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Confirmshaming and its effect on users

A qualitative study on how confirmshaming
in unsubscription processes affect users

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AUTHOR: Linn Ekroth & Josefine Sandqvist
SUPERVISOR: Einav Peretz Andersson
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Examiner:	Bruce Ferwerda
Supervisor:	Einav Peretz Andersson
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Abstract

Introduction – Confirmshaming is a dark pattern that seeks to shame users into acting differently than they normally would.

Purpose – The purpose of his study was to determine if and to what extent confirmshaming influences users to stay subscribed, and through this understand how confirmshaming impacts the user experience and thereby the perception of the companies that utilise it.

Method – The method of choice was a qualitative case study that subjected participants to confirmshaming in an unsubscription process through a user test, followed by semi‑structured interviews in order to understand the participants' behaviour and thoughts after they had been a victim of the tactic.

Findings – As a result of the study, we found that confirmshaming during unsubscription processes is an ineffective strategy. A majority of users perceive the companies that employ it in a negative fashion and regard them as unprofessional and desperate. This implicates that confirmshaming in unsubscription processes is a loss-loss situation for both users and companies and should not be used.

Limitations – This research was solely a qualitative study that focused on a small group of people. The results cannot be generalised to the general public and should instead be viewed as an introduction to the implications of confirmshaming. Further, the study was limited to the user experience and we did not measure how frequently occurring the phenomenon is.

Keywords – Confirmshaming, unsubscription, unsubscription processes, dark patterns, UX, user experience.

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1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background of the study and the problem area that the research is built upon. Further, the purpose and research questions are presented, followed by the scope and delimitations of the study. Lastly, the disposition of the thesis is outlined.

1.1 Background

Dark patterns are design elements that have been designed "with great attention to detail and a solid understanding of human psychology to trick users to do things they would not otherwise have done." That is how Harry Brignull describes it, the founder of the term dark patterns (Brignull, 2010a). There are numerous different types of dark patterns all over the web, all working in their own way to trick users into doing what the website owners want.

The topic of our research is confirmshaming, also called *manipulinks* (Costello, 2016), *guilt tripping* (Cara, 2019), and *negative opt‑out* (Schroeder, 2019). It is one type of dark pattern that is commonly used today (Mathur, et al., 2019). Confirmshaming means that website owners try to change users' behaviour by making them feel ashamed to make a certain choice (Brignull, 2010b). It is used to obtain information or payment from users, by for example offering a discount if you provide your email address, or a free trial if you create an account. It can also be applied in the opposite way, in what we call unsubscription processes, where it is used to stop users from retracting their information or payment (Schroeder, 2019). By unsubscription processes, we refer to the process where a user opts out of a service without discontinuing the use of the entire service or website. For example, a user may unsubscribe from an email newsletter while they remain a member, or they may cancel a premium subscription while they continue to use the free version.

Previous research in the area focuses largely on identifying different dark patterns and to investigate how widespread they are (Cara, 2019; Clark, 2019; Mathur, et al., 2019). Overall, there is a lack of research into how effective different types of dark patterns are and how they affect users. The existing research on these topics takes a broad approach and does not delve deep into the repercussions and implications dark patterns have. Chromik, et al. (2019) states that users might be annoyed and develop a negative attitude in regards to a number of dark patterns, but again, it is not explained in much more detail than that, and this is the recurring theme in previous research.

Dark patterns in regards to privacy concerns and how they are used to bypass users' inhibitions about sharing their information have been studied more substantially than other subareas. Bösch, et al. (2016) and Fritsch (2017) touch on the psychological aspects of privacy concerns brought on by dark patterns. However, the only known research into confirmshaming itself has been conducted by the Nielsen Norman Group (Moran and Flaherty, 2017). We can therefore conclude that no research has been done to specifically investigate confirmshaming in unsubscription processes. We think it is important to

contribute with knowledge concerning how dark patterns affect users, and we do so with this study on one of the most commonly used patterns: confirmshaming (Mathur, et al., 2019).

1.2   Problem statement

Dark patterns, such as confirmshaming, are widely described as a negative action due to its lack of ethics and because it is designed to serve the businesses interest while it omits how the user feels about it (Moses, 2019). It is nonetheless commonly used throughout the web despite how it disregards the experience of the website's users. Companies use confirmshaming because they value the possession of people's email addresses (Henneman, et al., 2015) and they claim that the tactics work (Schroeder, 2019). Conversely, according to Moran and Flaherty (2017) at Nielsen Norman Group, it is not actually effective, and the sole reason people might think it is, is because "it gives the user pause" before they make a decision and they might therefore act differently.

By employing confirmshaming, website owners use psychology and shame to persuade people into doing something they normally would not do. People do not like to be shamed, but it is a powerful tool in order to change people's behaviour (Lickel, et al., 2014). However, since shame is a negative emotion and users will remember negative emotions over a longer period of time compared to positive emotions, it greatly influences the user experience (Magin, et al., 2015).

In this study, we dig deeper into understanding how persuasive confirmshaming is today and to what degree it changes users' behaviour. It is possible that it has become so common that the users become negligent towards it because they have seen it so many times, and as a result it may not work at all. Users are currently evolving and finding smart ways around dark patterns (Charity, 2019).

This is relevant to examine due to the fact that confirmshaming in relation to unsubscription processes has not been studied before, as previously mentioned. If users can see through the approach and deem it a dishonest tactic, it will not only fail the initial goal to convince the user to stay subscribed, but also lead to distrust (Seckler, et al., 2015). If the shaming works, it results in a worsened user experience which could mean long term losses for a company such as negative brand perception (Moran and Flaherty, 2017). Either way, confirmshaming in unsubscription processes is most likely a lose‑lose situation for both parties.

1.3   Purpose and research questions

Drawing on the problem statement, it is not agreed upon whether confirmshaming is effective and why it might work. This study will determine if and to what extent confirmshaming influences users to stay subscribed. Through this, we will gain understanding of how it impacts the user experience and consequently what position that

puts both users and website owners in. To be able to fulfil the purpose, it has been broken down into two research questions. The first question is:

> 1. To what degree does confirmshaming in unsubscription processes affect the user and their decision to opt out?

To further measure the effectiveness of confirmshaming, we have found examples of where it has been used in unsubscription processes and categorised the results into two types. The first of which is a single-step process where the user is forced to make a shameful choice only once before finalising the unsubscription, as demonstrated in [Appendix 1]. This is more common than the second, more aggressive identified kind where the users have to go through two or more steps to confirm their choice to opt out while they are shamed along the way, as demonstrated in [Appendix 2]. Hence, the second research question is:

> 2. Are users more affected by confirmshaming in unsubscription processes that utilise a several-step process compared to a single-step process?

To answer these questions and thereby fulfil the purpose, a qualitative case study has been conducted.

1.4   Scope and delimitations

Confirmshaming can be used in many different scenarios, but to keep the scope reasonable, the focus of this thesis will exclusively cover unsubscription processes. Unsubscription, by definition, is the cancellation of an online service, and we extend that definition to include that the user is expected to return for other uses of the website. Due to this, it is relevant to maintain a pleasant user experience for the users. With this, we clarify that complete deregistration, for example when a user deletes their account, is not part of this study. Because a user is not expected to return to a website after a complete deregistration, the negative user experience does not have the same significance.

This study will also not examine confirmshaming in registration processes, such as account registration or newsletter subscription processes. This has, to some degree, been studied before by Moran and Flaherty (2017), where they conducted user tests where the participants were exposed to confirmshaming in newsletter sign-ups. They concluded that the gains from these increased micro conversions come at the expense of disrespecting your users which will result in loss of credibility and trust, and that it does not matter if a lot of people sign up for your newsletter if you have to bully them into doing so. If we were to include registration processes, the scope would increase as it would entail how to bring users in, whereas this study focuses on how to maintain or save a relationship between website owner and user after a more or less negative interaction.

Furthermore, we aim to see how people are affected by confirmshaming in unsubscription processes and not to measure how common the dark pattern itself is. Due to limited time and

the incapacious scope of a bachelor thesis, large samples have not been assembled. Instead, we acknowledge that this phenomenon exists and continue the work from there.

The focus is on language and labelling and not visual interference, which is another type of dark pattern that is often used in conjunction with confirmshaming. Visual interference privileges one option over another in order to influence the users to make the preferred choice (Mathur, et al., 2019). In practice, that means that the option to stay subscribed is made large and colourful and the option to opt out is made considerably less prominent, as also evident in [Appendix 2]. Although we do not evaluate how visual interference influences users in their choice to opt out, in order to recreate situations that are found on the web and appear realistic to the participants, we included visual interference in the prototypes by making the option to unsubscribe less prominent yet still clearly visible.

1.5   Disposition

The remainder of the report is organised starting with the theoretical framework, followed by the method and implementation of the study, where the approach, design, data collection, data analysis, and validity of the research are presented. Lastly, the analysis of the study, together with the conclusion and discussion are laid out.

2   Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation of the study.

2.1   Dark patterns

Harry Brignull is a User Experience specialist and academic researcher with a PhD in Cognitive Science (Brignull, 2008). He coined the term dark patterns and is well known for his contribution to the awareness of unethical user experience design. Brignull (2013) describes dark patterns as user interfaces that have intentionally been designed to deceive users and trick them into acting in ways they might not have done otherwise. He further explains that dark patterns are not what you would normally call bad design, because it is not the result of a designer that is bad at their job. On the contrary, it is the result of well-crafted design that plays on human psychology and does not keep the user's best interest in mind. Law (2016) defined dark patterns as elements on a website that deliberately use deceiving tactics to benefit the website owner at the expense of the user.

The rulebooks used to enhance usability when designing for the web, often Nielsen's 10 heuristics, are also adopted during the design process of dark patterns, though inverted, to be able to trick the user into doing as desired (Brignull, 2013). Dark patterns are, for obvious reasons, seen as highly unethical. It has been identified that practitioners that find dark patterns have started to spread it on social media to create awareness about it, and to publicly shame the companies applying this method (Fansher, et al., 2018).

2.2   Ethics on the web

Ethics is a complicated topic, given that it is a matter of one's moral compass; to sense what is ethically right or wrong in different situations. As the use of the internet intensifies, the problems with ethics on the web grows along with it. Dark patterns are different tactics that companies use to mislead users, which is a big problem regarding ethics on the web. The lack of legal rules in many situations on the web is exploited by companies. They ignore what is ethically right and mislead users into acting a certain way to their own advantage and to enhance their profit (Gray, et al., 2018). Companies taking advantage of users' personal information in different ways for their own profit used to be a large ethical issue, but as from May 2018, the GDPR law was adopted in the EU to protect users personal information (General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – Final text neatly arranged, 2018).

Acting in an ethically correct way concerns everyone using the web, not only companies. Basic rules of social interaction on the web is called *netiquette*, meaning you should treat people on the web as if you were interacting face-to-face, even if you may disagree with their opinions (Orrill, 2011).

2.3   Shame and subsequent behaviour

Broken down into its most basic meaning, confirmshaming uses shame to manipulate people. In order to understand why confirmshaming is effective, at least theoretically, we need to have a basic understanding of shame and what behaviours it will display in humans.

Shame is an intense feeling of being disgusted by your own actions because you have violated moral codes (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985; Tangney et al., 1996). Tangney (1996) continues to describe how people feel inferior to others due to shame, and that people wish that they had acted in a different way. Long-term, shame is such an intense and disliked feeling that it can lead to positive behavioural change (Lickel, et al., 2014). In relation to the topic at hand, it could contribute to the user becoming wary of signing up for newsletters or premium accounts in the future. However, confirmshaming do not seek to change future behaviour. Instead, as Lickel, et al. (2014) proceed to write, shame is a double‑edged sword. It can result in positive change, yes, but when people wish to avoid the risk of feeling ashamed, it leads to evasion tendencies where they wish to hide or not take responsibility for the situation, even though they are accountable (Tangney el al., 1996). In regards to unsubscription processes, that is what the companies that uses confirmshaming wish to accomplish. They hope people will act on their immediate feeling and choose to not opt out in order to avoid feeling ashamed.

Other emotions that are related to shame that could play a role in confirmshaming are guilt and regret (Lickel, et al., 2014).

Conversely, guilt makes people feel responsible and attacked for isolated situations, compared to shame that attacks the self (Tangney, et al., 1996). So, in confirmshaming, what this implies is that people do not feel guilty for cancelling a subscription, but they do feel attacked for clicking the "I am a bad person" option as it condemns their personal self. People are more okay with single blunders rather than being a bad person overall (Lickel, et al., 2014). Confirmshaming exploits shame, not guilt, by attacking users' sense of self with planting the idea of "I did a bad thing, therefore I am a bad person" (Tangney, et al., 1996). Although guilt is similar to shame, it has not been linked to escapism tendencies (Lickel, et al., 2014), which, as mentioned, is a major factor of confirmshaming.

One could also argue that regret plays a role in confirmshaming, but users are aware enough that they know they can just sign up again. Although, confirmshaming does play on the forthcoming possible feeling of regret in the sense that it hopes the user will change their mind, and therefore regret the decision to opt out.

All in all, shame has been reported to be a more intense emotion than both guilt and regret (Tangney, et al., 1996). If you judge these factors and take the term confirm*shaming* itself into account, shame is the main feeling that companies try to utilise.

3 Method and implementation

This chapter describes the methodology we have used in order to answer the two research questions. The chapter starts with an introduction to the methods of our choice and explanations of how they are suited to answer the research questions. After that, we explain the method approach itself closely, and follow it with a detailed description of each component's design in chronological order. Then we have the description of the data collection as well as the analysis of the data. Lastly, the chapter ends with a description of the procedures taken to achieve a reliable and valid outcome.

We have conducted a case study that consists of user tests followed by interviews with open ended questions, which both fall under the qualitative method approach. Creswell (2009) states that a qualitative approach is suitable when a topic has little previous research and has to be understood better, which is the situation for confirmshaming as explained in [1.1 Background]. In case studies, you observe a particular case in-depth in an activity bound by time (Simons, 2014). The focus is on a single topic (Creswell, 2009, p.17; Simons, 2014), namely, in this case, confirmshaming in unsubscription processes. Consequently, Creswell (2009) explains that a case study collects participants' thoughts in collaboration with the participants and the researchers bring personal values into the study with an agenda for change. In this research, we investigate the influence of confirmshaming in unsubscription processes on users and the agenda is therefore to identify the impact. A case study is suitable for this study because a qualitative approach allows us to identify patterns and gather perspectives from participants (Creswell, 2009; Simons, 2014). A quantitative approach would only present statistical data, whereas the chosen qualitative methods fulfil the goal of collecting and compiling data of the participants' thoughts and feelings of confirmshaming and through this we detect a theme in how it affects the user (Creswell, 2002). The authors of this paper also went with a qualitative approach due to personal experience in conducting user tests and open ended interviews over, for example, questionnaires. As Creswell (2002, p.22–23) explains, it is beneficial to take personal experience into consideration in order to conduct and write research that the authors feel comfortable and secure in.

The case study had two components: user tests and interviews. User testing is a method commonly used in user research for usability testing (Barnum, 2010), but it can also be used in scientific research and when the goal of the method is to observe behaviour, it falls under a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2009; Simons, 2014). In a user test, a participant is given one or several tasks to complete on a computer while they are being observed. The advantages of user tests are that they are easy to control from a moderator's point of view, they are cheap, easily adaptable, and can be set up almost anywhere (Barnum, 2010). The biggest disadvantage of user tests is that the participants often do not behave in a completely natural manner. They wish to do well on tests and give up later when they are observed than they would in real life (Barnum, 2010). As discussed in [3.1.2 User tests], we took measures to prevent the so‑called Hawthorne effect, where people perform differently when they are being observed (Jeanes, 2019).

We conducted three different tests that were carried out on five participants each, so‑called between‑subjects testing, where one person never did more than one test (Barnum, 2010, p.133). This meant that we had a total of fifteen participants. The tests were designed to see how the participants would act when exposed to varying levels of confirmshaming in an unsubscription process, which in our method constitutes a newsletter unsubscription form. The levels of confirmshaming ranged from none, a single step process, and a several step process (in two steps). After all user tests and interviews were finished, a comparison of the results allowed us to detect differences in behaviour and thoughts between three different tests and through that we are able to answer our research questions in a satisfactory manner.

The interview after the user test allowed us to understand what the participants thought of the confirmshaming. Conducting an interview after a user test is a great way to gain useful insight into the participants' experience (Barnum, 2010). As Creswell (2009) states, interviews are a common qualitative method approach with the advantages that the participants can provide historical information and it allows the researchers control of the questioning. However, the problems with interviews as a method is that not every participant is equally articulate and perceptive. The presence of the researchers may bias the results of the interviews, indirect information is passed onto the interviewee, and if the questioning takes place in a setting that is not natural to the participants it may influence their perception (Creswell, 2009).

We have presented the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen methods. Alas, every method has its downsides, but these were the best suited methods to attain descriptive data.

3.1   Approach

This section explains the implemented methodology from start to finish.

3.1.1   Participants

When selecting participants, a purposive homogeneous method was used, selecting participants we judged could obtain a representative sample, focusing only on students from Jönköping University (Dawson, et al., 1993). Due to the scope of this thesis and its time‑limit, we chose to conduct our research solely on one target group, in this instance students at a university. This was due to availability in terms of location, to save time, and because all students of Jönköping University are familiar with Microsoft Outlook, which was employed during the user tests. Using participants that were familiar with Microsoft Office was significant so they would not need extra time during the test to familiarise with the program since the test was only five minutes long. Because we used between‑subjects testing, the participants also had to be relatively similar to each other in order to accurately be able to compare the results (Barnum, 2010).

To prevent bias, the participants were not told beforehand what they were being tested on until the user test was finished and the interview proceeded. This was because we wanted to see if and how the participants would react to confirmshaming without being aware about it beforehand, just like in a natural situation. They were also told not to talk to anyone about the test to prevent information from spreading to the other participants and therefore skew the results.

The user tests and interviews were conducted one participant at a time, during a 30 minute slot. They were all executed within one week; time and day adapted to fit the participants' daily schedules.

3.1.2 User tests

User testing is a qualitative method. Qualitative research is commonly carried out in natural environments and not in labs (Creswell, 2009, p.175), and conducting user testing in lab environments has been criticised because it affects the participants' emotional state more than natural settings (Sonderegger and Sauer, 2009). However, according to Barnum (2010) and Nielsen (2005), conducting the tests in lab environments has its benefits, especially in terms of costs, time, and availability. Due to time constraints, this research therefore had to be carried out in group rooms which can be likened to a lab. The rooms met the requirements for user testing and consisted of a table, chairs for both moderators as well as the participant, one laptop for one moderator, and another one for the participant (Barnum, 2010). To assure complete privacy, we conducted the user tests and ensuing interviews behind closed doors in order to not cause any disruptions and to make the participant feel comfortable asking and answering questions without anyone outside of the room hearing them. The group rooms were located inside the university to simplify the process for the participants as they were all students of the university and therefore spent most of their days at the premises. Thanks to the concocted scenario, explained later in this section, and people's willingness to suspend disbelief (Nielsen, 2005), the user tests could proceed and provide reliable results despite taking place in a lab-like setting.

Consequently, the entire user test we conducted flows as follows: a participant is told a scenario in which they are new at a job. They have been assigned to handle the customer service email account, and the inbox is filled with emails of varying importance. Their task is to use a laptop and organise the inbox through placing emails into four premade folders called *Invoices*, *Meetings*, *Tickets*, and *Customer Support* and deleting irrelevant emails. The participant is told their task through the explanation of this scenario. In the inbox there are already 50 emails, five of which are newsletters from a fictional clothing company we call Woolos, and the remaining 45 fit in the previously mentioned folders. While the participant sorts and deletes emails, new emails show up in the inbox. Several of these emails are newsletters from Woolos, and eventually the participant is pressed enough to want to accomplish their task that they go into one of the newsletters and press an *unsubscribe* link to prevent new newsletters from Woolos from showing up. In the cases where the participant does not think to press *unsubscribe* themselves, the researchers, here referred to as moderators, provide hints that will eventually lead them to the unsubscription link. When

the participant has pressed unsubscribe, they are taken to a page on Woolos website with an unsubscription form. Here, they can either choose to stay subscribed or unsubscribe. The user test ends when they have made a decision, regardless of which choice they make.

As our research aims to measure the difference between single‑step and several‑step unsubscription processes with confirmshaming, we needed to have three user tests in order to be able to detect differences in behaviour and thought processes. All tests start out identical and the only difference is the unsubscription form at the end. One test was used as a neutral sample, where the participants were not subjected to confirmshaming at all in the unsubscription form. This was needed so that we could compare the results of the tests that contained confirmshaming to one without it, in order to see if it did work. In the second test the participants were confirmshamed once, in order to answer our first research question. The third test had two steps of confirmshaming in the unsubscription form to illustrate the several‑step process that we investigate through our second research question. This makes it possible to compare results and answer both research questions. Hence why we carried out three different user tests.

Five participants are deemed a sufficient sample size to collect data because those five participants will cover most of the problems (Nielsen and Landauer, 1993; Nielsen, 2000). As with every case study that contains a small number of participants, it is always a possibility that the samples were the exceptions to the rule and that they were not a good representation of how the broader population would behave, but as all the participants acted similar to each other, that risk is small and reliability is deemed satisfactory (Trotter, 2012).

We discussed whether the results could amount to more valid results had we conducted more than three different tests. However, we neglected the idea due to believing it would not show a noticeable change in the participants' behaviour. The lack of time is also a factor, considering that more tests would increase the workload and scope of the study. The reason to not use the same five participants for all three tests was to prevent them from learning that we wanted them to press *unsubscribe* in one of the newsletters. Because of the structure of the user tests with the scenario, it would not work to have one participant go through more than one test. The distraction of the scenario would be lost after one test and the participants would already know what the main goal of the study was which would ruin the result.

The mentioned scenario is an essential part of the method because it explains the task to the participants, provides context, and makes the participants care about what they do because they think for themselves and do not simply do what they are told (Barnum, 2010). The scenario was used to place the participants into a more realistic setting (Nielsen, 2005). Scenarios are commonly used in usability studies (Usability.gov, 2013), but can indeed also be used for research.

It is in natural human behaviour to want to perform well on tests and people try harder when they know they are being observed (Barnum, 2010, pp. 222–223). We utilise a phenomenon called inattentional blindness in order to distract the participants with the help of the scenario. Obvious aspects fail to be noticed because the participants pay attention to something else (Most, et al., 2001), or in our case, an essential part of the test is not thought to be important. Since the participants are focused on the task to organise the email inbox,

they do not believe that the unsubscription form is the actual test. The distraction facet of the scenario also decreases the Hawthorne effect (Jeanes, 2019), because they think they should perform well on the sorting of emails, not the unsubscription form. That way, the scenario ensures that the way the participants act when they reach the stage of the unsubscription form is genuine.

The scenario was read aloud to the participant and then a printed copy of the whole text including rules and tips were placed next to the laptop where the test was conducted. The scenario presented to the participant was: *"You are working your first day at a company called Wida, you have been assigned to take over and handle their customer support email called widacorporate@outlook.com. The inbox is filled with both important and irrelevant emails. Your first task is to organise the inbox by sorting and possibly deleting emails. You have 5 minutes to complete the task and clear up the inbox."*

This was followed by a set of rules to ensure that the users would eventually reach the *unsubscribe* link in the newsletter and to not find a way around it. The rules were:

1) Do not delete important emails.
2) Do not create new folders unless absolutely necessary.
3) Do not create rules that automatically sort or delete emails.
4) Do not mark emails as junk or phishing.
5) Do not block senders.

The users also received two tips to help them along the way, especially if they were running out of time. The tips were:

1) Focus on the subject line, you can usually find the topic there.
2) You cannot automatically sort or delete emails, but is there some other way you can prevent annoying emails to flood the inbox?

Eight participants went over the time limit of 5 minutes. However, the time limit was only set in place to stress the participants and force them to find alternative ways to rid the inbox of irrelevant emails, which in this case was the Woolos newsletters. In the cases where the participants spent more than 5 minutes organising the inbox, we did not stop the testing but simply let it continue on because we still needed them to complete the test and reach the unsubscription form. Alas, the time limit was not significant in any other way than to stress the participants. The decision to go with 5 minutes was reached after a pilot test of the user test on an independent participant that was not part of the 15 participants included in this study. The pilot test did not have a time limit, and the pilot test participant took 9:50 minutes to complete the test. This was deemed too long and therefore a time limit was set. It is important to pilot test partly to see that the test actually is functional and will take the participant through all steps of the test, but also to verify that the software and programs work accordingly to plan (Barnum, 2010, p. 221) and that the moderators are synchronised and prepared (Barnum, 2010, p. 220).

The Woolos newsletters were the gateway to the unsubscription form at the end of the user test. The participants were not told explicitly what to do with the newsletters, but they were

able to identify that the newsletters were unimportant as it was one type of newsletter from the same source that did not fit into any of the four premade folders. As mentioned, five newsletters were already mixed in among the 50 emails in the inbox when the participant started the test. More were sent to the email inbox during the test. The newsletter emails were sent in differentiating frequency judged by how fast the participants organised the inbox. If a participant was fast or used an uncommon strategy, for example search‑to‑sort, the newsletters had to be sent frequently. If the participant took a long time to sort, the newsletters did not need to be sent in quick succession. The newsletters were sent to the inbox by one of the moderators. From the moderators' point of view, one moderator sat next to the participant and watched their screen, provided hints if needed, and let the participant know if they broke any of the aforementioned rules. The other moderator was responsible for the newsletters and had prepared email drafts to send to the participant on the other moderator's signal.

The irrelevant nature of the newsletters content and the rules of the scenario eventually pushed the participants toward the *unsubscribe* link that could be found in each newsletter. If a participant asked if they were allowed to press *unsubscribe* and leave the inbox, the tester would not simply say yes, but ask a counter‑question such as "What do you think will happen if you do?" (Nielsen, 1996). This then led them to understand that they were allowed to press it. If they did not come to the conclusion to find the unsubscribe link by themselves and the 5 minute time limit was up, one of the moderators prompted the participant to find and press the unsubscribe link without explicitly telling them to. The prompts that should be used were, in this order:

- Check the tips we provided for you. (This refers to the tip: *You cannot automatically sort or delete emails, but is there some other way you can prevent annoying emails to flood the inbox?*)
- Is there anything else you can do to rid the inbox of irrelevant emails that does not break the rules? (Restate the previous tip with different wording.)
- Can you go into one of the irrelevant emails and solve the problem there somehow?

These prompts were repeated several times if needed. This was effective without leading the participants too much or influencing the outcome of the unsubscription form behaviour. It is important to note that in a real life scenario, a user would have already decided to unsubscribe when they reach an unsubscription form, which is the case in this method too and another reason why it is suitable and reliable. The user test was put in place to see if the confirmshaming in the form could make the participants change their minds after they had already decided to unsubscribe.

The form at the end could, as mentioned, be one of three different versions. For the sake of simplicity in the implementation, after one test had been completed on all five participants, we moved on to the next. First, the neutral test was carried out, followed by the single‑step unsubscription test, and finally the several‑step unsubscription test. Design and images of the forms can be found under [3.2.4 Forms].

3.1.3 Interviews

Following the user tests, interviews were conducted. The interviews were semi‑structured; they had predetermined open‑ended questions and we asked follow‑up questions whenever a participant needed to elaborate their answer (Brinkmann, 2014; Wilson, 2014). The questions focused substantially on the participants' feelings and thoughts to gain knowledge and understanding of the topic (Creswell, 2009, p.181). As we wanted to gather data on a topic that we had already identified but allow the participants to bring forward new issues, a semi‑structured interview is suitable (Wilson, 2014). By having semi‑structured interviews rather than unstructured, we could control that certain points were covered and focus the conversation on the chosen topic (Brinkmann, 2014). Entirely structured interviews, on the other hand, would not have provided the understanding of the participants' thoughts, which was essential.

One of the biggest strengths of semi‑structured interviews is that it allows for comparisons across interviews (Wilson, 2014), which was important due to the comparative nature of our second research question, and to compare the two tests containing confirmshaming to the neutral test. Because we had three different user tests, we modified the interview into three lengths so that it suited the test conducted. This might seem strange for comparative research at first, but the same questions were asked to all participants with the only alteration that fewer questions were asked to the neutral test participants since we could not ask them about what they thought about the confirmshaming simply because they were not exposed to it, and extra questions were added for the participants exposed to the several step confirmshaming test to better be able to answer how a several-step process influences users compared to a single-step process. All interview questions can be found under [3.2.5 Interview questions].

3.2 Design

This section describes in detail how we designed all parts of the method. The entire section and its subheading is structured in the chronological order each component was created, as well as in the order the participants encountered the components. These two coincidentally overlapped but it is also fitting to order them in this manner.

3.2.1 Scenario

The user tests should lead the participants to an unsubscription form, so the scenario had to reflect that. In order to provide the participants with the right amount of information, we created a mix between an elaborate scenario and full scale task scenario (Usability.gov, 2013). A full scale task scenario tells the participant how to complete a task, and that is not entirely true in this case, so that places this scenario in the elaborate categorisation. However, the rules given to the participants to prevent them from getting rid of the

newsletters in any other way than to press the unsubscription link in one of the emails, grazes into the full scale task scenario.

We developed the scenario first in order to be able to base all the other parts of the method on it, so that the entire setup had a realistic feel to the participants. This included ensuring that the email inbox matched the fictional company Wida that they were supposedly new at, as well as creating newsletters that did not appear to be important to Wida and therefore not belong in the email inbox. The decision to go with a customer support email was made because it had to be something that would be familiar to the participants, and a customer support email worked without having to explain to the participants what it meant, what kind of company Wida was, or what business they were running.

3.2.2 Emails and email inbox

When we had a fictional company and tasks lined up for the participants, we continued to set up an email account in Microsoft Outlook. As previously mentioned, we knew that the participants would be students at Jönköping University. In March 2020 when the user tests were carried out, the university used Microsoft Outlook as the email service provider and has done so for many years. Due to this, every participant was at least somewhat familiar with Outlook and therefore would not need to acquaint themselves with the interface. We assured that the participants were knowledgeable in the basic functionality of how to open, delete, and sort emails into folders. An unfamiliar interface would be an added obstacle and increase cognitive load for the users to complete the task and reach the unsubscription form within a reasonable time frame. *Figure A* depicts the interface that Outlook had at the time of the conducted tests.
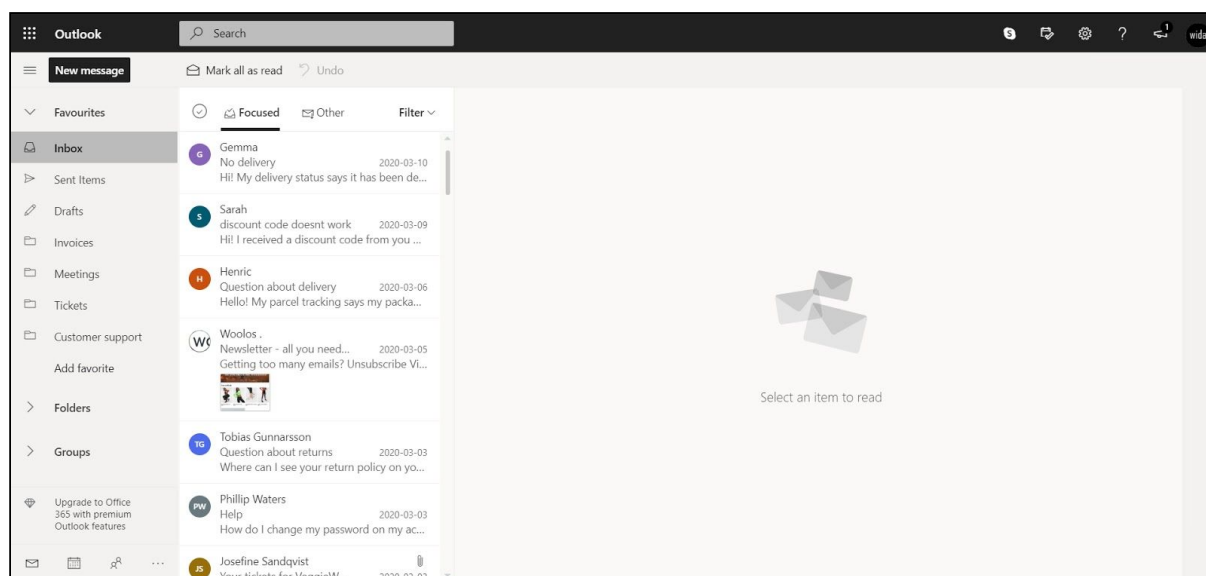

Figure A   The Outlook inbox for the Wida customer support.

Through an online service provider at *www.5ymail.com*, we were able to fill the inbox over a few days with 45 emails that appeared to be from different senders. The reason to make it look like there were different senders to the emails was to feed into the realistic feel of the scenario. Through the use of different senders we also prevented a possible situation where the participants became confused as to why all the emails in the inbox were from the same two people, i.e. the moderators. In *figures B*, C, D, and E we have provided examples of emails that were sent.
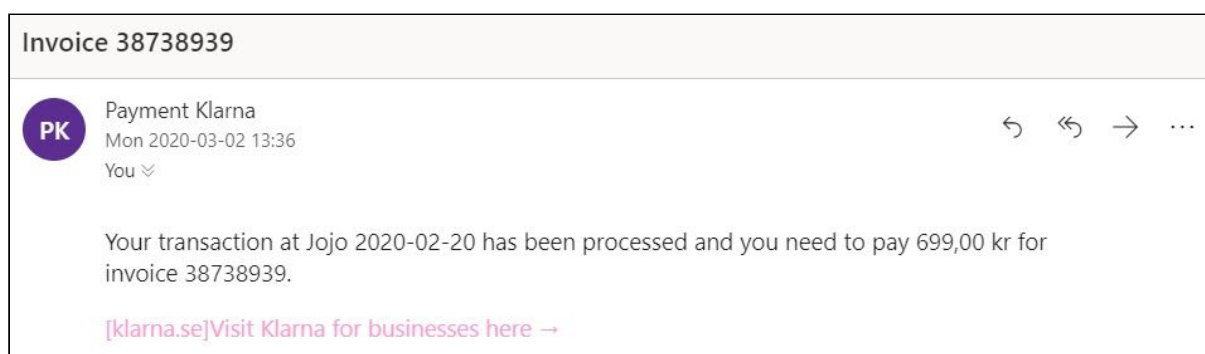
Figure B   Example email that fits into the category *Invoices*.
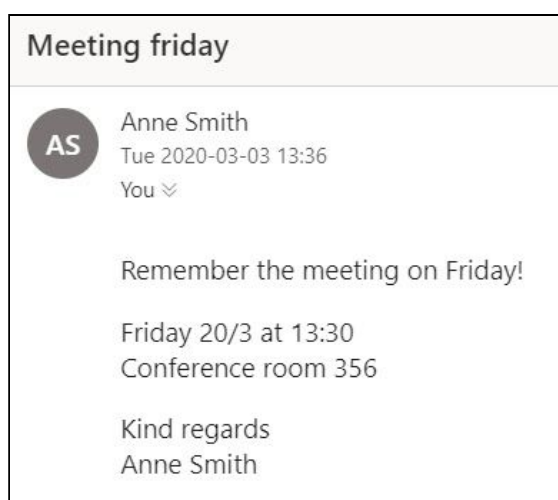
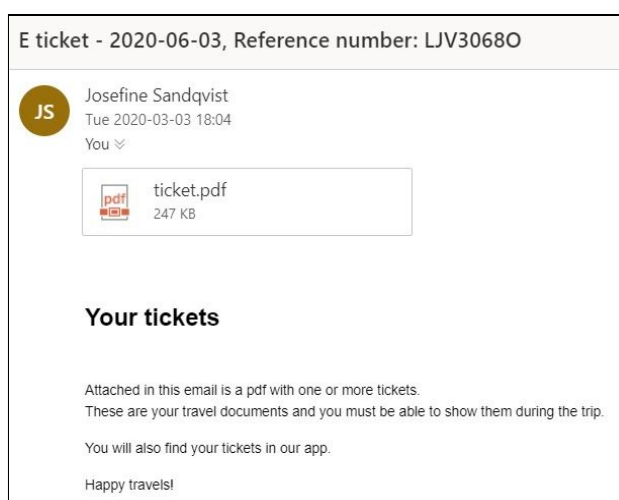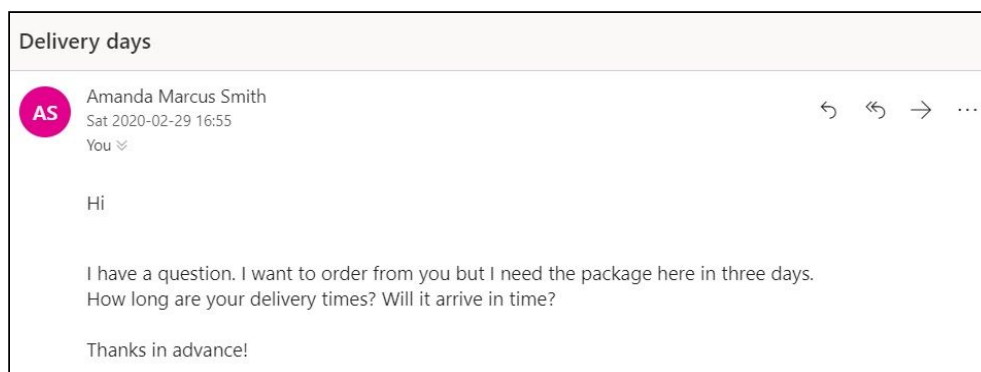| **Figure C**   Example email that fits into the category *Meetings*. | **Figure D**   Example email that fits into the category *Tickets*. |

Figure E   Example email that fits into the category *Customer Support*.

Each email can clearly be categorised into one the four premade folders called *Invoices*, *Meetings*, *Tickets* and *Customer Support*. The folders were located on the left side of the participants' screen and ordered in the aforementioned order. Emails could be placed in them by dragging emails from the inbox to the folder or by clicking *Move to* at the top of the screen to display a drop‑down menu with the different options. We chose the four categories for several reasons. Firstly, they were logical for a customer support email, as that is what the email address we were using was supposed to imitate. Secondly, they are distinctly different from each other, and we could easily fill the inbox with emails that fit into these categories. And thirdly, newsletters do not belong in any of these folders. The participants therefore needed to take a second look at the newsletters and wonder where to place them. The answer, of course, was in none of these options.

The possibility existed that the participants could categorise emails incorrectly, for example by placing an *Invoice* email into the *Ticket* folder. As that would not affect the outcome of the study as long as the participants did not sort the newsletters into the folders, we did not reprimand them. The few times the participants did sort emails incorrectly, they caught the mistake themselves and opened the affected folder and moved the email to the correct folder instead. The task to sort emails was, as mentioned, only a distraction from the actual study about confirmshaming that would come at the end of the test. Through the explanation of the scenario, including the rules, we limited the participants' possibility to incorrectly sort the newsletters into the folders. They were not strictly forbidden to create new folders, but asked to not do so unless they felt it absolutely necessary. All participants took this as a rule, and none of them created new folders. Additionally, the participants were not allowed to create filters in Outlook that automatically sort or delete emails based on, for example, sender or subject. If that would have been allowed in the test, the participants could have automatically deleted or moved all incoming newsletters to the bin or junk mail folders, which we did not want them to do. Creating a new folder for the newsletters or automatically sorting or deleting emails would likely have prevented them from finally resorting to press the *unsubscribe* link in one of the newsletters. It would then cause them to never interact with the form at the end and as a result we would not receive any data from them. Therefore we limited the participants' possibility to cheat or customise the tests.

Furthermore, in addition to the 45 emails sent through *www.5ymail.com*, five newsletters from Woolos were mixed in among the other emails. It was important to have the newsletters

sent in‑between other emails, so that the way the email inbox was ordered, which was by date, did not place all the newsletters clumped together. Neither should all of them be located at the top (newest) or at the bottom (oldest) of the inbox. This brings us to the design of the newsletter emails.

3.2.3   Newsletters

Prior to creating the newsletter we decided that the newsletters would be sent from a clothing company, as it is common they use email newsletters as a marketing strategy (Henneman, et al., 2015), the newsletters involve everyone since we all wear clothes, and we could easily customise the content of the newsletters. To avoid bias in regards to the clothing company itself during the user tests, we made up a fictitious clothing company named Woolos. Following, we designed a template as an image and created six different versions of newsletters with clothes for both men and women to avoid possible bias between the male and female participants. We deemed that six different versions would be enough for this purpose. The design of the template was made to resemble newsletters of already existing clothing companies with a simple and clean design to avoid extra distraction during the tests.
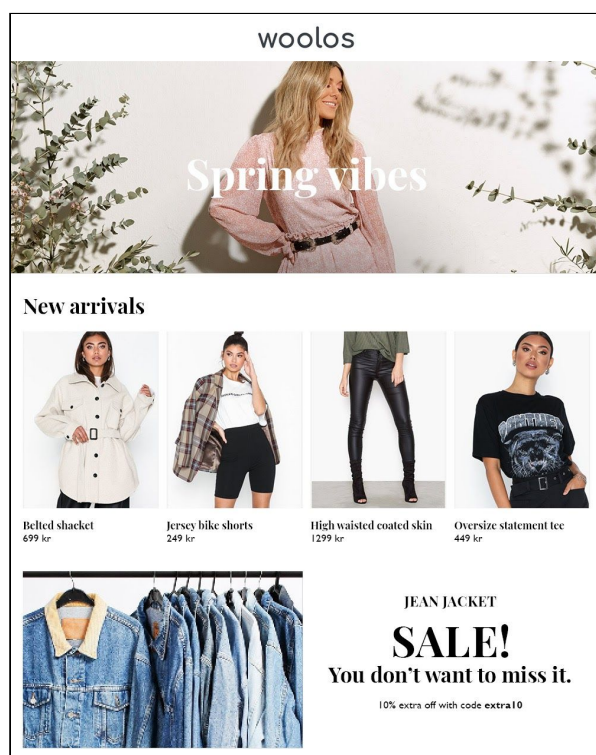

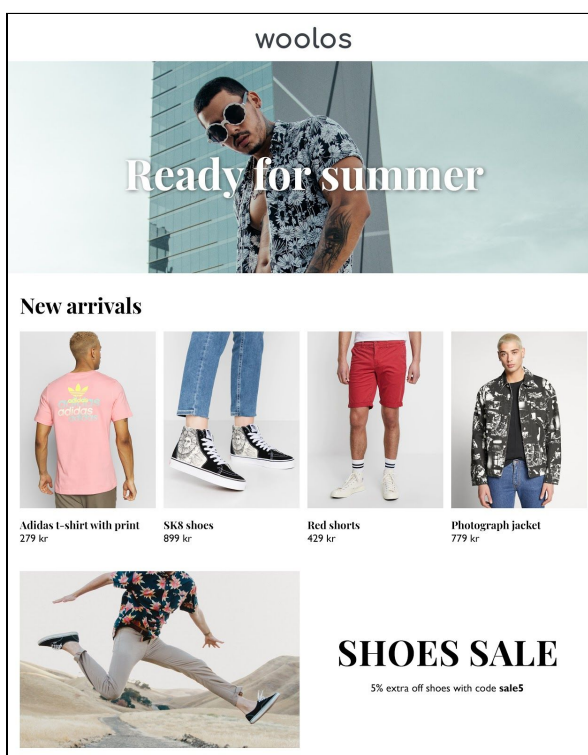**Figure F**   One of the newsletters.

Figure G   One of the newsletters.

The newsletters were included as an image directly into emails with a text above them that said "Getting too many emails? Unsubscribe" as a clickable link. The link was placed at the top of the email so it was clearly visible and therefore easy to find for the participants even if they felt stressed due to the time limit. Since stress affects your brain, it is easy to miss information (Starcke and Brand, 2012), such as, in this case, the unsubscription link. If the participants' were to miss the link, the whole test would fail. When the newsletter emails were sent and received, they had "Newsletter" in the subject row to make it clear to the participants what the emails were while they glanced through the inbox, without them having to open every single email to sort or delete them. See *figure F* and *G* for two of the newsletters.

3.2.4   Forms

After that, we created the unsubscription forms that were in the same design style as the newsletters so that they looked like they belonged to the same company. The forms were coded in HTML and CSS and the background image was a free stock photo that suited the brand Woolos. The pages were then uploaded to a domain so that the *unsubscribe* link in the newsletter emails would open a new tab in the browser and take the participant to an actual webpage. The forms used clickable buttons, but they were not actually functional in the sense that the newsletters were sent manually by one of the moderators, and the forms were therefore not connected to the emails. Of course, when a participant pressed the unsubscription option, the moderator did not send more newsletters. The test was also over when the participant had made a decision.

We had to have five different displays for the forms. The first of these, which can be seen in *figure H*, is the form that does not contain confirmshaming. This form was shown during the neutral test. The first option in this form, "Unsubscribe", took the participants to the display shown in *figure J*, while the latter option, "Keep my amazing offers", meant that the participant chose to stay subscribed, and was taken to the display in *figure K*. These two confirmed-option screens at the end were kept the same throughout all three tests.
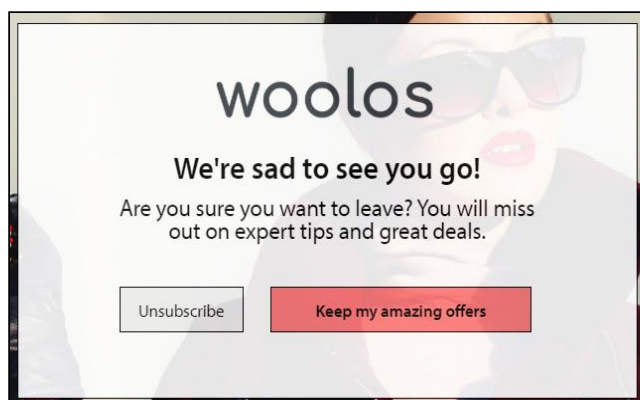

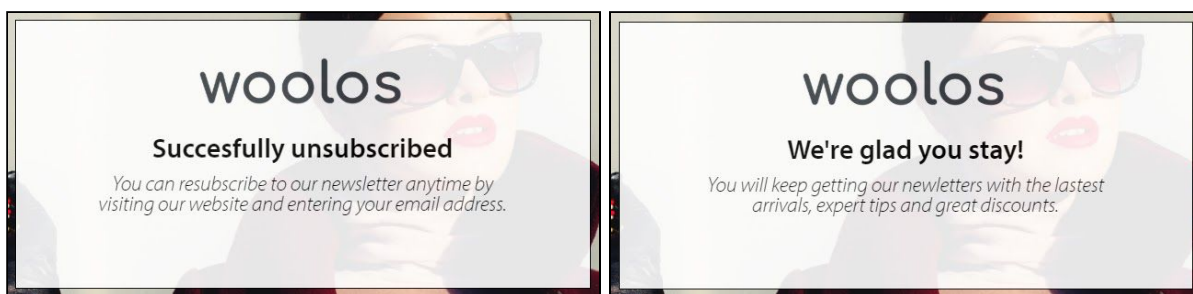**Figure H**   The form for the neutral test.

Figure J   Display when a participant has successfully unsubscribed.

Figure K   Display when a participant decides to not unsubscribe.

When the neutral test had been completed for all five participants in the neutral test, the form was changed to one with confirmshaming. The second test conducted was the single‑step unsubscription process. It was important to keep the url address the same so that the link in the newsletter emails would still work. Therefore, the design was updated to the form shown in *figure L*, while the url remained the same.

In this form, the unsubscription option was worded "I like being ugly, unsubscribe". This type of wording is one we have observed to be used in confirmshaming before, mostly in sign‑up forms. Many similar instances can be found throughout the web; we present an example in *figure N*. The wording had to be extreme in order to induce shame in the participants. It plays into the theories presented by Lickel, et al. (2014) where the goal is to make the participants want to complete the form without having to make a shameful choice. Because the opt‑out option is worded in such a way, the participants would have to admit to being ugly and the idea is that they want to avoid that because it is shameful.

The options to stay subscribed and to unsubscribe were styled slightly different. This is because most examples found employ visual interference in some way to make the option to stay subscribed more prominent, as seen in *figure N*, as well as in [Appendix 2]. To make the form resemble reality as as closely as possible, we made the choice to include this in the design. However, visual interference is not discussed further in this thesis, as stated in [1.4 Scope and delimitations].
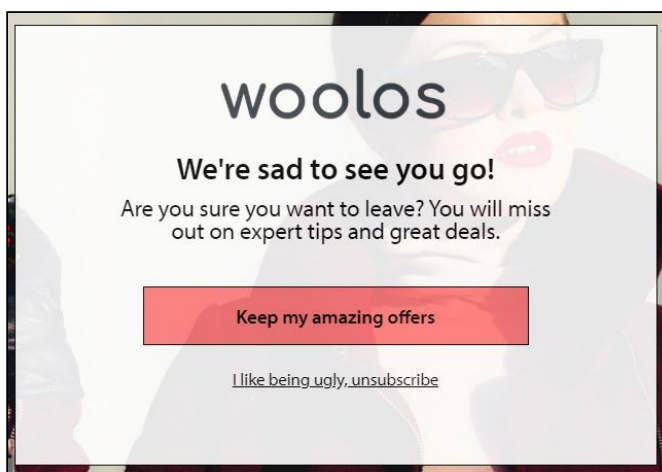
Figure L   The form both for the single‑step process and the first step of the several‑step process.
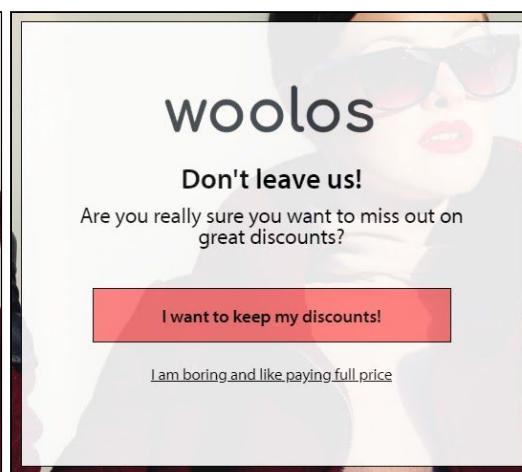
Figure M   The second form for the several‑step process.

In the final test, with two steps of confirmshaming, the design of the form was kept the same. A small change had to be made to the links in the buttons, however. Whereas in the previous forms, the participants only had to confirm their choice once, in this test the participants needed to be sent to a second form. Therefore, the link on the unsubscription option, "I like being ugly, unsubscribe" was changed to take the participants to the form in *figure M*, where they were exposed to confirmshaming a second time. In the second form, the wording of the unsubscription option was "I am boring and I like paying full price". Again, we have found instances of confirmshaming throughout the web that uses discounts as a tactic. One example can be seen in *figure O*. The wording was changed because evidently it would not be a several‑step process of confirmshaming if it was the same as in the first form. A new round of confirmshaming would also increase the possible impact on the participants because they would have to make a shameful choice once again. To affirm that the participants in this test knew the page had updated to a second form, the width and height of the form box was changed. Otherwise, they might have simply thought that the page did not update and clicked unsubscribe again without reading the new confirmshaming.
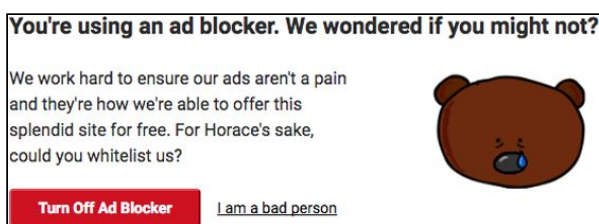

Figure N   Example of confirmshaming with extreme wording in the opt‑out option (Flynn, 2018).
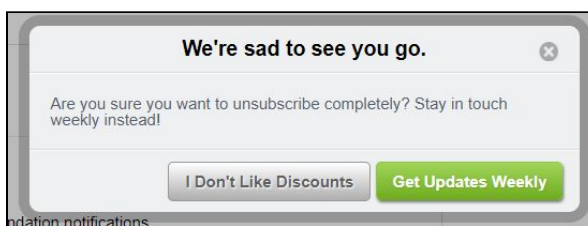
Figure O   Example of confirmshaming using discounts (QuestionMarkus, 2018).

3.2.5 Interview questions

The interview questions were formulated to gain understanding of why the participants behaved the way they did and understand their thoughts (Creswell, 2009; Wilson, 2014), as well as to answer questions about why confirmshaming might be effective that arose in [2. Theoretical Framework]. As explained in [3.1.3 Interviews], there were three lengths to the interviews. The neutral test had fewer questions because they were not exposed to confirmshaming and we asked the questions simply to be able to compare the results to the answers of the participants from the other two tests. The interview protocol with the participants of the single‑step test had a number of questions, and the interviews with the several‑step user test participants had the same questions as well as added questions that focused on the second form.

Although an interview protocol was used, follow‑up questions were sometimes asked so that the participants could better explain what they meant, thought, or felt (Creswell, 2009). Several questions were similar, and if a participant had already provided an answer to one question during their answer of another question, the second question could then be skipped because the knowledge we hoped to gain had already been acquired.

As a first question, we asked the participants if they knew what we had tested them on. No participant managed to figure it out and we can therefore conclude there was no bias in that regard amongst the participants. After this, we explained what the research was about before we continued the interview. In *table P* we have listed all interview questions and which interviews they were asked during. It is evident that the questions did not change and therefore comparison is possible, but for a deeper understanding of the different levels of aggressiveness of confirmshaming more questions were asked to the participants that were exposed to the dark pattern. The second to last question (marked *) was only asked if a participant claimed that they had not been impacted by the confirmshaming, something we obviously did not ask if they said that they had been affected.

The questions were chosen because they are all related to the research purpose and each interview question can be connected to the research questions (Brinkmann, 2014; Wilson, 2014), or, for the first two, they served as an introduction to the topic for the participants. As we sought to investigate how confirmshaming in unsubscription processes affects users, we had to ask them how all aspects of the confirmshaming made them feel, and then try to understand what part it was that made them feel that way and why. The goal was for the participants to describe what they felt during this test, and not theorise how they thought they would act in another similar scenario (Brinkmann, 2014). Careful consideration was taken into account to not ask biased or leading questions. That is why questions are worded, for example "did *anything* make you feel uncomfortable?" rather than "did the *confirmshaming* make you feel uncomfortable?"

Question	Neutral	Single‑step	Several‑step
What do you think we tested you on?	x	x	x
Have you seen this before in any way?		x	x
How did you feel when you unsubscribed to the newsletters?	x	x	x
Did anything make you feel uncomfortable? If yes, what and why?		x	x
How did you feel when you had to choose the negative option a second time?			x
Did the second time/form influence you more deeply than the first?			x
Did you hesitate before you pressed unsubscribe/the negative option? If yes, why?	x	x	x
Did the second form make you hesitate more than the first?			x
Did the wording of the unsubscribe option affect you in any way?		x	x
What was your thought process when you saw the wording?		x	x
What was your initial idea of the company?	x	x	x
Did the unsubscription process change your perception of the company? If yes, how?	x	x	x
Did the second confirmation make your feelings change in any way towards the company? How?			x
Why did you not feel affected by the shameful wording in the unsubscription option? *		x	x
Do you have any additional comments?	x	x	x

Table P   Table depicting which interview questions were asked after which user tests.

3.3 Data collection

As Creswell (2009) writes, assembling data helps in order to understand the problem at hand. Multiple types of data were collected for this research, including visual materials in the form of screenshots from both mobile and laptop devices, user tests which are a kind of observation, and interviews. The screenshots consisted of examples of confirmshaming used in unsubscription processes online. Most examples could be found through sources other

than signing up to newsletters to see if they used the tactic, but rather gather data that people had shared to online platforms such as Reddit and Twitter.

Furthermore, during the user tests, data was collected through screen recordings in order to be able to go back and see the participants' clicking behaviour from the tests. This made it possible to compare the participants' behaviour with their interview answers in case they hesitated when they answered certain questions. We recorded the audio of the interviews on a voice recording app on a mobile phone. When all tests and interviews were finished, the audio recordings were used to transcribe the data into a word processing program on a computer for analysis.

3.4   Data analysis

The qualitative data gathered had to be analysed with a suitable approach. Hence, we adopted a deductive reasoning process where we started with our initial assumption that confirmshaming in unsubscription processes negatively influences the user experience, and followed it with data to either confirm or reject this initial idea (Thorne, 2000).

We compiled the constant comparative method of analysis comparing each participant's answer to one another on all interview questions, sorting the answers into different categories and thereafter concluding whether our assumption was correct or not (Glaser, 1965). The audio files were organised by test type, ergo: neutral, single‑step, and several‑step. This so that we could first compare the interviews within the same test type with one another, followed by comparing the different test types to each other. While we compared and sorted the data, we identified common themes and patterns and were able to strengthen and add more levels of fact to our research. During analysis, categorisation was not only done to support the initial assumptions, but we also discovered themes that were surprising and unusual (Creswell, 2009, p.187).

3.5   Validity and reliability

In this section we discuss the procedures taken to ensure validity and reliability of the methodology and research as a whole. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, several measures were taken into account when developing the method in order to provide reliable and unbiased results.

To control that the approach was consistent between the two researchers, and thereby ensure the reliability of the research, certain reliability procedures were taken. Transcripts were checked to outrule that any obvious mistakes were made during transcription, and regular meetings between the two researchers were held to certify great communication, together with sharing the analysis and conclusion (Creswell, 2009).

Furthermore, to ensure validity of the research, we used procedures such as triangulation, by collecting data on the same topic using a variety of methods such as user tests, screen recordings, interview transcripts and audio recordings. We also used processes such as using rich, thick description, present negative or discrepant information, and peer debriefing, with two debriefers reviewing and questioning the study adding reasoning and validity to the study (Creswell, 2009).

As for analysing the data, we conducted a general procedure for qualitative research, by first collecting raw data, then we organised and prepared the data, read through all of it, sorted it into different themes and lastly interpreted the meaning of the different themes (Creswell, 2009). This procedure fit well with our research strategy and added to validating the accuracy of the information.

We are careful to generalise the conclusion of this study to the entire population, but focus solely on our target group. To strengthen the outcome for a broader generalisation, further studies with more participants need to be conducted (Myers, 2000).

4   Analysis

This section answers the research questions by processing the collected data and the theoretical framework. The analysis has been performed according to the principles stated in [3.4 Data analysis].

As some participants' interview answers were translated from Swedish into English, certain descriptive words could not be directly translated and may have slightly different meanings. We did the best we could to match these words as closely as possible to an English counterpart in the analysis, but this could possibly mean that the intended meaning behind some of the words the participants used have been lost in translation. Most participants were also more or less familiar with the authors beforehand, which could lead to differing levels of comfort when the interviews were conducted and could further provide bias in the study.

Nonetheless, the results of the user tests show that all fifteen participants decided to unsubscribe regardless if they were exposed to confirmshaming or not. However, one participant who did the several‑step process unsubscribed in the first form and then went back to the email inbox because they thought they had successfully unsubscribed.

The first user tests conducted were the neutral test, i.e. the test that did not expose the participants to confirmshaming. Here is the summed up result from the five participants conducting this test. All of the participants that were exposed to the neutral user test felt indifferent to the unsubscription form. They thought it was neither a positive nor negative experience, and none of the five participants said that they hesitated before they clicked *unsubscribe* in the unsubscription form at the end of the user test. Initially, the participants had no significant opinions about the company. Four participants did not change their opinion towards the company after having gone through the unsubscription process. One participant's perception of Woolos became more positive after having gone through the unsubscription process because they claimed that the company made it simple to opt out.

Following is the summed up result from the user tests exposing ten participants to confirmshaming, both the single‑step and the several‑step confirmshaming. Of the ten participants that we subjected to confirmshaming in their user test, half had seen confirmshaming of some kind before, and the other half were unfamiliar with it.

Compared to the neutral user tests, where all five participants felt indifferent during the unsubscription process, only two out of the ten participants that was exposed to confirmshaming felt indifferent. The most common reaction of the confirmshaming was that they thought it was ridiculous and laughable (4 part.), followed by surprise (3 part.). Two participants claimed it was mean, while two were relieved to get rid of the newsletters.

When asked if anything made them feel uncomfortable while unsubscribing, eight participants said no. However, for two of these eight participants the confirmshaming made them upset rather than uncomfortable, and they felt they wanted to opt out even more due to this. The remaining two participants did feel uncomfortable, whereas one of these became more determined to unsubscribe when they saw the second form. All participants claim that

they did not hesitate before they pressed *unsubscribe*, but four had to double check to make sure they pressed the desired option because of the design and style of it.

The wording of the confirmshaming, which is the main aspect, did not affect more than half of the participants (6 part.) according to their interviews. Of the remaining four, two felt it was laughable or ridiculous, and the last two were affected in a negative way and thought it was a strange way to formulate the opt‑out option. The most common thought when they saw the wording of the unsubscription option was that it was mean and arrogant (4 part.), while one of these also saw it as laughable. The second most common response was that they saw it as a joke and thought it was rather funny (3 part.). One claimed it seemed unprofessional, and finally, the remaining two people completely ignored the wording and only focused on opting out.

Compared to the neutral tests, where only one participant's perception of the company changed after seeing the form (which was a positive change), all except one participant claimed that the confirmshaming affected their perception of the company in a negative way. Out of these nine participants, five said that the company felt unprofessional due to the confirmshaming. Other comments included loss of respect for the company, that the company seemed desperate, and that they personally would seek out their competitors instead because of the treatment they received. The one participant whose perception of the company was not affected said it was because they interpreted the confirmshaming as a joke. This participant was exposed to the single‑step unsubscription process.

Out of the five participants who were subjected to the several‑step unsubscription process, two felt annoyed that they had to confirm their choice once again. They did not feel more affected by the second round of confirmshaming, but rather irritated by the repeated question. Another participant mentioned that it was a desperate attempt by the company to try to keep subscribers. Finally, one of the last two participants did not care about the confirmshaming in the second form and the last participant, as mentioned earlier, completely missed to press *unsubscribe* due to thinking they had already unsubscribed after the first form.

When asked if the second form influenced them more than the first, two participants claimed that they were more annoyed the second time. Two said that they were not affected more by the second confirmshaming, although one of them admitted they did not read the form very carefully. Lastly, as mentioned, one participant did not see the last form and therefore we lack their natural response to this question.

While we analysed the result from all user tests, a number of patterns between the different participant's answers were noticed.

Five out of the fifteen participants thought that confirmshaming could be effective on other people, however, that it would not affect themselves. As Brinkmann (2014, p.287) states, it is important to make the participants answer what they personally feel and experience and not let them speculate.

Four participants mentioned that they paused for a second to read the options a second time before they confirmed their choice.

Five participants called confirmshaming a see‑through tactic used by companies. Three other participants suggested a nice and positive approach to convince users to stay subscribed would be a more effective tactic than shaming the users for opting out.

Two participants said that they were used to confirmshaming and therefore did not care about the shaming, and three participants were not affected because they knew the shaming words were not directed towards them personally.

5   Discussion and conclusions

This chapter summarises the results of the study and describes what implications these findings have, as well as describes the conclusions of the study. Further, we discuss factors that may have possibly biased the results of the study. Limitations and suggestions for further research are given at the end of the chapter.

Five out of fifteen participants thought that confirmshaming could work on other people, but not on them personally, and this reflects the way companies think about confirmshaming. The results of the user tests, on the other hand, showed that confirmshaming in unsubscription processes are not effective, as all participants chose to unsubscribe.

It is possible that the scenario itself pushed the participants to the unsubscription option in order to complete the task given since the newsletters kept coming if they did not press it, and that they therefore ignored the comfirmshaming more than they would have done in real life. However, no participant indicated in the interview that they felt this way and the results should therefore not be biased, but it is worth keeping this in mind when assessing the results. We also want to note that it is a possibility that the confirmshaming turned out to be ineffective because the participants did not have any personal ties to the sender of the newsletters since Woolos was a fictional company created only for this study. Had the participants instead been subjected to confirmshaming from a company that they had a former positive relationship with, and from whom they had previously signed up to receive newsletters from themselves, the results could have been less unanimous than they were in this study. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalised to all instances of confirmshaming in unsubscription processes but should rather be applied to unsubscription processes where the previous relationship to the sender is unknown and neutral.

Proceeding with the discussion, the participant who was subjected to the several-step confirmshaming but left the unsubscription process after the first form was not technically exposed to the second step which could possibly skew the results somewhat. In a real situation this participant would have remained subscribed; not due to the confirmshaming, but rather the fact that the form was not as simple as they thought, which still contributes to the result that the shaming was not effective.

The fact that all the neutral test participants felt indifferent to the unsubscription process, whereas eight of the ten participants that were confirmshamed had some kind of reaction to it shows that confirmshaming is an effective way to pull a reaction out of people. Something that all participants exposed to confirmshaming had in common when they saw the unsubscription option was that they responded negatively to the wording in one way or another. However, as shame was not a distinguished emotion for most participants, but rather a feeling of shock or ridiculousness, we can conclude that for most people, confirmshaming is not an effective tool simply due to shame. Two participants had a stronger negative reaction, yet still unsubscribed, which contributes to our conclusion that it does not work and that confirmshaming does not elicit feelings of shame that are strong enough to make people change their minds. Contradictory to what confirmshaming is meant to

accomplish, we discovered that it in some cases had the opposite outcome, where the participants wanted to opt-out even more because of the wording.

Our assumption that confirmshaming leads to distrust and a negative perception of the brand were confirmed when all except one participant perceived the company in a more negative way after being subjected to the dark pattern. A large share of participants deemed the company to be unprofessional and desperate which is never a desirable position for a company to have. This negative perception could, as previously mentioned, lead to losses for the company, which was confirmed when a participant claimed they would seek out the company's competitors instead because of the confirmshaming. These reactions were distinctly different to how the participants in the neutral test perceived the company after the unsubscription process, where none of them had a negative reaction, and one even had a positive response due to the simple opt-out process. This authenticates that the negative perception of the brand was due to the confirmshaming, and not because they experienced the newsletters and frequently appearing emails as upsetting.

We can also conclude that confirmshaming in a several step process is not more effective than in a single step process, since the participants claimed they were not affected by the shame in the second form, but only more irritated at the process and the company. The point of a several-step unsubscription process that contains confirmshaming is to convince the users to stay subscribed through the use of shaming them. Contrary to this, two of the participants barely reacted to the second step, and two other participants became irritated, but not otherwise affected by the shaming, which further added to their negative perception of the company. We therefore theorise that if the several-step process had more than two steps, the participants would have become even more annoyed.

As for the patterns discovered, we found the fact that four participants paused to read the options a second time before they confirmed their choice particularly interesting due to the statement Moran and Flaherty (2017) at Nielsen Norman Group makes, where they believe the reason confirmshaming works is not due to the shaming, but because it makes the user pause before they made a decision. It may be true that the confirmshaming provides a pause, but the participants still chose to opt out. Hence, employing confirmshaming on the grounds of this argument is not justifiable based on the tests conducted.

Our research shows that additional reasons as to why confirmshaming does not work is because users understand it is not directed towards them personally, that it is an obvious, see-through tactic that the users will not fall for, and because they have seen it too many times before to be affected. This confirms another assumption of ours, that confirmshaming has little to no effect when seen too many times.

We have hereby presented several reasons as to why confirmshaming in unsubscription processes is not effective, and suggest it should not be employed. That said, there are a number of factors that could have played a role in creating a bias in the results presented, despite the measures taken in order to provide reliable results. We have been able to identify these factors and have discussed them in this chapter. This leads to the conclusions that further studies need to be conducted in order to gain an overarching understanding of confirmshaming in unsubscription processes.

5.2   Limitations and further research

Given the lack of existing research on the topic there are many opportunities for further research on the link between user experience and dark patterns. Due to the size and scope of this study, the approach has been limited down to appropriate measurements. Thus, this research was solely a qualitative study with focus on a certain target group, and therefore the result cannot be generalised (Myers, 2000). Complementing this study with further research on different demographics and geography together with a quantitative approach would be beneficial for a more generalised result. Should a similar study of unsubscription processes be conducted, we would advise to examine if the results would differ when the implementer of confirmshaming is one that the participants have former personal ties to.

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Appendices

Appendix 1:   Confirmshaming in a single-step process
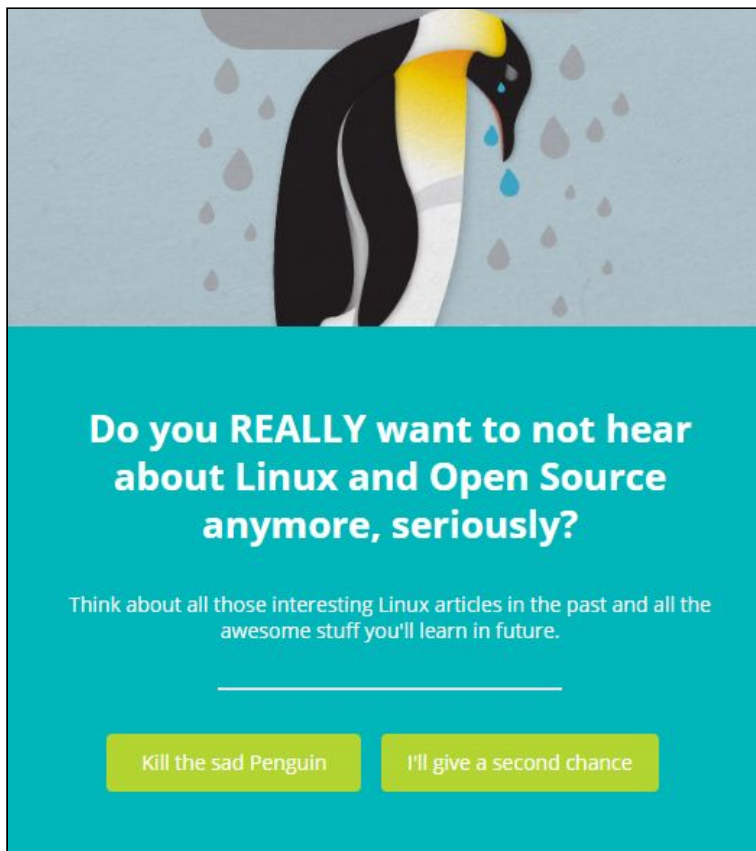
Example from itsFOSS (Scragly91, 2020).

Appendix 2:   Confirmshaming in a several-step process

Example from G2A Shield (HiUsernameImDad, 2016).