Dark Patterns and Adolescent Digital Behaviour: A Culturally Contextualized Analysis of Mobile Technology in Zimbabwe

Author: Priscilla Mutembwa
Antwerp Management School
University of Antwerp
Executive PhD program (2024 -2028)

Introduction

Mobile technology is a transformative force in adolescent development globally, not only bringing opportunities but also risks. One insidious risk is the rise of **dark patterns** – deceptive interface designs that subtly manipulate users into behaviours they might not have chosen freely. While dark patterns have been studied in general user populations, there is a **critical gap** in understanding how they affect **teenagers**, especially in under-researched regions. Recent literature reveals that scholarship on dark patterns has grown, yet research focusing specifically on children's and teens' online behaviour remains *scarce*, despite recognition that young users are particularly vulnerable. Moreover, cultural context is likely a powerful mediator of these effects, but little empirical work has examined this dimension. yet its impact is deeply mediated by cultural context. In Southern Africa, where mobile phone adoption among youth is high and sociocultural norms differ from the Global North, this gap is especially pronounced. In Zimbabwe, where communal values like *Hunhu* emphasize collective well-being and interdependence, teens' interactions with digital platforms reflect unique tensions between autonomy and social responsibility. This paper examines how dark patterns—deceptive interface designs that manipulate user behaviour—exploit these sociocultural dynamics, with implications for privacy, decision-making, and digital equity. This paper examines how dark patterns in mobile technologies interact with sociocultural norms and developmental vulnerabilities to shape adolescent digital behaviour. Using Zimbabwe as a case study, this work highlights the role of cultural values such as *Hunhu/Ubuntu* (communal ethics) in mediating teens' responses to manipulative designs. Drawing on interdisciplinary research in human-computer interaction (HCI) and cross-cultural psychology, the paper proposes strategies for ethical design and digital literacy that respect local traditions and prioritise teen digital well-being through the lens of local culture and sociotechnical realities while safeguarding adolescent autonomy.

Sociocultural Context: Southern African Teens and Mobile Tech

Southern Africa's youth inhabit a rapidly evolving digital landscape that differs in important ways from the Western settings where most dark pattern research has been conducted. Mobile phones are the primary mode of internet access for many teens in this region. In South Africa, for example, smartphone adoption among adolescents is nearly universal – a recent study found 99.2% of surveyed teens owned smartphones and spent on average over 3 hours per day on their devices **(**Le Roux, D.B., and Feldman, J.A (2024)). Similar trends are observed across neighbouring countries, with youths using mobile devices for social media, messaging (e.g. WhatsApp), entertainment, and educational content. This heavy engagement with mobile technology means that Southern African teens are extensively exposed to apps and platforms where dark patterns may lurk (such as social networks, mobile games, and free download sites).

However, the sociocultural diversity in this region – encompassing a mosaic of cultures, languages, and communal values – likely influences how teens interact with technology. Cultural context can moderate the effectiveness of manipulative design: a UI trick that exploits individualistic assumptions or certain linguistic cues might not succeed (or might have different implications) in a community-oriented African culture. Conversely, some dark patterns could be *more* harmful if they exploit specific local norms or gaps in digital literacy. For instance, if an app's interface is in English (a second language for many) or uses unfamiliar icons, teens may inadvertently click "Yes" on misleading dialogs simply due to language confusion, thus falling victim to consent-based dark patterns. Parental oversight and social norms around technology also differ. Southern African teens may have varying degrees of guidance – some might have vigilant parents or communal watch, while others navigate the digital world largely on their own. Notably, a South African survey found most parents do not limit teen screen time, with nearly 60% of teens reporting no parental regulation of phone use (Le Roux, D.B., and Feldman, J.A (2024)). This suggests many teens in the region operate with high digital autonomy from a young age, potentially increasing their exposure to unscrupulous design tactics without adult intervention.

Cultural Context: Zimbabwe's Sociotechnical Landscape

1. Hunhu/Ubuntu and Digital Interactions

- **Communal decision-making**: Zimbabwean teens often prioritize family or peer group consensus when navigating digital choices, increasing susceptibility to social pressure dark patterns (e.g., "Your friends are online!" prompts).
- **Trust in authority**: Respect for elders and communal leaders may reduce scepticism toward seemingly "official" manipulative designs (e.g., misleading subscription prompts in educational apps).

2. Language and Digital Literacy

- **Multilingual interfaces**: Many apps in Zimbabwe default to English, disadvantaging Shona and Ndebele speakers. This exacerbates vulnerability to dark patterns that rely on linguistic ambiguity (e.g., unclear opt-out clauses).
- **Oral traditions**: Teens' reliance on verbal communication for knowledge transfer may limit engagement with written privacy policies, heightening exposure to data misuse.

3. Case Study: Mobile Learning Apps

- **Example**: *EduZim*, a popular educational app, uses scarcity-driven prompts (e.g., "Only 3 seats left for this course!") to pressure teens into rushed enrolment decisions.
- **Cultural nuance**: Familial expectations to excel academically amplify compliance with such tactics, as teens avoid perceived "failure" to meet collective goals.

Proposed Interventions

1. Culturally Responsive Design

- **Localized interfaces**: Develop apps in Shona/Ndebele with clear opt-out mechanisms aligned with communal decision-making norms.
- **Community consent features**: Integrate family or peer approval steps for high-stakes actions (e.g., in-app purchases), respecting *Hunhu* values.

2. Digital Literacy Frameworks

- **School programs**: Partner with Zimbabwean educators to teach dark pattern recognition using culturally resonant metaphors (e.g., comparing manipulative designs to *zvirahwe* [traditional riddles] that require critical thinking).
- **Peer mentorship**: Leverage Zimbabwe's *mushandirapamwe* (collective work) traditions to create teen-led workshops on ethical technology use.

3. Ethical Policy Recommendations

- **Transparency standards**: Mandate plain-language disclosures in local languages for apps targeting Zimbabwean youth.
- **Age-sensitive defaults**: Restrict data-sharing features in apps used by minors, aligning with communal privacy expectations.

Methodological Considerations

1. **Mixed-Methods Approach**:
    - **Quantitative**: Track behavioral metrics (e.g., click-through rates on dark patterns) in Zimbabwean teen cohorts.
    - **Qualitative**: Conduct focus groups exploring how *Hunhu* values shape teens' interpretations of manipulative designs.
2. **Cross-Cultural Validation**:
    - Compare findings with studies in other collectivist cultures (e.g., Botswana, Nigeria) to identify universal vs. context-specific insights.

Conclusion

Dark patterns represent a growing threat to youth digital well-being, exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities in ways that can undermine young people's autonomy, privacy, and healthy development. This threat is global, but as this paper has highlighted, it is not globally uniform. In Southern Africa and other parts of the Global South, adolescents experience mobile technology within rich sociocultural contexts that may amplify or alter the impact of manipulative designs. Yet, the lack of focused research in these contexts means we are often flying blind in our efforts to protect and empower these users. There is an urgent need for the research community to bridge this gap by investigating dark patterns in under-studied cultural settings and for designers and policymakers to apply a culturally informed lens when developing interventions. By pursuing such a research agenda – from empirical studies and detection tools to participatory design and education – we can begin to illuminate the dark patterns in teens' digital lives and devise strategies tailored to their needs and context.
Understanding dark patterns' impact on adolescents requires sensitivity to cultural frameworks like Zimbabwe's *Hunhu* philosophy. By highlighting the unique challenges with manipulative digital designs that teenagers in Zimbabwe face, this paper calls for culturally-informed, youth-centred research and design interventions. By centering local values in design, policy, and education, stakeholders can mitigate manipulative harms while empowering teens to navigate digital spaces as informed, autonomous users. This approach offers a model for culturally grounded technology ethics in global contexts.
Ultimately, ensuring the digital well-being of Zimbabwean teens (and youth elsewhere) will require collaborative, interdisciplinary action. Researchers, industry practitioners, educators, and the teens themselves must work together to shine a light on deceptive design practices and champion alternatives that prioritize transparency, respect, and user dignity. In doing so,

we not only protect a particularly vulnerable demographic, but also enrich our global understanding of how culture intersects with technology. Such an endeavour aligns closely with the mission of "Mobile Technology and Teens: Understanding the Changing Needs of Sociocultural and Technical Landscape," and is a crucial step toward more equitable and inclusive digital futures.

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