Essay 1: UX & UI Analysis

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"Design Indaba"

Design Indaba, by Interactive Africa, is a platform that acts as a global advocate for African creativity and innovation since 1995 (Wikipedia, 2022). The brand itself serves as digital publication showcasing art and design projects, articles and multidisciplinary works from across the African continent. Design Indaba extends its mission through its website which features online exhibitions, event archives and emerging artists and their creative portfolios. However, despite its reputation as a platform showcasing the progression in the design world, the platform's interface fails to embody the art and designs it promotes. This essay critically examines the website's user interface (UI), user experience (UX), and ethical design practices, revealing the contradictions between its content mission and execution of presenting it to an audience. This analysis makes use of Figma's UI guidelines (2023), the Laws of UX (Yablonski, 2018) and the UX Design Institute (Stevens, 2024) to demonstrate how navigational inefficiencies, visual clutter, and inefficient organisation of content undermine the brand's role as a leader in creative innovation.

The Design Indaba website exhibits significant shortcomings in its user interface design especially concerning visual consistency, interactive feedback and accessibility. A flaw lies in the navigation bar's misalignment in its layout. The centred logo and slogan conflict with the left-aligned menu which disrupts the visual harmony. This lack of alignment does not follow the established UI principles that emphasizes that alignment improves "readability" and creates "predictability" making the user's experience on the website easier (Figma, 2023). Furthermore, the search function, far right from the left-aligned menu, was difficult to find as the search bar blended into the interface. The magnifier icon, representing "search", worsened this issue as it overlapped over the navigation bar which created disharmony in the visuals of this interface. The hierarchy of information and feedback mechanisms are also an equally problem in this website. Inconsistent typography and placement of the drop-down lists was found in the sort and filter menu. Firstly, the sort and filter menu is usually found at the top of the page for efficiency however, it was found below the "Latest Content" collections. Secondly, in some instances, the sort and filter menu does not appear on pages that heavily require its mechanic since it sorts through the archives. Thirdly, the typography and the drop-down lists from the menu vary from each page where the text is darker in some or lighter in others and the drop-down lists drop below the menu or fall above the menu. This breaks the consistency in the pages and makes navigation of design works unnecessarily difficult. Another issue is seen in the "About Design Indaba" section, where the use of ">" symbols misleadingly suggests expandable menus that do not function. Noted on the Figma website, "false affordances" don't only confuse users but also represent a failure in "error prevention" since it proves that the design does not account for misinterpretations (Figma, 2023). This raises some ethical concerns since the interface has some questionable design patterns that undermine the user's agency. The hidden searching bar and the misleading ">" symbol (falsely suggesting expandable menus) are designs that deceive users. This contradicts the ethical guidelines of being "transparent" and designing "honest interactions" (Stevens, 2024). These elements prove that this website suffers from inconsistent layouts and ineffective systems. With issues in the UI, it reflects the user experience and usability of the website. Noted in the "Laws of UX" (Yablonski, 2018), the "Aesthetic-Usability Effect" promotes the idea that aesthetically pleasing designs are more "usable".

The Design Indaba website presents various usability issues that stem from its inefficient organisation of content and heavily restrictive navigation structures. An issue lies in the website's approach to content discovery. This is specifically seen in the "News & Features" page and various other sections too. The interface forces its users to manually scroll through paginated lists without a sort and filter bar or any sort of categorization methods. This breaches the "progressive disclosure" technique. Users should be able to gradually reveal information based on their needs (Figma, 2023) however this website forces the user to do so manually, creating a tedious experience. It also raises an ethical concern when it comes to promoting an artist and their works. Only artists that have recently presented on the website will be favoured and featured on the website whereas the others will be hidden behind the paginated lists. This is also seen in the "Conference Talks" section that presents various talks over the years. This section requires some sort of year-based organisation however this website makes use of a simplistic "Load More" button. This implementation contradicts "Hick's Law" which states that the "user decision-making efficiency" decreases as "complexity increases" (Yablonski, 2018). As of the absence of a categorization method, exploring content becomes a time-consuming process. Another factor that worsens the usability issues is the websites inadequate error prevention and recovery mechanisms. The "Emerging Creatives" section demonstrates this failure through its misleading pagination system. It consists of the primary content which is a 2023 article and below that is the secondary content which presents emerging artists and their works. When clicking "Next Page", it refreshes the same 2023 article while only updating a secondary content carousel. This design flaw creates confusion and frustration for the user as they would expect new primary content when navigating the next page/s. Similar usability violations are seen in the "Design Directory" section where expansive dropdown menus do not have a scroll function. The dropdown menus would in fact present all the options at once and falls over the content on the page. This issue violates "Fitts's Law" regarding "optimal sizing and spacing of interactive elements" (Yablonski, 2018), making navigation unnecessarily difficult. Another element that disturbs the navigation of this website is the fixed sidebar which cannot be collapsed or minimized. It ends up competing for attention and does not leave room for white space. Laws of UX design principles notes this idea of "Cognitive Load" which measures the amount of "mental resources" needed to understand an interface (Yablonski, 2018). The implementation of the busy sidebar does not account for or reduce the cognitive load, making the experience on the website less enjoyable.

The Design Indaba's website presents a very paradoxical contradictions between its mission as a platform to promote African creativity, art, designs and works and its execution in a digital context. This analysis reveals its shortcomings across 3 critical dimensions; inconsistent UI and UX design and how it leads to questionable ethical choices. For the UI, there were inconsistencies in its layout, the navigation misalignment and its deceptive interface elements that causes cognitive strain. For the UX, the inefficient content organisation, questionable choices of information hierarchy and the tediousness of pagination lists instead of sort and filter menus has affected the user experience negatively. These factors play an imperative role in a digital platform which has unfortunately been undermined in the Design Indaba's website and inevitably undermined its credibility as one of the biggest promoters in the design community.

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