 1. RULES FOR THE ‘R/ASSHOLEDESIGN’ SUBREDDIT.

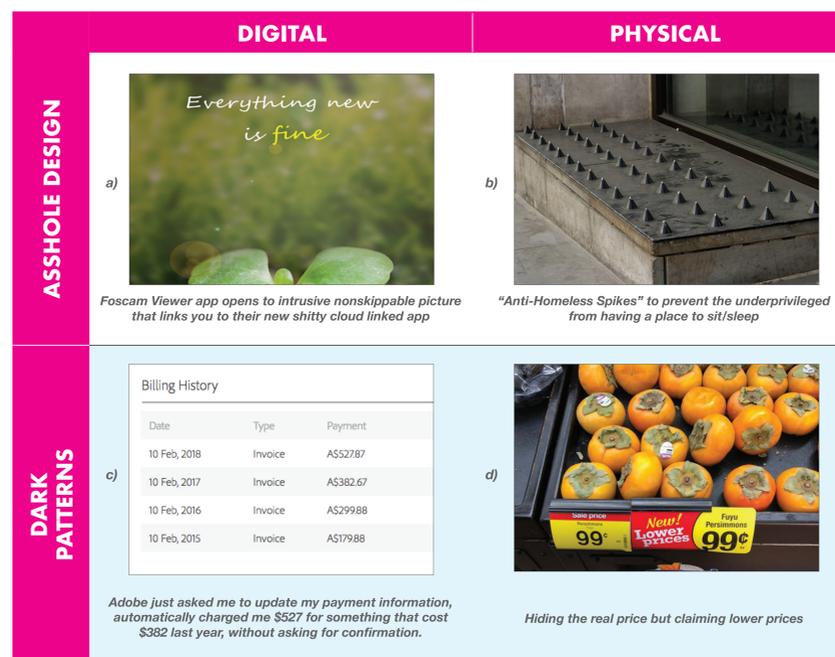


FIGURE 2. ASSHOLE DESIGN AND DARK PATTERN EXAMPLES.

## FINDINGS

In this study, we found evidence of conversation about ethical concerns on social media [6], indicating some level of interest in discussing ethical phenomena and complexity using real-world artifacts. The examples presented in these posts show potential to expand our understanding about how these ethical concerns are discussed by everyday users. Through analysis of a specific subreddit, we have expanded our study of dark patterns beyond digital interfaces to investigate ethical concern in relation to physical artifacts, describing artifacts that supplant user needs in favor of shareholder profit.

### ASSHOLE DESIGN V. DARK PATTERNS

690 of the 1002 posts were consistent with the principles of “asshole design” (Figure 1), while 207 were examples of bad design and 105 were examples of neither label. The posts containing bad design or no clear ethical concern were excluded from further analysis. Figure 2(b) includes an example of a physical artifact that is designed with spikes in such a way that it does not allow homeless individuals to sit or sleep on the platform.

Users mentioned a variety of reasons for posting these artifacts, including: interrupting or misleading the users’ task flow, presenting advertisements, collecting user information, signing up for services, enrolling for subscriptions, and tasks involving payments that take user’s credits. One such example is presented in Figure 2(a) where a user posted a screenshot of the Foscam Viewer app and commented: “[App] opens to intrusive non-skippable picture that links you to their new shitty cloud linked app.”

### COMPARING DARK PATTERNS IN DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL SPACE

To show this connection, we evaluate two examples from the data that depict the dark pattern strategy sneaking (n=36) in physical and digital forms. In our taxonomy [4], sneaking is an “attempt to hide, disguise, or delay the divulging of information that has relevance to the user.” In Figure 2(d), an author posted an image of a price tag with a new “lower price” graphic that hides the real price, which is also the same price as the offer. In a parallel example of digital sneaking (Figure 2(c)), an author posted an image of screen shot where Adobe asked the user to update payment information which was then automatically recharged without confirmation. In the case of obstruction (n=16), we identified physical obstructions created to block a user’s way, physically blocking the user from seeing or interacting with something. Nagging was the least common pattern in our physical artifacts (n=5); often, this included a digital interface to nag about something physically, such as a printer that repeatedly requested more ink.

## CONCLUSION

Through this late breaking work, we have identified similarities and differences in the presentation of dark patterns and “asshole design”. We found that dark patterns were mostly designed to trick users to use a certain service whereas “asshole design” tended to restrict the use of some products, or a certain manner of using them.

## FUTURE WORK

Future research should further differentiate among these practices, building upon prior work to investigate new vocabulary to describe ethical concerns as they exist in digital, physical, and multimodal forms.

These insights may encourage impacts in ethics education in HCI and UX design domains as well as bring awareness about ethical practices in everyday design objects.

Investigation of this community may provide cues to further describing methods of ethical arguments and discourse that point towards “everyday ethics.”

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