

The Power of Intention and the Hindrance of Ego in UX

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ABSTRACT

In the world of UX Research and Design, our primary output is manifestation. We contemplate a desired outcome, align on a vision, and work cross-functionally to bring that experience into reality. However, the greatest obstacle to this creative process is not usually a lack of resources or technical skill — it is the **ego**. Prior research has demonstrated the negative repercussions of ego bias in the workplace, broadly. In this paper, we explore how ego hinders UX practitioners, specifically. Findings demonstrate that the ego-driven cognitive inefficiencies that have previously been identified are also prevalent in the UX industry. Role and gender differences exist, and UX practitioners universally believe that checking the ego at the door is the single greatest lever for productivity.

Keywords: Identity-protective cognition, Extraneous cognitive load, Psychological safety, User experience (UX) design, Professional development, Performance optimization

INTRODUCTION: THE MANIFESTATION PARADOX

In the field of User Experience (UX) Research and Design, we often contemplate a desired outcome, align on a vision, and work cross-functionally to bring that experience into the hands of millions. UX practitioners are professional problem solvers, yet we often overlook the primary instrument we use to solve those problems: our own minds. We obsess over the “User’s Journey” while remaining blind to our “Internal Journey.” However, the greatest obstacle to this creative engine may not necessarily be a lack of technical skill, a tight budget, or a shifting roadmap. We hypothesize that the ego can impede successful team work and productivity.

Ego manifests in behaviors that stall the creative engine: meetings go in circles, research is disregarded, and “Franken-products” are built to satisfy stakeholders rather than users. In a professional setting, we often mistake ego for confidence. But where confidence is the quiet knowledge of one’s ability to solve a problem, ego is the rigid internal narrative of “who we are” that we carry into every research and design sprint. As Dyer (2004) suggests, the ego is built on false pillars, such as *I am what I have, what I do, and what others think of me*.

Yet we face a paradox: UX requires a strong vision, which seemingly demands a strong ego or “will.” We are expected to have a clear, innovative hypothesized direction for the products we work on. If UX is the process of

manifesting a vision into reality, the ego represents cognitive noise. It simply gets in the way. In this paper, we explore how intention and ego impact productivity in the UX field, an area that has not yet been explored.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EGO VS. INTENTION

We define “ego” through the lens of Identity-Protective Cognition (Kahan et al., 2007). Ego-defense acts as an extraneous cognitive load, diverting limited working memory resources away from the intrinsic task of problem-solving. When a practitioner identifies too closely with their output — Dyer’s (2004) “I am what I do” — a design critique can be perceived as a threat to self-identity.

Conversely, intention is framed as teleological alignment: the unwavering focus on a goal-directed outcome. Aligning one’s “inner world” with professional objectives allows for higher “psychological safety” (Edmondson, 1999), which is the prerequisite for innovation.

Wakeman (2017) defines the cost of workplace ego drama as the “ego tax.” In UX, this tax is paid in circular meetings and “Franken-designs” built to appease stakeholders. Harmonizing with team goals requires shifting from a scarcity mindset (protecting my idea) to an abundance mindset (believing the best idea can come from anywhere).

RECOGNIZING EGO-DRIVEN BIAS: THE “SELF-IDEA” TRAP

As Dyer (2004) posits, the “Self-Idea” manifests as “Expertise Bias.” When self-worth is tied to being the “smartest person in the room,” contradictory data feels like a personal attack. Practitioners must monitor the “heat” — the physiological spike of defensiveness—as an alarm that the Expertise Bias may be present. Shifting back to clarity requires a radical detachment: work is an experiment, not an extension of the self. Dyer’s research suggests our energy levels—from fear to peace—impact manifestation.

EGO IN THE UX INDUSTRY

The framework that has been proposed by Wakeman and Dyer who research business practices more generally have not been tested with UX practitioners. We have created a framework based on their work and based on what we have seen in the UX field anecdotally, and we share it here.

The 5 Ego Traps of the UX Lifecycle

In UX, our ego doesn’t just make us annoying to work with; it actively degrades the product quality. When we align with Dyer’s “false pillars” (e.g., *I am what I have, do, and what others think*), we can fall into these specific traps:

1. The “Designer-as-Prophet” Trap

- **The Ego-Trigger:** The need to be “right” before the data is in
- **The Manifestation:** We walk into a research session hoping the participants like our favorite feature. When they don’t, we dismiss them as not the target audience.

2. The “Defensive Wireframe” Trap

- **The Ego-Trigger:** Identifying yourself on the basis of your achievements
- **The Manifestation:** In a design review, a stakeholder suggests a change, and you feel a physical “heat” in your chest. You defend the pixel placement as if you are defending your soul.

3. The “Expertise Silo” Trap

- **The Ego-Trigger:** The need to be superior
- **The Manifestation:** “I have the PhD; why is the Product Manager giving me advice on the interview script?” This shuts down the “Collective Intelligence” in your research.

4. The “Reputation Guard” Trap

- **The Ego-Trigger:** “I am what others think of me.”
- **The Manifestation:** Avoiding “scrappy” or vulnerable early-stage testing/ results because you’re afraid of showing work that isn’t polished or “perfect.” This stalls the creative engine to protect your brand.

5. The “Feedback Dismissal” Trap

- **The Ego-Trigger:** Being offended by the behavior or opinions of others
- **The Manifestation:** A developer says a design is “impossible to build,” and you immediately write them off as “uncreative” or “lazy.”

Table 1: Ego and intention manifestations in UX.

| Internal State | The “Ego” Frequency (Scarcity) | The “Intention” Frequency (Abundance) |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| View of Feedback | A threat to be neutralized | Data to be integrated |
| View of Teammates | Competitors for “Lead” status | Co-manifestors of the vision |
| Design Approach | Complexity (to prove “Expertise”) | Simplicity (to serve the User) |
| Response to Pivots | Resentment over “wasted” work | Trust that the path is refining |

METHODOLOGY: MEASURING THE “EGO TAX”

To examine these UX ego traps, we conducted a preliminary convenience survey among UX practitioners in our network. Respondents were recruited via LinkedIn and professional Slack/Facebook groups. The anonymous survey (Appendix A) measured:

- **Physiological Reactions** (e.g., *How often do you feel a physical “heat” or defensiveness during a design review or research playback?*)
- **Behavioral Reactions** (e.g., *How often do you “over-polish” work or delay a share-out specifically because you are worried about how your competence will be perceived?*)
- **The Ego Tax** (e.g., *In an average work week, how many hours do you estimate you have lost to “workplace drama” (e.g., managing fragile egos, defending decisions against non-data-backed opinions, or recovering from “stinging” feedback)?*).

RESULTS: DEMOGRAPHIC DISPARITIES

Respondents were 37 female and 23 male ($N = 60$) UX professionals who varied in **Role** (17 Director/VP/Executives, 12 Managers, 31 Individual Contributors (ICs)), **Age** (3% aged 18-24 years; 17% aged 25-34 years; 31% aged 35-44 years; 34% aged 45-54 years; 10% aged 55-64 years; 5% aged 65+), **Race/Ethnicity** (predominantly White/Caucasian, 77%, or Asian/Pacific Islander, 16%) and **Years of Experience** in the UX field ($M = 16.4$ years).

Results confirm that ego is not just an interpersonal annoyance; it is a measurable friction point in product development.

The survey data revealed a universal consensus: **All but one practitioners believe “checking egos” would increase productivity**, ($M = 5.57$, with 78% of respondents rating this item a 5 or higher, on a 7-point scale). However, the burden of this cognitive tax is not distributed equally.

The Ego Tax

Respondents identified ego-driven behavior as the primary cause of “diluted quality” and “wasted time.” Dramatically, respondents estimated that an average of 5.28 hours, with a range of zero to *twenty hours per week* are lost to navigating “drama” and ego-driven conflicts. Number of hours lost due to workplace drama correlated with two variables:

- Respondents who view other departments as obstacles reported more hours lost due to workplace drama, $r(54) = .319, p = .019$.
- Respondents who over-polish or delay sharing work due to worry about perceived competence reported more hours lost due to workplace drama, $r(54) = .381, p = .004$.

How much more productive teams could be if everyone checked their egos at the door also correlated with two variables:

- Respondents who feel “heat” or defensiveness during a design review or research playback tend to believe the team would be more productive if egos checked at door, $r(59) = .328, p = .011$.
- Respondents who over-polish or delay sharing work due to worry about how their competence will be perceived tend to believe the team would be more productive if egos were checked at the door, $r(59) = .445, p < .001$.

Physiological Reactions

The Defensive Spike: *How often do you feel a physical “heat” or defensiveness during a design review or research read-out?*

There was a group difference in Defensive Spike, where Managers reported “feeling the heat” most often ($M = 3.45$), followed by ICs ($M = 2.94$), then Directors ($M = 2.41$), $F(2, 58) = 4.284, p = .019, \eta^2 = 0.133$.

Behavioral Reactions

The Expertise Trap: *How often do you try to “look like the expert” rather than admitting you don’t have the answer yet?*

There was a group difference in The Expertise Trap. Managers reported this behavior more often ($M = 3.1$) than ICs ($M = 2.2$) and Directors ($M = 2.2$), $F(2, 58) = 3.774$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2 = 0.119$.

The Reputation Guard: *How often do you “over-polish” work or delay a share-out specifically because you are worried about how your competence will be perceived?*

There was a group difference in The Reputation Guard. ICs reported “over-polishing” ($M = 3.55$) more than Managers ($M = 2.82$) and Directors ($M = 2.35$), $F(2, 58) = 5.434$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = 0.163$.

Women were significantly more likely ($M = 3.36$) to delay share-outs due to fears of competence perception compared to men ($M = 2.61$), $F(1, 58) = 4.829$, $p = .032$, $\eta^2 = 0.078$.

However, women in this sample were underrepresented in the most senior roles and overrepresented in least senior roles, relative to men. That is, there was a significant difference in gender representation in the various roles [$X^2(2) = 15.1$, $p < .001$], such that Director/VP/Executive respondents were 23.5% women versus 76.5% men, and Individual Contributors were 81% women versus 19% men.

There were no significant differences for the following two items:

The Silent Agreement: *How often do you withhold a “better” idea because you don’t want to challenge a senior stakeholder’s ego?*

The Silo Effect: *How often do you feel that “winning the argument” becomes more important than “solving the user problem”?*

DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that the ego often acts as a survival mechanism. For those who feel their competence is under a microscope — here, ICs and women — the “Reputation Guard” is a defense against perceived judgment. This physiological disparity may suggest that in technical environments, ego functions as an adaptive defense mechanism against systemic skepticism for certain roles and genders.

Results also suggest that Managers are under the microscope, but in a different way. They report more defensiveness and trying to look like the expert more than ICs and Directors.

This data suggests that the ego isn’t just “arrogance”; it’s often a defense mechanism against perceived judgment, which in turn, can lead to slower velocity and “stalled manifestation.”

Actionable Strategies: Dismantling Self-Imposed Obstacles

The mental barriers to optimal UX — imposter syndrome, fear of judgment, and rigid perfectionism — are primarily ego-defenses. While these may be mischaracterized as a lack of confidence, we distinguish confidence as the stable knowledge of one’s problem-solving capacity, whereas ego is the need for individual validation. To realign the internal state with task-oriented goals, we propose a four-tier remediation framework, informed by literature and our survey data. Our theory is that by practicing these behaviors, practitioners could move from the “Ego-Driven” column to the “Intention-Driven” column. Further research is warranted to validate this framework.

Table 2: Behavioral indicators of ego-driven vs. goal-aligned (intentional) UX workflows.

| Feature | Ego-Driven UX | Intention-Driven UX |
|------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Primary Goal | Being “Right” / Validation | Being “Effective” / Impact |
| Reaction to Data | Defensive / Dismissive | Curious / Adaptive |
| Meeting Presence | Dominating or Withdrawn | Facilitative and Open |
| Outcome | Fragmented / Feature-heavy | Cohesive / Human-centric |

1. Physiological Regulation (Pause to Breathe)

To counter the “Defensive Wireframe” trap, practitioners must mitigate autonomic nervous system arousal.

- **The Intervention:** Stop and breathe. Reset by implementing a breathing technique (e.g., Inhale 4s, Hold 4s, Exhale 4s) at the first sign of the “Defensive Spike.”
- **The Intentional Pivot:** This physiological reset allows the individual to re-label critique. The stakeholder is not attacking the self; they are stress-testing the teleological intention of the artifact.

2. Decoupling Identity From Artifacts (Rough-Cut Reviews)

To dismantle the “Reputation Guard” trap, which our data shows disproportionately impacts ICs and women, leadership must normalize low-fidelity vulnerability.

- **The Intervention:** To get comfortable with critique, institutionalize early reviews where high-fidelity mocks and finished research reports are shared and critiqued.
- **The Intentional Pivot:** Move from “Scarcity” (protecting a polished brand) to “Abundance” (recognizing the infinite capacity for refinement). Releasing a flawed prototype for early learning is a “high-vibration” act of service to the user.

3. Communication Protocols (The 70/30 Rule)

To mitigate the “Expertise Silo” and “Designer-as-Prophet” traps, practitioners must shift from a “Prophet” mental model to an “Observer” model.

- **The Intervention:** Listen. For example, adopt the 70/30 Rule—spending 70% of a cross-functional meeting listening and only 30% contributing.
- **The Intentional Pivot:** Move from “Prophecy” (predicting/controlling behavior) to “Observation” (witnessing reality). By surrendering the need to be the “smartest person in the room,” practitioners access “Collective Intelligence” and the “Beginner’s Mind.”

4. Reframing and Radical Detachment

To address the “Feedback Dismissal” trap, practitioners must utilize what we call an “Identity Guard Rail.”

- **The Intervention:** When a technical constraint (e.g., from Engineering) feels like an insult to creative vision, apply the principle of “Minimum Resistance.”
- **The Intentional Pivot:** Reframe the constraint not as a failure, but as a creative boundary that clarifies the next step in manifestation. Ask: “*Am I defending the user, or am I defending my time/reputation/effort?*”

CONCLUSION: STEPPING OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY

Our preliminary data demonstrate that the ego-driven cognitive inefficiencies that have previously been identified in business are also prevalent in the UX industry. Across genders and roles, UX practitioners believe that checking the ego at the door is the single greatest lever for productivity.

Respondents who reported feeling “heat” or defensiveness during a design review or research playback, and those who over-polish or delay sharing work due to worry about how their competence will be perceived tend to believe their teams would be more productive if egos were checked at the door.

Respondents who view other departments as obstacles, and those who over-polish or delay sharing work due to worry about how they will be perceived reported more hours lost due to workplace drama.

The negative repercussions of ego can manifest psychologically and behaviorally, which can have a negative impact on the resulting innovative products we create.

People often fear that if we let go of our ego — our titles, our “expert” status, our need to be right — we will become invisible or undervalued. But the research of Grant & Parker (2009) and Edmondson (1999) suggest the exact opposite. When we stop exhausting our energy on “reputation management” and “defensive posturing,” that energy is suddenly available for innovation. Our data suggest that this is not a marginal gain; with an average of 5.28 hours per week lost to ego-driven friction (and as much as 20 hours per week), the transition from ego to intention represents a significant recovery of team velocity and product quality.

We believe that great UX requires the practitioner to “step out of their own way.” By recognizing ego-driven bias as a workplace inefficiency, teams can manifest more cohesive, human-centric products. The transition from ego to intention is not merely a “soft skill” — it is a critical optimization of the human-centered design process.

The most impactful UX practitioners of the future won’t be the ones with the loudest voices or the most polished portfolios. We believe they will be the ones with the clearest intentions — the ones who have mastered the art of getting out of their own way to let a great experience manifest through them. This is not just a wellness initiative, but a call for performance optimization.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Items

1. How often do you feel a physical “heat” or defensiveness during a design review or research playback? *Scale: 1 (Never) to 5 (Daily)*
2. How often do you withhold a “better” idea because you don't want to challenge a senior stakeholder's ego? *Scale: 1 (Never) to 5 (Daily)*
3. How often do you try to “look like the expert” rather than admitting you don't have the answer yet? *Scale: 1 (Never) to 5 (Daily)*
4. How often do you feel that “winning the argument” becomes more important than “solving the user problem”? *Scale: 1 (Never) to 5 (Daily)*
5. How often do you view other departments (Engineering, Product, etc.) as obstacles to your vision rather than partners in manifestation? *Scale: 1 (Never) to 5 (Daily)*
6. How often do you “over-polish” work or delay a share-out specifically because you are worried about how your competence will be perceived? *Scale: 1 (Never) to 5 (Daily)*

Section 2: Impact

7. When “Ego-Driven Drama” (posturing, defensiveness, or entitlement) enters the research and design process **on your team**, what impact do you observe? *Select all that apply.*
 - a. Diluted Quality: The final product is a “compromise” that satisfies internal egos rather than user needs.
 - b. Burnout: I feel exhausted by the emotional labor of navigating personal agendas.
 - c. Wasted Time: We spend significant time “venting” or circular-reasoning to protect reputations.
 - d. Reduced Trust: I feel less safe sharing “messy” early-stage work or admitting mistakes.

- e. Slower Velocity: Decision-making stalls because of a need for individual validation or “calling the shot.”
 - f. Other
8. In an average work week, how many hours do you estimate you have lost to “workplace drama” (e.g., managing fragile egos, defending decisions against non-data-backed opinions, or recovering from “stinging” feedback)? (*open-ended*)

Section 3: Intention

9. Describe a time a team member “left their ego at the door” - perhaps by admitting a mistake or surrendering a favorite idea. What happened to the project’s momentum after that? (*open-ended*)
10. Describe a project where the team felt “in sync” and focused entirely on the user’s outcome. How did the **energy** of that work feel compared to a standard project? (*open-ended*)
11. What is the one biggest “self-imposed obstacle” (e.g., perfectionism, fear of judgment, need for control) that currently prevents you from connecting deeply with your creative intentions? (*open-ended*)
12. On a scale of 1-7, how much more productive do you believe your team would be if everyone could effectively “check our egos at the door”? *Scale: 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely)*

Demographics

13. How old are you?
- a. Under 18 years old
 - b. 18–24 years old
 - c. 25–34 years old
 - d. 35–44 years old
 - e. 45–54 years old
 - f. 55–64 years old
 - g. 65+ years old
14. What is your gender?
- a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Prefer not to say
15. What is your race?
- a. White/Caucasian
 - b. Black/African-American
 - c. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - d. American Ind./Alaskan Native
 - e. Other (specify)
16. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- a. Less than high school
 - b. High school
 - c. Some college
 - d. Associate’s degree
 - e. Bachelor’s degree
 - f. Some graduate school

- g. Master's degree
 - h. Some graduate school
 - i. Doctorate degree
 - j. Other (specify)
17. Which of the following best describes your company's primary industry?
- a. Retail / eCommerce
 - b. Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) / Manufacturing
 - c. Financial Services / Insurance
 - d. Technology / Software / Electronics
 - e. Automotive
 - f. Telecommunications
 - g. Healthcare / Pharma
 - h. Travel / Hospitality
 - i. Media & Entertainment
 - j. Consumer services
 - k. Government
 - l. Academia
 - m. Other industry (please specify)
18. Which of the following best describes your role?
- a. Researcher
 - b. Designer
 - c. Both researcher and designer
 - d. Other (specify)
19. How many years have you been in research/design?
- a. What is your current level of seniority?
 - b. Individual Contributor (Non-managerial)
 - c. Team Lead / Supervisor (Manages a small team or projects)
 - d. Manager (Manages employees)
 - e. Senior Manager
 - f. Director / Senior Director
 - g. Vice President (VP) / Senior VP
 - h. C-Level Executive (CEO, CTO, CFO, etc.)