

**User Experience as Symbolic Action: Using Terministic Screens as a Lens for UX Research
and Design**

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As technology advances and becomes more integrated into daily life, the means of communication adapt to keep pace. After the emergence of the Internet, we have seen a shift in communication mediums. Now, meaningful communication is not exclusive to the physical realm; meaningful communication also occupies the online sphere. Through the use of social media, instant messaging, Email, and web conferencing, people are more dependent on technology to meet their social needs than ever before. Technology is currently used as a vehicle for meaningful interaction between individuals. In the midst of a pandemic, online interaction is a necessity, and the products that provide these services must be optimized for its users. For this reason, professionals and academics have shown an increased interest in the field of user experience (UX). In this paper, I argue that UX is a symbolic act that is confined by terministic screens. Furthermore, it is important for UX professionals to recognize the reality that terministic screens impose on users and to reduce the consequences of harmful terministic screen influence.

UX is a form of communication and serves as a symbolic act. However, there is limited research in the field of UX that considers its rhetorical application and potential consequences regarding terministic screens. Through UX, researchers and designers have the power to foster an inclusive and useful product, but these professionals can also unintentionally neglect areas of UX that are vulnerable to unconscious bias. Specifically, terministic screens reflect, select, and deflect attention from one interpretation to another. For example, the diction used on a webpage could shape the perception of a user's reality from that point onward. Although language cannot exist apart from terministic screens, UX professionals can better understand how their users

perceive the elements of a design based on this concept and address any unintentional meanings that terministic screens may provoke.

Throughout this paper, I use Kenneth Burke's concept of terministic screens (1966) as a lens to evaluate industry standard UX research and design practices. Specifically, I determine the influence of terministic screens on various design elements such as language, color scheme, layout, navigation, graphics, and visuals. I also investigate the impact of terministic screens on data collection and analysis. In particular, I study the effect of terministic screens on drafting user satisfaction surveys and questionnaires; administering usability tests and interviews; completing these surveys, questionnaires, tests, and interviews as a user; and analyzing the results using qualitative methods such as inductive content analysis. Finally, I propose a framework that considers the influence of these terministic screens on UX design and research. This paper explores the following research questions: How is the perception of UX design elements affected by terministic screens? Can terministic screens introduce bias in data results and data interpretation?

Rhetoric: Symbols and Meaning

Rhetoric is difficult to define because it cannot be isolated outside of the discipline it is manifested in. It serves as an available channel that transfers meaning from one individual to another. According to Lunberg, "Every definition of rhetoric is caught up and molded by the same field of discourse that it attempts to capture" (2013, pp. 247-248). Therefore, the definition of rhetoric varies from discourse to discourse due to the terministic screens that are reinforced by an area of study. Lunberg further describes rhetoric as having a "river-like character" because the scope of rhetoric is fluid due to its versatility.

Historically, the purpose of rhetoric has been divided into two schools of thought: persuasion and identification. Aristotle claimed that the sole purpose of rhetoric is “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (*Rhetoric*, p. 48). To further explain this idea, Aristotle introduces the reader to the three artistic proofs: ethics, emotion, and logic. Persuasion is expressed through these artistic proofs that appeal to the audience’s senses. On the other hand, Burke asserts that the purpose of rhetoric is not just persuasion, it is also identification. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke argues that “the most fundamental human desire is social” (1969, p. 27) and that we long for unity through rhetoric — to identify with one another. Rhetoric functions to “find common meaning, unifying symbols, and ways of acting together, and thus promoting cooperation” (Bitzer, 1998). Not only does rhetoric seek to persuade an audience, but it also connects individuals with one another through identification.

Burkean Theory: Symbolic Action and Terministic Screens

Symbolic action and terministic screens are rhetorical concepts that are described by Burke in his 1966 text, *Language as Symbolic Action*. Burke first uses the term symbolic action in the second essay titled “Poetics in Particular, Language in General.” Burke states that poetry is the sheer exercise of “symbolicity” (or “symbolic action”) and continues to state, “If man is characteristically the symbol-using animal, then he should take pleasure in the use of his powers as a symbolizer, just as a bird presumably likes to fly or a fish to swim” (p. 29). Here, Burke acknowledges the importance of communicating using symbols to convey meaning. Furthermore, Burke elaborates on the term “action” in his first essay, “Definition of Man.” Burke says, “Action involves character, which involves choice...action implies the ethical, the human personality” (p. 11). Based on Burke’s criteria, symbolic action is an ethical choice to use symbols appropriately to communicate meaningful ideas. He further discusses the misuse of

symbols later in essay one, “Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol misusing) animal” (p. 16). When Burke refers to the misuse of symbols, he means rhetoricians that use “demagogic tricks” to manipulate their audience’s appeals and “improperly criticized action of symbolicity” caused by ““psychogenic illnesses”” (p. 6). Additionally, Burke does not reserve the term symbolicity for only language systems, “besides such verbalization, or talk, “symbolicity” would also include all other human symbol systems, such as mathematics, music, sculpture, painting, dancing, architectural styles, and so on” (p. 28). Other forms of expression, like art, can be considered mediums capable of demonstrating symbolic action.

Terministic screen is another concept Burke discusses in *Language as Symbolic Action*. In his third essay “Terministic Screens,” Burke exclaims,

“We must use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention from one field rather than another.

Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology (p. 50).

In this quote, Burke claims that all language is biased and highlights certain perspectives while neglecting others. Terministic screens reflect, select, and deflect reality (p. 45). When Burke says that terministic screens reflect reality, he means that the language chosen represents society and the rhetorician’s environment. For example, if the rhetorician is a scientist, they may use jargon that is specific to their field and unfamiliar to lay people. In Klein’s “Interdisciplinarity, Humanities, and the Terministic Screens of Definition,” the researchers investigate how definitions of a subject differ based on the terministic screens of the interdisciplinary spectrum. Klein references Ian Angus who says that “definitions are cogently

related to an individual's position, current institutional priorities, and possibilities for alternative forms of knowledge production" (p. 137). Therefore, terministic screens are responsible for variations in meaning, specifically nomenclature, across disciplines because as professionals from different disciplines interact with one another through interdisciplinary methods, their definitions of a term merge with one another to create a new meaning. Second, the selection of reality refers to the subjective truth of the rhetorician. For instance, a writer has the power to select the most suitable words that convey their meaning accurately. In selecting the particular words, the writer is likely choosing how the audience perceives reality. Lastly, the deflection of reality relates to the omission of the other perspectives. When a rhetorician selects the language they want to use to express their point, they draw attention to their reality, which inherently directs attention away from other realities.

User Experience: Research and Design

User experience (UX) refers to the interaction between a user and a product. This interaction can be positive, neutral, or negative. Coined by Don Norman, UX is "the result of using any product or service," and it "illuminates the needs of your audience and creates compelling products and services" (Stull, 2018, p. 4). UX that is considered satisfactory depends on a design that meets the audience's needs and expectations. If a product does not meet the needs and/or expectations of a user, the user will likely have a negative attitude toward the product and abandon it. So, UX researchers and designers must understand their audience's perception of specific elements to appeal to their audience.

UX is a term that is commonly used within the realm of online interfaces such as websites and software applications. When a user visits a webpage or utilizes a software application, they must be able to navigate the information and features of the digital product

effortlessly. Digital products relay information through design elements like language, layout, color scheme, fonts, graphics, and visuals. Therefore, UX researchers and designers need to strategically select the appropriate design elements for their audience's needs and expectations. For example, if a user needs a webpage to serve as a quick reference, such as a recipe, the page should have a strong visual hierarchy that points the user to the exact information that they are looking for. This visual hierarchy could include an increased font size for the actual recipe, bolded headers that clearly outline the sections, a brightly colored border around the recipe, images of the finished dish in proximity to the recipe, and white space that zones the information for easy navigation. As suggested by Burke, other forms of expression, like UX design, can be considered mediums capable of demonstrating symbolic action. UX researchers and designers rely on symbolic action to direct the users toward the intended function of an online interface. By understanding the user's perception of an element or feature, UX professionals can determine the appropriate design for the digital product and optimize it for future ease of use.

UX is a form of rhetoric because it acts as a means of persuasion and identification. UX researchers and designers attempt to create products that are useful and enjoyable. By designing effective products, UX professionals can persuade their audience that the product is worth their time and money. Additionally, UX researchers and designers strive to make products that are intuitive. When a product is intuitive, users can draw connections between similar products they have interacted with in the past and the current product design. If a product is too complex for a user, they will likely lose interest in it. Thus, a product's design must communicate with its users an effective means of identification. According to Gruber (2020), "Identification marks a step toward thinking about the formation of identities and embodied experiences." As suggested by Gruber, identification unifies people's understanding of a concept or idea. This idea of shared

experience transcends to UX. For example, the universal symbol for “power on/off” is a partial circle with a horizontal line that divides the top. UX researchers and designers implement this symbol into their design to communicate the functionality of their product easily with their users. The power symbol is a recognizable visual that evokes shared experiences among technology users, which is a unified identity. Like rhetoric, the purpose of UX research and design is persuasion and identification.

To better understand UX as symbolic action, the differences between UX research and UX design must be outlined. According to Kuniavsky, Goodman, and Moed (2012), UX research is “the process of figuring out how people interpret and use products and services” (p. 3). This process includes conducting interviews, usability evaluations, satisfaction surveys, and other measures of administering and collecting quantitative and qualitative data. The data is then analyzed and applied to the product design. UX design is the process of creating the elements of the product. For example, a website’s navigation, visual design, and interactive features are all aspects of UX design. Once the researchers establish which design elements are well received by the users, UX designers make the desired changes to the design of the product to improve its usability. This process is constant and is dependent on user feedback. UX researchers and designers work closely with one another to improve their product according to the audience’s ever-changing needs and expectations. In conclusion, UX research and design is a rhetorical act that considers the needs and expectations of its target audience to produce an effective product. In the following section, I address my research questions using peer-reviewed literature within the academic disciplines of rhetoric, computer science, psychology, and technical communication.

UX as Symbolic Action: Terministic Screens and User Experience

Research Question One

How is the perception of UX design elements affected by terministic screens?

Now that I have argued that user experience is a symbolic act, I will investigate the impact of terministic screens on design elements. As I stated before, digital products relay information through design elements like language, color scheme, fonts, graphics, and visuals. These design elements reflect, select, and deflect attention from one aspect of the product to another. For example, bold type lettering on a webpage draws users' attention from one area of the page to another, which consequently deflects the attention from all other content. In "Expanding the Terministic Screen," Bowie and Reyburn attempt to bridge the gap between Burke's theories of visual rhetoric and communication design discourse. Specifically, the text makes a direct connection between visualizations and terministic screens, "we would like to focus on the often-overlooked ideological biases that inform the way in which information visualizations are both created and interpreted" (2014, para. 16). The authors argue that visuals do not have objective meaning; visuals are given meaning through terministic screens that determine the reflective, selective, and deflective function. So, when a UX designer chooses specific elements to include in the product design, their terministic screens interfere with how reality is perceived by users.

Also, terministic screens determine the expectations of a user. As stated in *Observing the User Experience* (Kuniavsky, Goodman , Moed, 2012, p. 303), "Before participants click on a link, check a box, or perform any action with an interface, they have some expectations about the result...Performing an action forever alters their perception of its effect." Users have expectations that correspond with the terministic screens of a design element. For example, if content on a

webpage is highlighted and positioned at the top of the page, the user will assume that the information is more important than other content on the page. In implementing these design elements, the user is directed by terministic screens to value the information that is highlighted and at the top of the page. However, if the information that is highlighted and at the top of the page is not useful to the user, their expectations were likely not met and may cause them to be dissatisfied with the product. Burke touches on this idea of hierarchy briefly in *Language as Symbolic Action*. Burke states that man is “goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)” (1966, p. 16). Therefore, people desire a sense of order, which can also be applied to UX design in the form of design layout.

Because the design of a product is highly dependent on vision, I want to extend Burke’s concept of terministic screens to all symbolicity including visual rhetoric. In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke states, “When I speak of “terministic screens,” I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were different photographs of the same objects” (1966, p. 45). This quote supports my argument that terministic screens can apply to visual rhetoric because photography is a visual art. Considering that UX design appeals to the visual sensation of a user, I want to connect Burke’s idea of terministic screens to sensation. In the article “Orientation: Seeing and Sensing Rhetorically,” Poole (2020) investigates Burke’s idea of orientation and how it relates to sensation in rhetoric. She further elaborates on orientation by stating that Burke believes that vision can introduce unconscious bias by directing attention to different channels (terministic screens), which influences the perceived meaning of an object or thing. Poole states, “Orientation as seeing...reveal much about rhetoric’s relationship to sensation, about how non-symbolic motion is glued to symbolic action through sensing and the orienting of self toward world” (p. 605). Therefore, orientation acts to connect sensation to

meaning. Poole also emphasizes that visuals are experienced emotionally, so a user's immediate reaction to an image has "more to do with affective emotion sticking to past images, and subsequently symbols, than with a present critical evaluation of what is seen" (p. 616). This means that visuals are processed using association to established expectations and experiences. On a digital product like a webpage, the visual design of a product directs the user through the functionality of the site and should meet users' needs and expectations. Moreover, it is essential for UX researchers and designers to understand how the terministic screens of visual elements they select may be interpreted by a user. Later in this paper, I offer a framework that addresses this issue.

Research Question Two

Can terministic screens introduce bias in data results and data interpretation?

Burke suggests that all terminology have screens that "[direct] attention and [shape] the range of observations implicit in the given terminology" (1966, p. 50). So, the terms selected during UX research could likely introduce bias to the data. In "A Catalog of Biases in Questionnaires" (2005), Choi and Pak present a literature review that categorizes different types of questionnaire design bias into three groups: individual question design, questionnaire design as a whole, and the method that the questionnaire is administered. In particular, the sections on "problems with wording" and "cultural differences" exposed common issues in questionnaire design bias. These areas of ineffective wording and cultural variation seem to have the most influence of terministic screens. For example, if UX researchers are conducting a cross-cultural usability study, they may include words in a questionnaire that reflect their own culture but deflect the users' culture; this may lead to misunderstanding and unreliable results.

The language used in a questionnaire can impact how a participant answers a question, which degrades the validity of a study. In an article titled "Weight Bias: A Systematic Review of Characteristics and Psychometric Properties of Self-Report Questionnaires" (Lacroix et al., 2017), the researchers looked at 40 self-report questionnaires on the topic of weight. Lacroix et al. found that weight bias, like stereotypes and blaming, were present in many of the self-report questionnaires. For example, "fat" was a term that the researchers found in some of the self-reported questionnaires. The term "fat" has a negative connotation in society (reflection) that is associated with shame and when used in a questionnaire, participants may not identify with the term even though they may fit the researcher's criteria. Therefore, terministic screens can mean the difference between two different answers on a questionnaire.

In UX research, survey questionnaires are used to determine the usability and satisfaction of a digital product. Although, the way the questions are designed in a qualitative questionnaire may impact the results. Qualitative questionnaires consist of open-ended questions that require users to share their attitudes toward a product. Qualitative data collection helps add context to quantifiable measures like user statistics. A common practice of analyzing qualitative data is called content analysis (or emergent coding). Content analysis is a method where researchers identify terms and place them into overarching categories that represent all the qualitative data from the study. In UX research, this common method helps researchers synthesize user feedback. However, content analysis is a method that is susceptible to the effects of terministic screens.

As I have stated throughout this paper, terministic screens reflect, select, and deflect reality. According to Burke, "Many of the "observations" are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations were made. In brief much that we take as observations about "reality" may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular

choice of terms" (1966, p. 46). When a UX researcher evaluates the terms in the questionnaire, they may overlook other valuable perspectives because the terms that the user chose to include in the questionnaire may not authentically represent their attitudes and beliefs. Rather, the terms that the user selected to answer the questionnaire may reflect the observations of the UX researcher.

When a user answers the question, the terministic screens from the UX researcher who designed the research question are still present and may influence the user's answer. For instance, a question may ask, *Are you satisfied with the design of the webpage?* While answering this question, the user is confined to express their feelings about the website design within the constraints of the term "satisfaction." If the question allowed for more freedom of genuine expression, then the influence of terministic screens from the researcher is reduced. For example, the questionnaire could ask, *How do you feel about the design of the webpage?* Once the user's genuine attitude toward the product is revealed, UX researchers can conduct content analysis using the Affective Norms for English Words (ANEW) scores (Bradley & Lang, 1999). The ANEW scores assign a numeric rating that corresponds with the feelings of pleasure, arousal, and dominance. The UX researcher could determine if the user is satisfied with the design of the product by analyzing the words using the ANEW scores, which would reduce the interference of terministic screens on the user's perception of the product.

Framework: Identifying and Addressing Terministic Screens

In this section, I propose a framework for identifying and addressing the influence of terministic screens on UX research and design. This framework works to recognize issues caused by terministic screens and reduce unintentional meaning that may impact the reality of the user. The framework below is based on Burke's explanation of terministic screens as the reflection,

selection, and deflection of reality. UX researchers and designers can implement this framework to better understand how terministic screens influence a user's experience with a product or with a survey questionnaire. The questions should be answered by UX professionals within the company.

1. What reality does the current design reflect? Is this the reality you want to reinforce?

Determine how the UX team, company, and environment/community influenced the product's design. Does the design expose any personal and unconscious biases? If yes, how can you reduce this bias?

Example: A survey questionnaire includes only two options for gender: male and female. The language selected reflects the personal beliefs of the UX researchers, the company, and/or the community. No, I do not want the user to feel excluded. The design should change to include a write-in option, so the user's gender is validated if they do not fit within the traditional gender binary.

2. What reality does the current design select? Is this the reality you want to reinforce?

Determine how the design impacts the reality of the user. Based on this design, what does the user believe? Is this what you want the user to believe?

Example: The font size and visual images draw attention to a specific area of a webpage. The user believes that this information is the most important on the site. Yes, I want the user to know that this information is the main idea.

3. What reality does the current design deflect? Is this the reality you want to reinforce?

Determine how the product's design neglects other perspectives not shown. Is this the reality you want to reinforce?

Example: The models on a clothing website are not inclusive because they do not show pictures of plus-sized women. The current design deflects the idea that plus-sized women are beautiful and are worth using as models to sell clothing to consumers. The user believes that plus-sized women should not wear these clothes based on the current design. No, this is not what the company intended. The design should include curvier women in the clothes to foster acceptance.

Conclusion

UX is a symbolic act that has serious rhetorical consequences if symbols like design elements are misused. UX serves as a medium to communicate rhetorically between individuals with the main goal of meeting users' expectations and needs. Additionally, terministic screens always accompany language and can be applied to visual rhetoric. When UX professionals are considering the implications of their product design, they should keep in mind the significance of terministic screens on a user's perception of reality. Terministic screens reflect, select, and deflect reality; they direct attention to one reality while rejecting others. By using the framework I have provided above, UX researchers and designers can check their biases and avoid unintentional meaning in their product design. My research serves as a theoretical approach to understanding the impact of terministic screens on a user's perception of reality. More research should be done to further investigate the effects of terministic screens on UX.

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