Ethical Analysis Of Dark Pattern Marketing On The Shopee E-Commerce Platform Among University Students In Makassar City

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Abstract: *The digitalisation of commerce has introduced the phenomenon of dark pattern marketing, which manipulates consumer decisions through strategic interface design. This research explores the implementation, perception, and ethical implications of dark patterns on the Shopee platform for university students in Makassar City, who are active digital consumers. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews of ten active Shopee-using students, the study identified six dominant dark pattern categories: false urgency, hidden costs, forced continuity, confirm shaming, trick questions, and obstruction. Findings show false urgency is the most prevalent tactic, affecting all participants and creating a 'fear of missing out' that drives impulsive purchases. A paradox of awareness was revealed, where only 40% of students recognised the design manipulation, despite being highly educated digital natives. The economic impact reaches IDR 150,000–IDR 400,000 per month per individual through overspending and unplanned purchases. The ethical implications indicate fundamental breaches of the principles of honesty, transparency, and consumer autonomy, resulting in significant erosion of trust, with 60% of participants stating an intention to reduce their shopping activity. This research affirms that dark patterns are not merely a technical issue but a business ethics problem threatening the sustainability of the e-commerce ecosystem. Recommendations include the adoption of ethical design by platforms, strengthening digital consumer protection regulations, integrating consumer literacy into higher education, and multi-stakeholder collaboration to create a fair and transparent digital ecosystem.*
Keywords: *Dark Pattern Marketing, E-Commerce Ethics, Digital Consumer Behaviour, Interface Manipulation, Consumer Protection*

INTRODUCTION

The era of digitalisation has fundamentally changed the global commerce landscape, with e-commerce platforms becoming the primary medium for modern consumer transactions. Indonesia, as the country with the highest digital economy growth in Southeast Asia, recorded e-commerce transaction values reaching IDR 550 trillion in 2024, with Shopee dominating the market as the most visited platform with 157.9 million visits per month (Deligöz, 2025). Amidst this exponential growth, a controversial phenomenon known as 'dark pattern marketing' has emerged. This is the practice of digital interface design that intentionally manipulates users into making decisions that benefit the platform but are detrimental to the consumer (Pramiarsih, 2024).

Dark patterns are manipulative tactics in user interface design that exploit users' cognitive weaknesses and psychological biases to encourage actions inconsistent with their interests, such as impulsive purchases, excessive sharing of personal data, or difficulty in cancelling services (Amir et al., 2023). Global studies indicate that 75.7% of 642 digital companies use at least one form of dark pattern, with 66.8% implementing two or more manipulative tactics on their platforms (I Nyoman Susipta, 2025). These practices include various strategies like false urgency (creating a false sense of urgency), hidden costs, forced continuity (difficulty unsubscribing), and confirmshaming (psychological manipulation through guilt).

The Indonesian context shows a significant prevalence of dark patterns on local e-commerce platforms. Comparative research on Indonesia's three largest platforms identified that Shopee has 11 types of dark patterns implemented in 15 interface elements, the highest compared to its competitors (Ramadhani et al., 2025). The implementation of these dark patterns seriously impacts consumer behaviour, with studies showing that more than 40% of consumers report financial losses due to being rushed through confusing purchase processes or tricked into buying more expensive products (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021). This phenomenon is increasingly worrying because consumers, especially university students who are active users of digital platforms, are often unaware they are being manipulated by interface designs intentionally crafted to exploit their cognitive limitations.

University students, as a Generation Z demographic group, have unique characteristics as 'digital natives' who grew up with technology. Yet, paradoxically, they are vulnerable to dark pattern manipulation due to impulsive tendencies and high dependency on digital platforms for daily transactions. Studies show that nearly 70% of Generation Z in Southeast Asia prioritise e-commerce platforms for their research and purchases, with Shopee being the top choice (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021). Makassar City, as a centre for higher education in Eastern Indonesia with a large student population, becomes a strategic research locus for understanding the ethical dynamics of dark pattern marketing in the context of young, highly-educated consumers who are potentially vulnerable to digital manipulation.

The ethical dimension of dark pattern marketing practices is a crucial concern as it violates fundamental principles in business ethics, particularly transparency, honesty, and respect for consumer autonomy. Research indicates that digital consumers from Generation Z and Millennials

are increasingly concerned about corporate ethics issues and tend to choose brands that demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility (I Nyoman Susipta, 2025). However, reality shows a significant gap between consumers' ethical expectations and the dark pattern practices still rampant on e-commerce platforms. This raises fundamental questions about the moral responsibility of digital businesses in designing fair and transparent interfaces, as well as the urgency for stricter regulations to protect consumer interests in the digital era.

This research is important for three main reasons: first, to fill the literature gap on dark patterns in the local Indonesian context, especially among university students who are a strategic consumer segment; second, to provide an in-depth understanding of the ethical implications of manipulative practices in e-commerce, which have thus far received little academic attention; third, to provide an empirical basis for developing consumer protection policies and more ethical interface designs in Indonesia. Thus, this research contributes not only to the development of digital consumer behaviour theory and business ethics but also provides practical recommendations for regulators, e-commerce platforms, and consumers in creating a fairer and more transparent digital ecosystem.

Based on the background described, this study formulates the following research questions: (1) How is dark pattern marketing implemented on the Shopee platform as perceived by university students in Makassar City?, (2) What are the students' perceptions and awareness of dark pattern marketing practices in their e-commerce transactions?, and (3) What are the ethical implications of Shopee's dark pattern marketing practices on the consumption behaviour and trust of students as digital consumers? This study aims to: (1) Identify and analyse the forms of dark pattern marketing applied on the Shopee platform experienced by Makassar City students, (2) Evaluate the level of awareness and perception of students towards manipulative practices in e-commerce interface design, and (3) Analyse the ethical implications of dark pattern marketing on consumer behaviour, trust, and decision-making autonomy of students in the context of digital transactions.

This research provides significant academic, practical, and social benefits. Academically, it enriches the literature on e-commerce ethics and digital consumer behaviour in Indonesia, particularly regarding the phenomenon of dark patterns, which is still minimally studied in the local context. Practically, the research findings can serve as strategic input for e-commerce platforms to design more transparent and ethical interfaces, and for regulators in formulating more

effective digital consumer protection policies. Socially, this research increases the awareness of students and young consumers about their rights in the digital era, and encourages more responsible and ethical business practices within Indonesia's digital economy ecosystem.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach designed to explore and describe the phenomenon of dark pattern marketing on the Shopee platform from the perspective of active student users in Makassar City. The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to produce comprehensive and in-depth descriptions of the research subjects' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the phenomenon under study, without manipulating research variables. This method allows the researcher to stay close to the data and generate a rich understanding of the social context and meanings constructed by the participants (Villamin et al., 2024). The descriptive qualitative design offers methodological flexibility aligned with the naturalistic paradigm, where the researcher seeks to understand phenomena in their natural conditions and the real-life context of the participants (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024).

The subjects of this research were active students enrolled in higher education institutions in Makassar City who have been active users of the Shopee platform within the last six months. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which involves the intentional selection of participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The purposive sampling strategy enables the researcher to identify and select individuals or groups who possess in-depth knowledge and direct experience with the phenomenon being studied, thereby providing rich and meaningful information for the research (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). Inclusion criteria for participants included: active undergraduate (S1) students from various disciplines, aged 18-25 years, having used the Shopee application at least 10 times in the last six months, and willing to participate voluntarily by providing informed consent. This study involved ten students as participants, a number considered adequate to achieve depth of understanding in descriptive qualitative research, considering the homogeneity of participant characteristics and the specific focus of the phenomenon under study (Villamin et al., 2024). The selection of ten participants also considered the principle of data saturation, where data collection is halted when new emerging

information no longer provides significant additional insights into the understanding of the research phenomenon.

The data collection technique involved semi-structured interviews designed to explore participants' deep experiences, perceptions, and understandings of dark pattern marketing practices on Shopee. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because this method offers an optimal balance between organised structure and flexibility in exploring topics, allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions based on participant responses while maintaining focus on the research objectives (Ruslin et al., 2022). An interview guide was developed based on a literature review of dark patterns and included open-ended questions grouped into several main themes: shopping experiences on Shopee, awareness of manipulative interface design elements, specific experiences with various types of dark patterns, impact on purchasing decisions, and ethical evaluation of these practices. Each interview session lasted between 45-60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face or via online communication platforms according to the participants' preferences and convenience. The entire interview process was recorded with participants' consent to ensure data accuracy, and the researcher also created field notes to document non-verbal observations and initial reflections during the interview process (Naz et al., 2022).

The data analysis procedure followed the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke, which has become a widely used and recognised qualitative data analysis method in social science research. Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to identify, analyse, and report patterns of meaning (themes) within a qualitative dataset with a level of interpretation suitable for descriptive research (Naeem et al., 2023). The data analysis process began with the verbatim transcription stage of the interview recordings, where every participant utterance was converted into complete and accurate written text. The data familiarisation stage was conducted by repeatedly reading all transcripts to build an in-depth understanding of the entire dataset and noting initial ideas that emerged. The next stage was coding, where the researcher identified meaningful units in the data and assigned descriptive labels that captured the essence of each data segment. These codes were then grouped and synthesised to form potential themes representing broader, more abstract patterns of meaning in the dataset. The identified themes were subsequently reviewed and revised through an iterative process to ensure the internal consistency of each theme and its coherence with the entire dataset. The final stage involved clearly defining and naming the themes,

where each theme was described in detail, identifying sub-themes if necessary, and composing a coherent analytical narrative supported by direct quotes from the participants (Fuchs, 2023).

To ensure the credibility and quality of the research, several trustworthiness-enhancing strategies were applied throughout the research process. First, the researcher applied the member checking technique by verifying data interpretations with several participants to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's understanding of their experiences. Second, the researcher conducted peer debriefing by discussing the analysis process and findings with other research colleagues to gain alternative perspectives and minimise subjective bias. Third, the researcher compiled an audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, data collection and analysis processes, and critical reflections of the researcher to ensure the transparency and replicability of the research process. Fourth, the researcher applied the principle of reflexivity by explicitly acknowledging positions, assumptions, and potential biases that might influence data interpretation. Fifth, the researcher used source triangulation by comparing perspectives from various participants to identify consistent patterns and variations in their experiences. All research procedures received ethical approval from the institutional ethics committee and were conducted respecting research ethics principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, data confidentiality, and the participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study involved ten active university students from various higher education institutions in Makassar City who are active users of the Shopee platform. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, this research successfully identified various forms of dark pattern marketing experienced by students, their level of awareness of these manipulative practices, and the impact on their consumption behaviour and consumer trust.

1. Research Participant Profile

The research participants consisted of ten students with diverse demographic characteristics but shared the similarity of being active Shopee users. The complete participant profile is presented in the following table:

Initial	Age	Program of Study	Shopping Frequency/Month	Duration of Use

AR	20	Management	8-10 times	3 years
DF	21	Informatics Engineering	12-15 times	4 years
NS	19	Psychology	6-8 times	2 years
MH	22	Accounting	10-12 times	3,5 years
SA	20	Communication Science	15-20 times	4 years
RK	21	Pharmacy	7-9 times	2.5 years
LM	23	Development Economics	5-7 times	3 years
IW	20	Graphic Design	10-14 times	3 years
FH	22	Law	8-11 times	2 years
ZA	21	English Language Education	9-12 times	3.5 years

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

The data shows that all participants are active users with a shopping frequency of at least 5 times per month and have used Shopee for at least 2 years, thus possessing adequate experience to provide in-depth perspectives on dark pattern practices on the platform.

2. Identification of Dark Pattern Marketing on Shopee

The interview results identified six main categories of dark patterns consistently experienced by the research participants.

2.1. False Urgency

All participants reported experiences with the most dominant false urgency tactic on the Shopee platform. Participant AR stated: *"I often see text like 'only 2 products left' or a countdown timer that makes me panic. But if I refresh, the stock is still the same."* Participant DF added: *"Flash sales with a running timer make me feel I have to check out quickly, afraid it will run out, even though it might not really be finished."* This tactic creates a fear of missing out (FOMO) that encourages impulsive decisions.

2.2. Hidden Costs

Eight out of ten participants experienced surprising additional costs during the checkout process. Participant NS explained: *"The product price looks cheap at first, but when I go to pay, admin fees appear, insurance that's already ticked by default, and delivery charges that are more expensive than expected."* Participant MH added: *"The insurance fee is always pre-ticked, and sometimes I don't notice until the transaction is complete."*

2.3. Forced Continuity

Six participants who had subscribed to Shopee Premium reported difficulties in cancelling the service. Participant SA recounted: *"I tried to cancel Shopee Premium, but the process was very complicated and hidden. I had to go into many menus, and in the end, the auto-renewal continued until the next month."*

2.4. Confirmshaming

Participant RK gave an example: *"There's a voucher pop-up with options 'Claim Now' and 'No, I don't like discounts'. It feels like you're being blamed if you don't take the voucher, even though you might not need it."* This tactic uses psychological manipulation through guilt.

2.5. Trick Questions

Participant LM stated: *"The checkbox for subscribing to newsletters or promo notifications is confusing. Sometimes you have to tick it not to receive, sometimes the opposite. So I often get it wrong."*

2.6. Obstruction

Participant IW explained: *"Detailed product information like return conditions or warranty is hard to find. It's hidden at the bottom with small text."*

Dark Pattern Type	Number of Participants	Percentage	Intensity of Occurrence
False Urgency	10	100%	Very High
Hidden Costs	8	80%	High
Confirmshaming	7	70%	Medium
Forced Continuity	6	60%	Medium
Trick Questions	7	70%	Medium
Obstruction	9	90%	High

Table 2. Frequency of Dark Pattern Types Based on Participant Experience

3. Student Perception and Awareness of Dark Pattern

3.1. Level of Awareness

A surprising finding showed that although all participants experienced dark patterns, only four out of ten were aware they were being manipulated before the interview was conducted. Participant FH stated: *"Before this interview, I never thought the app design was deliberately made to manipulate. I just thought that's how it worked."* Meanwhile, participant DF, who has a

technology background, stated: *"I had suspected for a while that the countdown timer was fake, but I didn't know the term 'dark pattern'."*
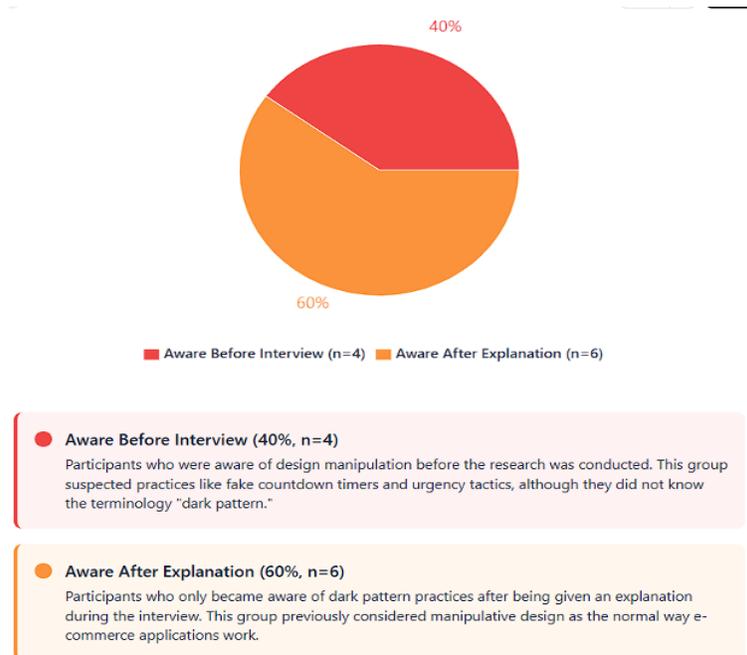

■ Aware Before Interview (n=4) ■ Aware After Explanation (n=6)

● **Aware Before Interview (40%, n=4)**
Participants who were aware of design manipulation before the research was conducted. This group suspected practices like fake countdown timers and urgency tactics, although they did not know the terminology "dark pattern."

● **Aware After Explanation (60%, n=6)**
Participants who only became aware of dark pattern practices after being given an explanation during the interview. This group previously considered manipulative design as the normal way e-commerce applications work.

Figure 1. Diagram of Student Awareness Level of Dark Pattern

3.2. Emotional Response

After realising the manipulation, participants showed various emotional responses. Participant ZA expressed: *"I feel deceived and disappointed because all this time I trusted Shopee. It turns out there are many tricks like this."* Participant MH added: *"There's a feeling of frustration because I feel stupid for being trapped multiple times by the same tactic."*

3.3. Perception of Shopee's Ethics

The majority of participants questioned Shopee's business ethics after understanding the concept of dark patterns. Participant NS stated: *"If Shopee is really that big, why do they have to use dishonest methods? This damages consumer trust."* Participant AR added: *"I expect a platform as big as Shopee to be more transparent and not take advantage of consumers' lack of knowledge."*

4. Impact of Dark Patterns on Consumption Behaviour

4.1. Impulsive Purchasing Decisions

Nine out of ten participants admitted to making unplanned purchases due to urgency tactics. Participant SA recounted: *"Because of the countdown timer and limited stock, I checked out immediately without thinking. But actually, it wasn't that urgent at all."*

4.2. Financial Loss

Participant RK calculated: *"In a month, I can overspend around 200-300 thousand Rupiah buying things that weren't actually planned. This is the impact of the FOMO created by the app."*

4.3. Changes in Shopping Behaviour

Some participants developed defensive strategies. Participant LM explained: *"Now I always put it in the basket first and wait a few days. If I still want it, then I buy. This is my way of fighting the countdown timer manipulation."*

Type of Impact	Number of Participants	Frequency of Occurrence	Estimated Loss/Month
Impulsive Purchase	9	3-5 times/month	IDR 150,000 - IDR 400,000
Overspending	8	2-4 times/month	IDR 100,000 - IDR 300,000
Unused Products	7	1-3 products/month	IDR 50,000 - IDR 200,000

Table 3. Impact of Dark Patterns on Participant Purchasing Decisions

5. Implication for Consumer Trust

5.1. Erosion of Trust

Participant IW stated: *"My trust in Shopee has dropped drastically after knowing this was all intentional. I've become more sceptical of all their promos and offers."* Participant FH added: *"I'm starting to consider switching to other platforms that are more transparent, even if the prices might be slightly more expensive."*

5.2. Consumer Loyalty

Six participants stated they would reduce their shopping frequency on Shopee and start trying alternative platforms. Participant ZA revealed: *"I've already told my friends about these Shopee tricks. Some of them are also becoming aware and are reducing their shopping there."*

DISCUSSION

Implementation of Dark Patterns on Shopee: A Business Ethics Perspective

The research findings indicate that the Shopee platform implements six categories of dark patterns consistently experienced by students, with false urgency being the most dominant tactic (100% of participants). This practice reflects a fundamental misalignment of incentives between the company and the consumer, where the platform can still profit from consumer data even if these actions harm user interests. The complexity of dark pattern implementation lies in interface designs that deliberately hide important procedures or force consumers through excessive steps to complete certain actions (Kollmer & Eckhardt, 2023). The phenomena of hidden costs and forced continuity, experienced by 80% and 60% of participants respectively, confirm that design manipulation is not incidental but a systematic strategy exploiting users' weaknesses and cognitive biases to behave in ways unfavourable to the consumer (Patil, 2023).

From a business ethics perspective, Shopee's dark pattern practices violate three fundamental principles: honesty, fairness, and trust. Research proves that these three elements of business ethics have a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction in the context of Indonesian marketplaces (Sirait & Arjuna, 2025). However, the findings show an erosion of consumer trust due to manipulative practices, with 60% of participants stating they will reduce their shopping frequency and consider alternative platforms. This indicates that dark patterns not only damage short-term relationships with consumers but also threaten long-term business sustainability.

Consumer Awareness and The Vulnerability of Digital Natives

A significant paradox emerges from the finding that only 40% of students were aware of the design manipulation before the interview, despite being 'digital natives' with supposedly high digital literacy. This phenomenon confirms that dark patterns are interface design techniques intentionally crafted to manipulate consumers into taking actions inconsistent with their true preferences (Putri, 2025). The sophistication of these manipulative tactics exploits consumer cognitive biases, creating a situation where even highly educated consumers struggle to identify practices that are detrimental to them.

Participants' psychological responses show significant emotional impacts, with feelings of being deceived, frustrated, and powerless dominating the narrative after awareness was formed. The complexity of detecting dark patterns in user interfaces requires in-depth analysis of manipulative signs based on design principles (Dmitry & Yerkebulan, 2022). The students' inability to identify manipulation independently reinforces the argument that consumer protection cannot rely solely on individual vigilance but requires more comprehensive structural interventions.

Economic Impact and Long-Term Implications

The financial impact of dark patterns on participants reached IDR 150,000–IDR 400,000 per month for impulsive purchases, reflecting market distortion and significant consumer loss. On a global scale, the economic impact of dark patterns amounts to billions of dollars, indicating a systemic problem within the e-commerce ecosystem (Putri, 2025). International studies show that 78% of e-commerce sites implement manipulative practices such as hidden fees, forced continuity, and misuse of consumer privacy (Patil, 2023), confirming that this phenomenon is universal and requires a coordinated global regulatory response.

Urgency of Regulation and Consumer Protection

The findings reveal a significant gap between the complexity of dark patterns and the adequacy of current regulations in protecting digital consumers. Further research is needed to understand the organisational antecedents, consumer psychological responses, and broad consequences of dark patterns for companies and the market (Runge et al., 2023). This study recommends enhancing the legal framework, stricter prescriptive measures, cross-border collaboration, and industry self-governance mechanisms to effectively address manipulative practices and strengthen consumer autonomy in increasingly sophisticated digital interactions (Patil, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This research reveals the crucial finding that the Shopee platform implements six main categories of dark pattern marketing, which systematically influence the consumption behaviour of university students in Makassar City. False urgency emerged as the most dominant tactic, with

a prevalence rate reaching 100% of all participants, followed by obstruction (90%) and hidden costs (80%), indicating a structured manipulative pattern in the platform's interface design. A significant paradox was identified in the consumer awareness gap, where only 40% of students were aware of the manipulative practices before the research was conducted, despite being 'digital natives' with presumably adequate technological literacy. The economic impact of these practices reaches IDR 150,000–IDR 400,000 per month per individual through impulsive purchases and overspending, with 90% of participants experiencing unplanned purchases due to psychological manipulation. The ethical implications show a fundamental violation of the principles of honesty, transparency, and respect for consumer autonomy, leading to significant trust erosion, with 60% of participants stating an intention to reduce their shopping activity and consider migrating to alternative platforms. These findings confirm that dark pattern marketing is not merely a technical interface design issue, but a fundamental business ethics problem threatening the sustainability of the e-commerce ecosystem and the well-being of digital consumers in the long term.

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