

User Experience Research Report

Comparative Evaluation

Team Visionaries

Zi Wang, Kay Malan, Catherine Zhou, Sufyan Hammoudeh, Henry Jackson

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Executive Summary

ProQuest ETD Administrator stands as a cornerstone in the academic landscape, facilitating the electronic submission process for theses and dissertations. Our team embarked on a comparative evaluation looking to enhance the user experience and refine platform functionality. Through detailed analysis, we aimed to find out how competitor sites measured up against ProQuest's system, identifying key features that influenced user satisfaction, while uncovering obstacles encountered during publishing.

Our research examined pivotal questions surrounding user satisfaction, navigation ease and instructional clarity during the publishing process. We scrutinized multiple competitor platforms, from digital publishers to academic associations. Notably, **Bepress emerged as the sole direct competitor**, aligning closely with ProQuest's functionality and target audience.

We did a detailed evaluation focussing on five important factors which were instructional clarity, audience, supplemental content, aesthetics, and interaction style. Important insights were gathered from our research, shedding light on ProQuest's strengths and areas for improvement. Interestingly, while ProQuest offers a step-by-step text guide, its competitors complemented this feature by providing a variety of resources including videos and formatting guides. While ProQuest targets students and academic institutions, competitors had larger audiences including libraries, researchers and faculty.

Furthermore, there was a consistent aesthetic across all platforms, projecting an academic atmosphere. However, ProQuest faced difficulties in providing transparent tracking of the review process. In response, recommendations were developed to address these concerns, advocating for the expansion of supplementary materials, clearer instructions through video tutorials, a broader user base and improved communication channels.

In summary, our comparative evaluation offers an understanding of ProQuest's standing in relation to its competitors, highlighting opportunities for improving the user experience and refining the platform. As we move forward, our commitment to improving academic publishing standards and meeting the evolving needs of users remains a key priority. This commitment ensures ProQuest's continued leadership in scholarly dissemination.

Introduction

ProQuest ETD Administrator is a platform which facilitates the submission and publication of theses and dissertations for a wide range of students and institutions. The product's main goal is to streamline the submission process, offering users a straightforward path to publishing and ordering copies of their work. A majority of ProQuest's user base are graduate students looking to publish and disseminate theses or dissertations. Administrators are also relevant stakeholders. To make recommendations that could improve ProQuest's user experience, our team has evaluated its features and affordances against those of its most relevant comparators.

The primary objective of our research is to identify how ProQuest's aesthetics, clarity, and interaction style relate to the industry baseline. In this study, we aim to address the following key questions:

- Are there notable differences in interaction style and aesthetics between ProQuest and its comparators?
- How does the ease of navigation on ProQuest's site compare to that of its comparators?
- What is the industry standard for instructional content and how does it compare to that of ProQuest's system?

To thoroughly investigate these questions, we have compared ProQuest to products with similar goals, services, and audiences. Our findings serve to highlight ProQuest's strengths and weaknesses within the publishing market, specifically relating to clarity and ease of use.

Methods

During our initial meeting, our client identified Bepress as a competitor with a similar audience and function to ProQuest. To find other relevant comparators, our team searched for platforms with comparable features, such as online publishers and associations affiliated with academic submissions (i.e. journals and magazines). Products offering the same function were identified as direct competitors, while noncompeting products with similar functions and audiences were considered parallel. We categorized platforms with different functions (e.g. journals like Nature and Plos One) as analogous. Given the limited number of direct comparators, we chose to focus on distinct services provided by ProQuest, e.g. ordering physical copies and submitting scholarly works, as criteria for identifying our comparators. Many of the products we

researched were identified through internet searches, though IEEE and ASME were both mentioned by a participant during user interviews. To evaluate the list of comparators we compiled, we looked at five specific criteria—audience, instructional clarity, supplemental content, aesthetics, and interaction style. We designed these criteria to measure ProQuest’s user experience against that of its most relevant competitors, offering insight into ProQuest’s strengths and weaknesses when compared to industry standards. We’ve summarized our list of comparators as follows.

Bepress

A digital publishing platform that provides academic institutions, libraries, and researchers with the necessary tools to publish scholarly works, manage institutional repositories, etc.

Elsevier

Dutch academic publishing company that specializes in scientific, medical, and technical content. Users are able to publish both books and journals.

IEEE

The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers is an association allowing members to publish material relating to electronics and electrical engineering.

ASME

The American Society of Mechanical Engineers publishes journals, eBooks, and conference proceedings related to engineering research.

Oxford Academic

Oxford University Press’s academic research platform, publishes scholarly journals, books, and multimedia submissions.

Nature

The world's leading multidisciplinary scientific journal which publishes peer-reviewed research, mainly in science and technology.

Plos One

An open access mega journal published by the Public Library of Science (PLOS). The journal covers primary research from any discipline within science and medicine.

MIT Press

A university press which has been a pioneer in the open access movement in academic publishing. Publishes a number of academic journals.

Sheridan Communications

A company that provides digital printing and warehouse services for books, scholarly journals, and magazines.

To analyze our findings, we evaluated each comparison product against our criteria, highlighting key features and aspects in each category. We created a comparative

matrix via Google Sheets to compile our research in a single document (See Appendix). In addition to our five criteria, we included columns for comparator type, justification for comparison, and product function. Through the organization of our data, we were able to synthesize a set of key findings—taking into account the range of distinct comparators, we evaluated their overarching features and affordances against ProQuest’s own. We’ve recorded the five most evident patterns within this report.

Findings and Recommendations

As mentioned above, the sole direct comparator we identified through our research was Bepress, a digital publishing platform which also handles the submission of theses and dissertations. Other types of competitors, such as platforms that publish scholarly journals and magazines, can either be categorized as analogous or parallel comparators. After evaluating each criterion within our comparative matrix (See Appendix), we identified five pivotal insights and formulated five corresponding recommendations for each finding.

Findings

Instructional Content

- ProQuest offers a comprehensive step-by-step text guide embedded with **external PDF links**, while other competitors also provide various resources such as **videos**, **checklists**, **editorial criteria**, **formatting guides**, and submission **FAQs** to further assist users in the publishing process (See Appendix Criteria #1).
- 8/10 of the websites we evaluated provide clear submission **instructions**, with some also integrating **videos** accompanied by **slides** (See Appendix Criteria #2).
- ProQuest has a straightforward process of publishing, but focuses less than comparators such as Nature and Plos One on the reviewing process. (See Appendix Criteria #5)

Aesthetics

- ProQuest and its competitors all contain a clean, standard, and easy-to-navigate professional aesthetic, reflecting an authoritative and rigorous academic tone. (See Appendix #4)

Audience

- ProQuest primarily targets academic institutions and students seeking to publish their theses and dissertations, whereas others may have a broad range of

audiences including libraries, researchers, and faculty members, etc. (See Appendix Criteria #3).

Recommendations

Instructional Content

- Expanding supplemental content like **formatting guides** and providing additional **visual aids**, like pictures and videos to support the step-by-step guide.
- Implementing **video tutorials** complemented by slides to enhance the accessibility and clarity of submission instructions, giving users the opportunity to choose from multiple resources for guidance.
- Incorporating additional communication channels beyond email for authors, reviewers, and editors to facilitate smoother interactions and minimize delays in the publishing process.

Aesthetics

- Enhancing the clarity of text hierarchy by enlarging the font size of the title element while maintaining a highly conventional aesthetic.

Discussion

The comparative evaluation conducted provides helpful insights into the user experience associated with the ProQuest ETD Administrator system and its positioning in the market relative to its competitors. However, there are some limitations and shortcomings to the breadth and depth of the study that need to be addressed.

Shortcomings

- **Limited scope of direct competitors:** The comparative evaluation was somewhat constrained by the limited number of direct competitors, with Bepress being the only one identified as offering a similar service for the submission of dissertations and theses. This scarcity underscores a niche market but also limits the diversity of most relevant comparative data and potentially valuable insights that could be obtained from a broader competitive landscape. Meanwhile, selections are based on internet searches and clients' suggestions. We could not ignore the possibilities that these competitors may not represent the full spectrum of available or relevant platforms.
- **Limited disciplines evaluated:** The study primarily identified analogous and parallel competitors within the sciences, whereas ProQuest caters to a broad

range of disciplines. This focus might have restricted the evaluation to science-specific publishing practices and potentially overlooked unique features and requirements regarding other disciplines that ProQuest serves.

- **Limited criteria:** Additionally, the evaluation criteria we built for examining focused primarily on instruction-related content and interaction styles. While these are significant, other aspects such as user support and post-submission services may also profoundly affect user satisfaction and could be included in future analyses.

Next Steps

Although Bepress is currently the only direct competitor we have identified, there is scope for further research on websites that may have the potential to become the direct competitors in future development. This could involve extending the research internationally, or considering adjacent services that handle academic content management. Moreover, the evaluation criteria may be modified and updated after discussions with clients to better align with their needs. We plan to perform competitor analysis periodically to ensure that the evaluation reflects the most critical features and most current practices in the market. Future heuristic evaluation and usability testing could also possibly yield new perspectives on the aspects that require assessment.

Comparative Matrix

Link to Google Sheets

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/164yoc_WRuTsd3bj3VyK7ysWRQLw-AeUJaUsdHy2VnRo0/edit?usp=sharing

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