

What is Meant by User Experience? Analyzing Usability/User Experience Professionals' Dynamic Representations of Self

Rebecca Zantjer

MA Candidate in Digital
Rhetoric and Professional
Writing, User Experience
Intern
Michigan State University
434 Farm Lane
Room 253
East Lansing, MI 48824
USA
zantjerr@msu.edu

Laura Gonzales

PhD student in Rhetoric and
Writing
Michigan State University
434 Farm Lane
Room 253
East Lansing, MI 48824
USA
mart1595@msu.edu

Abstract

This research investigates the ways usability/user experience professionals describe themselves for different audiences and across multiple digital platforms, including LinkedIn, Twitter, portfolio websites, and business websites. By analyzing the digital identities of over 40 usability/user experience professionals, this article presents quantitative and qualitative pictures of how usability and user experience is being described in digital spaces. This article highlights broad patterns and specific tactics being implemented by four types of usability/user experience professionals and gives recommendations for how these tactics can be modified and applied for other usability/user experience professionals attempting to create professional identities in digital spaces.

Keywords

usability, user experience, professional, identity, description, portfolio, LinkedIn, Twitter, personal branding



Introduction

As graduate students preparing to enter the usability/user experience industry, we often find ourselves being asked variations of the question: “So, what do you do?” The pressure to articulate what usability/user experience professionals do—and, specifically, what we do in relationship to that definition—comes from a number of sources both within industry (i.e., prospective employers) and outside of it (i.e., academic staff, family members, and clients). Providing meaningful answers to these inquiries is difficult, for reasons that include (a) being new and emerging members of the usability/user experience community and, therefore, still in the process of solidifying both our professional identities and our sense of the contours of the field; (b) articulating responses to inquiries that stem from individuals with widely varying professional, theoretical, and pragmatic standpoints; and (c) balancing a response that addresses the needs of various audiences and stakeholders. In this paper, we present a preliminary study that explores how current usability/user experience professionals in industry describe their skills and experiences in their digital profiles. The purpose of this study is to draw implications and recommendations that may assist new professionals facing the challenge of presenting their training and experiences to employers after graduation.

Attempts to Define Usability and/or User Experience

The question of how to define what the terms *usability* and/or *user experience* mean is not a new challenge to usability/user experience professionals. Law, Roto, Vermeeren, Kort, and Hassenzahl (2008) articulated the need for a more cohesive understanding of user experience as opposed to the “disintegrated and scattered” definitions of user experience that were in existence. To do so, they circulated a questionnaire to a group of user experience professionals in order to collect feedback on five definitions of user experience and 20 statements about user experience that had been taken from the professional literature. The results of this research indicated that, as of 2009, the definition(s) of user experience were still highly contested, especially between primarily academic and primarily industry-facing survey respondents (Law, Roto, Hassenzahl, Vermeeren, & Kort, 2009).

Another survey conducted by the Nielsen Norman Group demonstrated that, “The strongest finding from this research is that there is no single defining characteristic of user experience careers” (Farrell & Nielsen, 2013, p. 6). Their work cites previous attempts to define user experience through disciplines (Saffer, 2008) and activities (Bacon, 2013). Other user experience professionals have made similar attempts with efforts to define user experience via a set of layered processes (Garrett, 2000), a process of sequenced activities (Ross, Nowicki, Solomon, Yarbrough, & Schwendeman, 2000), and set of constellated and cyclical concerns (Revang, 2007).

Although not final or universal, the work of these previous scholars and practitioners has been instrumental in helping the field(s) of usability and user experience define itself. There is tremendous value in engaging the usability/user experience community in conversations about what skills and expertise make up user experience—especially in contrast to other closely-related professions. Bill Hart-Davidson (2001) wrote about the value of making skill sets explicitly saying, “When there are no labels, no language, for these concepts... contributions [seem], at best, mysterious” (p. 147). Therefore, it is important both to acknowledge that work and to encourage further attempts at similar work moving forward.

Up until this point in the research, however, attempts at answering the question of “what is usability/user experience?” have come from collecting, evaluating, combining, and sketching various ideas about *the* definition of usability/user experience. Borrowing terminology from our native field of rhetoric and composition, the literature so far has attempted to produce an essentialist understanding of user experience. Essentialist definitions presuppose that a single, correct definition exists and that the goal should be to capture and describe that definition as accurately as possible (Schiappa, 1998). Law, Roto, Vermeeren, Kort, and Hassenzahl’s (2008) survey served as a particularly good example of this by asking usability/user experience practitioners to vote and agree on what is *the* best definition for usability/user experience, presupposing that a best definition did or could exist.

Furthermore, previous literature in this area has attempted to define usability and/or user experience as a static term. Again, this is useful for creating boundaries around what does or

does not count as usability/user experience work; it helps the usability/user experience community take ownership of the term and provides metrics by which we can understand ourselves in relationship to other professional communities. However, defining usability and/or user experience in static terms risks obscuring how—in real-world situations—professionals often use a set of dynamic and varied understandings of themselves based on context. In their analysis of over 100 conventional portfolios, Brady and Schreiber (2013) found that professionals who enacted dynamic and flexible definitions of themselves were more successful than professionals who articulated a singular identity. Although the following example is focused on a technical communication portfolio, we propose that the same principles apply to usability/user experience professionals:

Because the skills and knowledge technical communicators bring to the workplace are not static, neither are identities— that is, employees must be able to “float among identities” and “embrace” the skills of the creative worker (Brady & Schreiber, 2013, p. 353).

Although this dynamicism is recognized as a strength, an approach of cataloging and analyzing identity shifts across contexts has not been made in the usability/user experience community.

Therefore, in this article, we take a different approach to understanding usability/user experience. Instead of asking “What is usability/user experience?” we asked, “What is *meant* by usability/user experience?” Again, taking a concept from Schiappa (1998), we chose a lexical approach to understanding usability/user experience. A lexical approach looks at how a term is used within a particular community and bases its understanding of what a concept is by describing the ways in which that concept is commonly used. Therefore, instead of attempting to offer a single, universal definition or understanding of what usability/user experience is, we investigated how the term is being used within the usability/user experience community. We also looked intentionally at how professionals’ digital identities were dynamic and fluid across various digital spaces in order to make visible the complex rhetorical and contextual work being leveraged by usability/user experience professionals. In doing so, we discovered some trends and patterns that can help usability/user experience professionals think strategically about how they define themselves in various digital spaces. Namely, we were interested in answering the following research questions:

- How are usability and/or user experience professionals defining themselves in their various digital spaces? What nouns (titles, skills, and tools) and verbs (activities, experiences, and behaviors) are they leveraging to describe their work?
- How (if at all) do these definitions vary between different digital spaces or for different stakeholder audiences?
- What is the suggested meaning of the terms *usability* or *user experience*? How does that meaning for usability/user experience affect professionals in digital spaces?

Methods

To get an accurate snapshot of how the usability/user experience community was defining themselves, as well as what types of work were being included under the terms usability/user experience, we analyzed the web portfolios of 40 usability/user experience professionals. Web portfolios were randomly selected (using a random number generator) from a registration list of a 2014 regional usability/user experience event in the Midwest (we have withheld the name of the event to protect the anonymity of our participants). This sample set represents 24% of conference attendees ($n = 169$), includes a cross-sectional representation of usability/user experience professionals at various stages of their careers (i.e., job experiences analyzed in this study ranged from undergraduate students to usability/user experience practitioners with 20+ years of experience), and provides a blend of usability/user experience professionals both within and outside of academia. Furthermore, the sample includes the portfolios of individuals who may not use the term usability or user experience to define their work, but are associated with the field enough to be involved at a usability/user experience professional event.

Using the registration list for the event as a starting point, we used a random number generator to select a sample of 40 professionals. We then used Internet search engines to locate these professionals’ digital spaces, including LinkedIn, portfolio websites, business websites, corporate

profiles, and Twitter. After assembling a list of their digital spaces, we answered the following questions as a way of understanding their various digital identities in these spaces:

- What nouns does this professional use to describe themselves and to describe the work they do?
- What verbs does this professional use to describe themselves and to describe the work they do?

As we were collecting data from professionals' digital profiles, we began to see distinct groups of professionals forming. That is, we began to categorize the professionals whose portfolios we were analyzing into one of four groups:

- Students and recent graduates: This group contained usability/user experience professionals who were still completing degrees or who had completed degrees within the last year.
- Early career professionals: This group contained usability/user experience professionals who had less than five years of full-time professional experience in the fields of usability and/or user experience.
- Established professionals: This group contained usability/user experience professionals who had at least five years of full-time professional experience in the fields of usability and/or user experience.
- Academics: This group contained usability/user experience professionals whose primary employer was a college or university.

Because each of these groups had distinct stakeholder needs, we felt it would be valuable to provide an analytical breakdown of how each of these groups was defining themselves as usability/user experience professionals. In order to accurately represent the ways each group was describing themselves, wording was lifted directly from professionals' digital spaces without alteration. Data was placed into an electronic spreadsheet and analyzed using Textalyzer (<http://textalyser.net/>). Textalyzer is a linguistic analysis tool that provides algorithmically developed analyses of words in a text, including textual complexity, readability (using the Gunning-Fog index), and word frequencies. Using textalyzer provided a baseline analysis of the types and complexity of words professionals used to describe themselves in their digital profiles. The results of this analysis provided us with "big picture findings" for how each group was choosing to define themselves in digital spaces. We then paired this quantitative, analytical understanding with a detailed case study highlighting how one representative member from each group strategically used word choice to convey complex, contested, and shifting understandings of usability and/or user experience across multiple digital spaces.

Results

Based on the data from Textalyzer, Table 1 highlights how different groups of usability/user experience professionals defined themselves in digital spaces. The average number of unique words shows how many different terms, on average, individuals in this group used to describe what they do, what they know, and who they are as usability/user experience professionals. Readability is calculated using the Gunning-Fog index, which estimates the years of formal education needed to understand a particular text by calculating the number of words per sentence, length of words, and number of sentences. Textalyzer also provided word frequencies for the descriptions used in each group (e.g., students and recent graduates, experienced professionals, etc.). These frequently used words illustrate the wide array of skills and titles individuals used to describe their work.

Table 1. Linguistic Analysis of Digital Profiles

Group	Average number of unique words	Readability	Most frequent words and number of occurrences	
Students and recent graduates	55.6	43.6	design accessibility web user research usability experience accessible writing issues	22 16 15 12 12 11 9 7 6 6
Early career professionals	48.3	44.3	user design web usability information experience development designer management research	59 48 44 35 31 28 26 23 23 22
Established professionals	36.0	21.7	design web user usability designer experience management senior information graphic	57 36 33 28 18 17 15 14 14 12
Academics	36.3	22.1	media social design marketing professor mobile management research usability strategy	14 11 10 10 8 8 7 7 6 6

As seen in Table 1, students and recent graduates had the highest average number (55.6) of unique words used in their descriptions across all digital platforms. This suggests students may be attempting to appeal to a wider array of audiences as they seek jobs after graduation and may still be experimenting with language to represent themselves to potential employers. Text readability levels

were highest for students and recent graduates (43.6) as well as early career professionals (44.3). Established professionals and academics had lower readability levels, with 21.7 and 22.1 respectively. Word choice, however, was where our team saw remarkable contrast between the academic profiles and the profiles of full-time industry professionals. The words “media,” “social,” and “marketing” appeared much more frequently in this group than in any of the other profiles. In the sections below, we provide a contextualized discussion of how these preliminary identification patterns were evidenced in the profiles for individuals in each of the categories we developed. These sample use cases were developed through patterns we identified in the digital profiles of individuals in each experience category. We decided to present our findings through use cases to provide a more contextualized representation of the patterns we noted in professionals’ digital profiles. Although these use cases and summary findings are partially an interpretive act, we wrote them using our training in digital rhetoric in order to interpret participants’ identity representation decisions. Though we changed or omitted the names of specific organizations, all statements represented in these use cases were represented directly in the digital profiles of the professionals sampled.

Group 1: Students and Recent Graduates

Big Picture Findings

Students and recent graduates display the following patterns in their digital profiles:

- Using a wide variety and number of words to describe their skills and experiences
- Working to establish a professional identity outside of classroom experiences
- Highlighting relationships with successful companies, organizations, and projects

Students and recent graduates are attempting to build digital profiles that reach a wide range of potential future employers. For this reason, these individuals use the highest number of unique words on their digital profiles. The words used to describe skills and experiences are also the most diverse for students and recent graduates. For example, the word “writing” is one of the most frequently used words in these digital profiles. Because many of the students and recent graduates we analyzed for this study are coming into the usability/user experience industry from technical communication or professional writing programs, these individuals tended to focus on their writing skills as they describe their work. As students and recent graduates gained experience in industry, however, they tended to replace the word “writing” with other verbs like “design,” “create,” and “build.” Through their digital profiles, it’s clear that students and recent graduates are working to develop terminology to describe both their previous experiences and the experiences they wish to attain in future jobs and projects.

Case Study: The Recent Graduate

“Ana” is a user experience researcher at a technology corporation in the Midwest. This is the first full-time position she has held as a user experience researcher outside the university. Ana earned her graduate degree two years ago, where she also interned as a usability specialist and graduate research assistant. In building and maintaining her professional digital identity, Ana faces the following challenges:

- Accurately and honestly representing her experiences to various stakeholders
- Building a digital presence that introduces her to new connections and makes her memorable

To address these challenges, Ana used the following tactics:

Tactic 1: Ana uses a wide range of terms to describe her experiences.

While Ana has had relatively limited experience in industry (gained through one job and one internship as a user experience researcher), she uses a variety of words to describe her experiences in her LinkedIn profile. For instance, in her background description section, Ana describes herself as a professional technical communicator, user experience specialist, information architect, and interaction designer. Ana has played all of these roles during her time at her job and internship, and she wants to market her expertise in various areas as she continues looking for new work.

Tactic 2: Ana maintains a consistent image in her digital profiles

Because Ana is new to the industry, she has not had the time or experience to establish large professional networks or connections. As she gains experience and people begin talking about her work, Ana wants to remain memorable. To do this, she maintains a consistent digital presence across her profiles. Ana has a LinkedIn profile, a Twitter account, and a personal website, and she maintains the same picture of herself in all three spaces. She associates herself directly with both her graduate program and the company she currently works for, listing her school and job location prominently in all her digital profiles. In this way, Ana builds her own ethos by associating herself with her education and work locations.

Group 2: Early Career Professionals

Big Picture Findings

After analyzing the portfolio content for usability/user experiences professionals with less than five years full-time professional experience, we identified the following patterns:

- Early career professionals tend to describe themselves using many unique terms (i.e., they tend to present descriptions of who they are and/or describe what they do using many different words).
- Early career professionals tend to describe themselves using words that are highly industry-specific.
- Early career professionals tend to describe themselves using nouns (i.e., job titles) over verbs (i.e., job responsibilities).

Early career professionals are describing themselves in multiple ways and are using industry-specific terminology to do so. We theorize that this result stems from early career professionals' desire to demonstrate competence and membership in the usability/user experience community (using the field's terminology to demonstrate belonging) as well as their desire to demonstrate experience (describing their past experiences in detail to prove employability).

The profiles of early career professionals were also noun-based, meaning that early career professionals were more likely to describe themselves by the job titles they held (e.g., graphic designer), the types of products produced (e.g., usability reports), or the skills they possessed (e.g., HTML and CSS) rather than describing themselves using verbs to demonstrate what they did (e.g., collaborating with clients) or what their process is like as a professional (e.g., making the web work better). Again, this tendency could stem from a desire to use industry-specific terminology to demonstrate competence. However, we theorize that this more likely stems from early career professionals feeling more confident in articulating what they know over what they've done because many may feel they lack sufficient experience to build a portfolio on past activity.

Case Study: The Web Designer

"Margaret" has been working as a full-time interaction designer for three years. Before this, she had worked part-time as a freelance web designer while she was finishing up graduate school and beginning a family. Although she has a full-time job, Margaret has kept her freelance web design business and, occasionally, will take on client projects to bring in extra revenue, enhance her portfolio, and keep her design skills honed. Therefore, Margaret's digital spaces include a LinkedIn profile and a business website that includes a portfolio of Margaret's previous design work. The challenges Margaret faces in constructing these digital spaces are the following:

- Representing what user experience work is, and how it has value, to potential clients
- Separating the work done as a freelance web designer and work done as a full-time employee while still claiming ownership of both

To address these challenges, Margaret utilized the following tactics:

Tactic 1: Margaret shows, not tells, potential clients what she can do.

Margaret addressed the challenge of communicating what potential value she had for clients by adopting a very text-minimal professional site. Margaret's site describes herself as a UX Designer, includes a simple tagline, and then showcases a number of websites she worked on as

a web designer. Her professional site contains thumbnail images of websites she has worked on. These thumbnail images link to live sites and are not accompanied with any text or description. Potential clients can easily see the types of work Margaret has done in the past, but are not given any descriptions that articulate Margaret's role, work style, or services rendered. In this way, Margaret avoids overwhelming or confusing clients with abstract text descriptions of what usability/user experience professionals can do. However, in choosing this tactic, Margaret's portfolio does not allow her to talk about all the non-visible work user experience professionals do (e.g., user research, iterative prototyping, etc.) and any potential ways her work philosophy is different from that of similar professionals (e.g., computer programmers or graphic designers).

Tactic 2: Margaret distances herself from her business portfolio on LinkedIn.

Margaret chose to distance herself from her freelancing work on LinkedIn. Although the link to her business site is available under the "contact info" tab, her experiences as a freelance web designer are not made immediately visible in her LinkedIn history. While this could be due to multiple factors (i.e., wanting to seem more marketable to potential employers and/or avoiding conflict of interest concerns), the result is that Margaret maintains two almost distinct digital spaces. Her LinkedIn account is almost completely oriented towards full-time, paycheck-granting jobs, and her business site is completely oriented towards her freelancing work. Instead of attempting to achieve a composite identity that remains consistent across these spaces, Margaret has attempted to silo her digital spaces so that one space addresses one audience and one space addresses another audience.

Group 3: Established Professionals

Big Picture Findings

Experienced professionals in the usability/user experience community demonstrated several patterns in their digital profiles:

- Established professionals (with 5+) years of experience in industry have crafted an identity for themselves apart from any particular project or job. More specifically, experienced professionals curate digital portfolios that highlight their individual identities and values. Instead of focusing on specific companies or experiences, experienced professionals use their digital profiles to focus on their own skillsets.
- Established professionals tend to use more verbs to demonstrate action (rather than job titles or programs) on their digital profiles.
- Established professionals have a less-visible social media presence than early career professionals and students.

Established professionals use their digital profiles to explain what they provide to the usability/user experience community. Though experienced professionals have extensive digital profiles (primarily on LinkedIn), these profiles are used to describe their individual orientations, values, and approaches to usability/user experience. Experienced professionals list their previous and current employers on their digital profiles, but they use these profiles to market themselves as professionals. Additionally, while established professionals have accounts on social media sites like Twitter, their social media profiles have little activity or engagement. However, established professionals have the greatest number of client endorsements and comments on LinkedIn, perhaps decreasing the need for networking via social media.

Case Study: The Experienced UX Specialist

"Casey" is a Senior User Experience Specialist at a large information and technology company in the Midwest. He has been working with this company for five years. Casey has a wide range of work experiences, as he has worked with nine companies in 3–5 year periods since 1995. These companies include small startups, digital libraries, and large technology companies. Because Casey has worked on hundreds of projects in various settings, his biggest challenges creating his digital identity include the following:

- Crafting a succinct yet detailed digital presence that highlights his work and experiences while not being overwhelming

- Establishing digital spaces that he can update frequently as he completes new projects
- Remaining present and visible in new digital platforms

To address these challenges, Casey implemented the following tactics:

Tactic 1: Casey markets himself, not his organizations.

While Casey holds a prestigious senior position as a user experience specialist at a large company, and though he has worked for many recognizable organizations in the past, the focus of his digital identity is largely on his own qualifications. Though Casey lists the organizations he has worked for, his LinkedIn profile begins with a list of “Core Values” he upholds as a professional in the usability/user experience field. He focuses these values on what he does for users, including “making information easier to find,” “organizing content to provide access,” and “designing to maximize user return on investment.” As he goes on to list his specific work experiences, Casey uses active verbs to describe what he did in each project. His most frequently used verbs include led, design, create, participate, and assist. He wants people who browse his digital profile to understand not only where he has worked, but also what he can do as a user experience specialist.

Tactic 2: Casey embeds his work presentations in his digital profiles.

Because Casey oversees and undertakes several projects simultaneously, he often struggles to keep his digital profiles updated. To help with this challenge, Casey uses platforms like Slideshare and Issuu to link presentations and relevant documents to his LinkedIn profile. In this way, he can provide short descriptions for his projects and link out to these presentations as a way to provide more information for relevant audiences.

Tactic 3: Casey maintains focus in digital profiles.

Because Casey has over 20 years of work experience, he has an established network of professional contacts. He has built and fostered relationships with these individuals for years. For this reason, Casey does not see the direct benefits of curating profiles on social media sites. While Casey has a Twitter account, his tweets are protected, allowing him to only share his tweets with desired audiences. Though Casey does not socialize with professionals via social media, he has an active and frequently updated list of endorsements and recommendations on his LinkedIn profile. He also makes a point to endorse and recommend others, continuing to expand his professional network without having to start from scratch on new and always emerging social media spaces.

Group 4: Academics

Big Picture Findings

Individuals who find themselves participating in the usability/user experience community from within an academic institution demonstrated the following patterns in their digital spaces:

- Academics are similar to established professionals in that they tend to describe themselves using fewer unique words.
- Academics tend to describe themselves using relatively easy-to-understand words (as compared to other groups analyzed for this study).
- Academics tend to describe themselves using words that are very different from industry-based usability/user experience professionals.

Academic digital profiles tended to describe themselves using fewer, easier-to-understand words. We theorize that this tendency may stem from a number of sources. It is likely that these individuals have had more experience crafting narratives of themselves as professionals for different audiences and purposes and, thus, have refined and honed their responses over time. Alternatively, these established professionals may be able to depend more on their reputations as scholars and, therefore, are not as pressured to represent the depth of their work and experience in digital spaces.

Case Study: The Academic Consultant

"Hector" is an assistant professor at a four-year research university where he researches social media and teaches courses on user-centered design. He also works as a consultant for organizations, specializing in the areas of social media, marketing, and usability. Hector's digital spaces include a LinkedIn page, a Twitter account, a university faculty profile page, and a personal website. Some of the challenges he faces in creating a digital identity are the following:

- Articulating a cohesive identity of himself as a professional even though he maintains multiple, distinct professional roles
- Describing the same work in ways that are meaningful to clients (can get him consulting jobs) and to academic colleagues (can get him tenure)
- Talking about academic work (i.e., research and publications) in ways that seem relevant to non-academic audiences

To address these challenges, Hector utilized the following tactics:

Tactic 1: Hector uses relational words to articulate a composite identity.

Hector addresses the challenges of articulating a cohesive view of himself—even though he "wears multiple hats" as a professor, researcher, and consultant—by using relational words such as "complements," "supplements," and "accompanies" to describe his work. For example, Hector opens his personal website by positioning himself primarily as an academic researcher who also does consulting work. Hector accomplishes this composite identity by talking about his work as an academic researcher and teacher first and then talking about the ways his consulting work complements the research he does in the university and supplements the theory he brings into the classroom. Instead of presenting himself as a full-fledged consultant, researcher, teacher, etc., Hector presents one definition of himself that has composite parts, and he uses relational words to help his readers understand how those composite parts work together to form his professional identity. Hector's use of relational words to describe his roles reflects the identity negotiation he undertakes as an academic who has to balance research, teaching, and service at his institution.

Tactic 2: Hector begins describing his work with general terminology that later drills-down into audience-specific terms.

Part of the way Hector is solving the challenge of articulating his work in ways that make sense to widely different audiences is by beginning his digital spaces (i.e., home page of his portfolio, summary text on LinkedIn, Twitter description, etc.) by talking about his interests and work in extremely broad terms. For example, rather than opening his website by talking about his research on the usability of voice recognition technology in mobile devices, Hector talks more generally about his interest and experience with user experience in mobile technology. Using general terminology to initially frame his work allows Hector to (a) make his work appeal to a wider audience; (b) use terminology that more people are likely to be familiar with and, therefore, understand; and (c) present a description of himself that has meaning for his academic and non-academic professional self.

Tactic 3: Hector prioritizes research subject matter and learning over research methodology and publication results.

A significant challenge graduate students face as they prepare to enter industry is how to make the research work they did as students seem useful and relevant to potential clients, employers, and colleagues outside of the university. Hector addresses this challenge by talking about his research in terms of what problem he was attempting to solve and what he learned by performing this research rather than by talking about methodology, theory, and publication outcomes. This places the reader's focus on the most widely applicable parts of the research process and demonstrates the unique types of knowledge Hector can bring in to both his academic appointments as well as his consulting work.

Limitations

The four groups discussed in this research represent a cross-sectional snapshot of the usability/user experience community. While this research paints a useful snapshot of that community, generalizations based on this research should be made with discretion. This data, although useful, would be enhanced by a longitudinal study following participants and their developing representations of self in digital spaces over time and by comparing the results of this community with different geographic communities.

Additionally, it is important to note that our interpretations of professionals' strategies and tactics are an interpretive act based on our training in digital rhetoric. Other researchers may interpret the same data differently based on their professional inclinations. Again, this data could be enhanced by follow-up interviews and conversations with the professionals sampled in this study. Finally, while we posit that professional experience (i.e., number of years of full-time work) and professional context (i.e., inside or outside academia) play an important role in how usability/user experience professionals define themselves, other factors—such as educational background, generational differences, and personal experiences (among others)—may play a role in how usability/user experience professionals construct digital identities.

Conclusion

Our research showed that different groups of usability/user experience professionals employ various tactics for representing their professional identities online. These tactics can, and should, be considered by usability/user experience professionals. We believe that new professionals can benefit from adopting tactics that translate their experiences to various audiences and help them develop and curate meaningful digital identities. In particular, we think new professionals in the usability/user experience industry can benefit from seeing the language and strategies experienced professionals use to describe their work, including focusing on marketing and describing their own values and skills rather than fore-fronting the organizations they work for, using active verbs to describe what they contribute to specific tasks or projects, and maintaining consistently updated digital profiles that reflect their recent work. These strategies can be useful to new professionals attempting to build their digital identities, as well as educators training new professionals in these areas.

While this initial analysis was useful in helping us understand how the usability/user experience community is defining themselves and in articulating specific tactics being implemented by usability/user experience professionals, it represents only a small portion of what can be learned from these types of studies. We see the need for continued research, discussion, and reflection about how our field represents ourselves and recommend that future research include follow-up interviews and/or focus groups with usability/user experience professionals where questions of identity branding and strategy are discussed explicitly.

Tips for Usability Practitioners

Based on our research, we recommend the following tactics for usability/user experience professionals who are thinking carefully about the way they present themselves in digital spaces:

- Describe skills broadly, but consistently, across digital platforms.
- Use active verbs to describe what you contribute to projects, organizations, and users.
- Highlight your values and approaches to usability/user experience in your digital profiles.
- Start your audience(s) with a broad description of yourself that uses general terminology, then let users drill-down into more detailed information that uses industry- or academic-specific terminology.
- Talk about research questions and learning outcomes over research methodologies and publications when presenting research to a broad audience.

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About the Authors



Rebecca Zantjer

Ms. Zantjer is a User Experience Researcher at Owens Corning who recently completed her MA in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing and User Experience Internship at Michigan State University. Her work looks at the ways technology can be made accessible and usable to inclusive populations, with a special focus on building technologies to support writing pedagogy.



Laura Gonzales

Ms. Gonzales is a PhD student at Michigan State University, where she studies and teaches digital rhetoric and professional writing. Her work focuses on highlighting the affordances of linguistic diversity in digital spaces.