



# Professional identity scale for information professionals: an instrument development

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir30iConf47314>

## Abstract

**Introduction.** There is no validated and reliable instrument available for information professionals to measure their professional identity development. As the profession goes through a transformation and recalibrates itself to stay relevant, enhance training opportunities and programs to promote a strong professional identity, and better address the needs and expectations of users, having a validated and reliable instrument to assess the professional identity of the professionals in the field will help address this gap.

**Method.** A quantitative approach was used to collect data about LIS professional identity to develop a reliable scale. A non-probability sampling strategy was employed to recruit early career LIS professionals.

**Analysis.** Data were analysed using exploratory factor analysis approach.

**Results.** The proposed instrument has high internal reliability and captures aspects of the LIS professional identity. Results of the exploratory factor analysis indicated that five areas or subscales can assess the LIS professional identity.

**Conclusion.** The results of the study supported that proposed constructs were mostly consistent with LIS professional identity scale factors. Though there is extensive research in professional identity development of LIS professionals, this is a first step to developing a scale to measure LIS professional identity.

## Introduction

About 400 publications have been published in the scholarly and professional literature with the words 'future of libraries' or 'future of librarianship' in any of their text fields since 2016. This number (~3500) was significantly higher when these search terms were used in Google Scholar for the same period as it has a broad coverage of databases and repositories. The same search yielded more than 500 publications in 2016 for the previous 5-year period (Dorner et al., 2017). Such an interest in the future of the field in the community is no coincidence as the library and information science (LIS) profession has been going through a major transformation period (Fraser-Arnott, 2019) due to emergence of new digital technologies that dramatically improve access to information for the average user (Fraser-Arnott, 2019; IFLA Trend Report, 2019; Witt & Smith, 2019) and, as a result, transformations in the global information economy (IFLA Trend Report, 2019).

Professional identity is generally defined as one's interpretation of self as a professional in connection with the personal and professional experiences, attitudes, and aspirations (e.g., Cheung, 2008; Whyte, 2002). Definitions of professional identity in the literature appear to share three common elements: (1) self-labelling as a professional, (2) integration of skills and attitudes as a professional, and (3) a perception of context in a professional community (Fraser-Arnott, 2019; Gibson et al., 2010). Therefore, one's professional identity needs to be regarded as a fluid construct as it can change over time through learning, experiences, and interactions with others within the profession and beyond (Cheung, 2008; Dorner et al., 2017; Fraser-Arnott, 2019; Pierson et al., 2019).

The LIS profession goes through transformations as a response to challenges and opportunities from the external environment (e.g., digital evolution) and within (e.g., workforce demographics) which in turn requires changes to the professional identities of the individuals working in the field (Fraser-Arnott, 2019). There is no validated and reliable instrument available in LIS to measure professional identity development of information professionals. As the profession goes through a transformation and recalibrates itself to stay relevant, enhance training opportunities and programs to promote a strong professional identity, and better address the needs and expectations of users, having a validated and reliable instrument to assess the professional identity of the professionals in the field will help address this gap.

## Literature review

Socialization within a professional community plays a key role in construction of professional identities (Croxton, 2015; Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Dorner et al., 2017; Fraser-Arnott, 2019), the theories of social identity (Tajfel, 1978) and communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, et al., 2002) are selected as a theoretical framework to inform the development of a professional identity development scale for information professionals.

According to the social identity theory, individuals drive one part of their total identity, their social identity, from the group or groups that they belong to (Tajfel, 1978). Social identity is 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value or emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). The social group's features, norms, values, and expectations determines not only the strength and content of social identity but also emotions and behaviours. A group of people who engage in joint learning activities, build relationships, and help each other regularly in pursuing their interests in the domain is described as a community (Wenger, McDermott, et al., 2002) and continuity in their interactions allows them to develop a sense of belonging, identity, and commitment.

Professional identity cannot be treated as a fixed attribute (Cheung, 2008) as it is informed and shaped by a variety of factors that influence how one perceives themselves as a professional. Formal education and training is seen as a foundational step to building a sense of professionalism (Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2016; Sare et al., 2012; Tan et al., 2017; Trede et al., 2012) as students

are introduced to knowledge, skills, ethical expectations, and professional values of the field. Through knowledge of the profession (Tan et al., 2017) and practical experiences (Tan et al., 2017; Trede et al., 2012) in the field such as internships or prior work experience (Bird et al., 2011; Croxton, 2015), students align themselves with the expectations of the profession as such experiences also allow students expand their social networks in their field (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Professional identity is also cultivated through interactions with peers, mentors, and professional networks (Croxton, 2015; Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2016; Pierson et al., 2019). Engagement with professional associations (Pierson et al., 2020; Woo & Henfield, 2015) promote their socialization into the field through opportunities such as networking (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005), professional development, and advocacy. LIS profession is grounded in a set of core values and ethical principles including intellectual freedom, public good, and equitable access (e.g., *Core Values of Librarianship* - ALA, 2024; *Our Vision and Mission* - IFLA, n.d.). Internalization of such values and ethical principles not only provide a foundation for professionals perform their roles and responsibilities in the field (Woo & Henfield, 2015) but also allow them to align themselves with their peers, enhance their sense of belonging to the community (Wenger, Mcdermott, et al., 2002), and strengthen their professional identity (Adams et al., 2006; Pierson et al., 2020).

## Method

The study employed a quantitative approach to develop an instrument to measure professional identity development of information professionals. A framework proposed by Pierson et al. (2019) included 14 characteristics relevant to professional identity development of information professionals informed the instrument development. A mapping of values, ethics, and competences statements of major professional associations including the American Library Association, the American Alliance of Museums, and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions developed to inform the instrument development. Although professional identity development scales developed in other helping professions including the professional identity scale for in-service teachers (Cheung, 2008) and the professional identity scale in counselling (Woo et al., 2018; Woo & Henfield, 2015) are discipline specific, they served as a model and appropriate measures are adapted. Professional identity in LIS domain is conceptualized as the product of six areas of an LIS professional's ability to

- (1) demonstrate knowledge of the profession (*Knowledge of the Profession*) [7 items],
- (2) characterize the values that underlines the profession (*Philosophy of the Profession*) [7 items],
- (3) show an understanding of expertise required and professional roles (*Professional Roles and Expertise*) [9 items],
- (4) endorse attitudes toward the profession and oneself (*Attitude*) [9 items],
- (5) socialize with other professionals in a range of capacities (*Engagement Behaviours*) [11 items], and
- (6) manage outward perception of the profession (*Perceptions*) [5 items].

A total 63 item questions were initially developed for these constructs.

## Expert review

Eleven expert reviewers were invited to perform content validation of the instrument and provide feedback. These experts included practitioners as well as LIS faculty members with expertise on the subject. Of the eleven experts, eight reviewed the instrument and provided feedback. Reviewers are provided with definitions, a list of literature references that informed the development of each construct, and a set of questions proposed to measure each construct. Reviewers were asked to rate each question with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly agree* to *Strongly disagree*. A comment area was included for each construct and another comment area for the instrument for reviewers to share their feedback. The questionnaire was disseminated

to expert reviewers online. Reviewers were generally in agreement about the proposed constructs. As per reviewer feedback, several questions were revised or removed. A total of 47 questions for six constructs were included in the final instrument.

### **Instrument and data analysis**

Nine demographics questions such as graduation year from a Master of LIS (MLIS) program, employment status, work experience, and race/ethnicity, and gender were included in addition to 47 questions about six constructs. There was no suitable sampling frame for LIS professionals available. Therefore, the instrument was disseminated online via various alumni mailing lists, Reddit, Facebook groups, and direct emailing. Career transitions require changes to one's professional identity as new roles demand new skills, perspectives, and behaviours (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Ibarra, 1999). Therefore, transition of students from school to work presents a unique opportunity to study the professionals' identity development (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005). Recent graduates of MLIS programs (Fall 2018 or later) in the US were invited to participate in the study. Of 403 responses were received, 311 responses were used for data analysis.

Participants were predominantly identified as White (%85.9, n=267) and female (64.6%, n=201). Almost all the respondents were employed either full-time (82%, n=255), part-time (13.5%, n=42), or self-employed (4.2%, n=13) at the of data collection. About half of respondents (52.4%, n=163) had a work experience of 5 years or less in LIS domain.

Item	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Factor 1: Professional Integrity</b>					
1	Upholding the principle of intellectual freedom and users' right to privacy in accessing information is essential.	0.765			
2	Regardless of different roles an LIS professional may hold, key goals include facilitating access to information and serving our users.	0.714			
3	My profession is passionate about connecting users with information that supports a wide range of needs, including education, research, intellectual inquiry, and recreational/entertainment interests.	0.705			
4	A commitment to provide the highest service levels to promote informed, connected, educated, and empowered communities is important to contribute to the public good.	0.704			
5	Equitable access to information regardless of technology, format, or delivery methods is one of the core values in my profession.	0.667			
6	I value the advancement and the future of my profession.	0.662			
7	I value various professional roles (e.g., educator, librarian, and information professional) that an LIS professional can hold.	0.658			
8	My profession provides unique and valuable services to society.	0.634			
9	Innovation and adaptability to meet evolving user needs and technological advancements in the field is integral to the LIS philosophy.	0.633			
10	I am knowledgeable of ethical responsibilities and professional standards relevant to my roles.	0.628			
11	I believe an LIS professional should value the importance of advocacy for the profession.	0.626			
12	Advocacy for libraries, information sources and services, and library users is emphasized in the LIS philosophy.	0.620			
13	I believe an LIS professional should value the importance of advocacy for the community that the person serves.	0.532			
<b>Factor 2: Engagement Behaviours</b>					
14	I follow up with theoretical, practical, and technical advancement in my profession by keeping up with literature (e.g., professional journals, books) in the field.	0.704			
15	I have contributed to research in LIS (e.g., by being interviewed, taking surveys, or conducting research).	0.689			
16	I engage in or seek voluntary service opportunities in my professional community (e.g., professional associations, interest networks, committees, or community service).	0.671			
17	I regularly communicate with a mentor/mentee who is interested in my/their professional development.	0.654			
18	I am an active member of my professional community (e.g., participating in conferences, workshops, or webinars) every year.	0.649			

19	I have presented/published to contribute to the field's knowledge base or share insights/experiences.	0.623
20	I seek feedback/consultation from professional peers/colleagues as a form of professional development.	0.601
21	I have membership(s) in LIS professional associations (e.g., local, regional, state, national, or international).	0.593
22	I advocate for my profession by participating in activities associated with legislation, law, or policy on behalf of the profession.	0.569
23	I participate in ongoing discussions with colleagues about identity and the vision of the profession.	0.562
<b>Factor 3: Knowledge of the Profession</b>		
24	I am familiar with accreditation organizations (e.g., American Library Association's [ALA] Committee on Education for accrediting educational programs in North America) and their standards for professional preparation.	0.685
25	I am knowledgeable of professional LIS publications (e.g., American Libraries) publication(s) relevant to my specialty area and their purposes in the profession.	0.674
26	I am knowledgeable about ethical guidelines (e.g., codes of ethics/standards of practice) in LIS.	0.656
27	I am familiar with laws and regulations (e.g., copyright, licensure) related to my profession.	0.653
28	I am familiar with professional LIS associations (e.g., international, national, regional, or local associations) and their roles in the profession.	0.616
29	I am informed about the important events and milestones (e.g., establishment of public libraries, introduction of standards and cataloguing systems, role of academic libraries, rise of digital libraries, and open access) in Library and Information Science (LIS) history.	0.605
30	I am familiar with the requirements to work as a professional (e.g., ALA-accredited MLIS degree, state-specific requirements) in my field.	0.593
31	I completed my professional training and standard education to perform my duties in my roles.	0.517
<b>Factor 4: Attitude</b>		
32	I am satisfied with my work and professional roles.	0.775
33	I recommend my profession to those who are searching for a new career related to helping professions.	0.712
34	I share my positive attitude towards the profession when working with people in other fields.	0.665
35	My profession fosters a mindset of collaboration, empathy, cultural humility, ethical conduct, and continuous learning.	0.637
36	I am confident that there will be positive outcomes of my work and services.	0.451 0.535
<b>Factor 5: Perceptions</b>		
37	I am confident in my ability to address stereotypes/misconceptions about my profession.	0.682

38	I regularly communicate with others about the roles of LIS professionals in society.	0.661
39	I would like to more involved in developing the public perception of the profession.	0.654
	Eigenvalues	9.586
	% of variance	17.348
	Cumulative %	17.348
		5.990
		2.185
		1.471
		1.363
		10.660
		7.630
		5.088
		40.091
		47.720
		52.808

**Table 1.** Factor loadings and communalities of exploratory factor analysis

The Cronbach's alpha statistic was estimated as 0.90 indicating a high level of internal consistency. In this analysis, the KMO measure was 0.90, suggesting enough of a satisfactory factor analysis to proceed, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity being statistically significant ( $p<0.001$ ). The results of an exploratory factor analysis on LIS professional identity scale items identified five factors which explained 52.8% of the total variance as shown in Table 1. The criteria recommended by Woo and Henfield (2015) were adopted to determine an appropriate factor structure for the instrument. Thirty-nine items consisting of five factors remained from the original instrument after eliminating eight items that did not meet the criteria.

## Discussions

The results suggest that the proposed instrument has high internal reliability and captures aspects of the LIS professional identity. Though professional identity in LIS domain was originally conceptualized as the product of six areas of an LIS professional's ability to perform, results of the exploratory factor analysis indicated that five areas or subscales can assess the LIS professional identity as shown in Table 1. The most central aspect in the scale was the *Professional Integrity* factor. This subscale comprised of 13 items from three areas: philosophy of the profession, professional roles and expertise, and attitude. Although these items were originally conceptualized to be part of three separate areas, they were grouped into a single factor. Since these items are related to professional values, ethics, and advocacy which are integral to how LIS professionals approach their responsibilities, this subscale was named as *Professional Integrity*. Internalization of professional values, ethics, and advocacy ensures that professionals consistently uphold the principles and responsibilities of their profession, informing their actions and decisions in a way that benefits society and advances the profession. This alignment cultivates a sense of purpose, belonging (Wenger, Mcdermott, et al., 2002), and commitment to their professional role (Adams et al., 2006; Pierson et al., 2020).

The second most important subscale emerged as the *Engagement Behaviours*. This area measures an LIS professional's capability to perform professional actions and activities, and socialization into the field. As expected, proposed items for this area were grouped into a single factor. Participation in professional associations and engagement with the community play a critical role in strengthening one's professional identity through interaction with their peers and community (Croxtion, 2015; Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Woo & Henfield, 2015).

The third factor emerged as *Knowledge of the Profession*. Items that were originally conceptualized in this area emerged under this factor with the addition of an item from the original professional roles and expertise area. Since the additional item was about professional training and preparation which aligned well with the area's focus on measuring an LIS professional's basic knowledge and understanding of the profession, the name of the area was retained. Respondents agreed that education and training play a critical role in building and strengthening one's professional identity (Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2016; Sare et al., 2012; Tan et al., 2017; Trede et al., 2012).

The fourth factor emerged from the analysis was the *Attitude*. Proposed items in this area were grouped into a single factor with an additional item from professional roles and expertise. The

added item was the professional's self confidence in their work and services. Since the original construct measures an LIS professional's perspective toward the profession and oneself and the added item was related to one's attitude towards their own work, the name of the subscale was retained. One's perspective towards the profession is influenced by a combination of factors including personal and social influences (Fraser-Arnott, 2019) including education and training, professional community, work experiences, and perception of the profession by others.

The last factor emerged from the data was the Perception. This area focused on capturing an LIS professional's perception of the profession (stereotypes/misconceptions) by others. Three items that were originally conceptualized in this area were grouped into a single factor. Perception of the profession and professionals by others is an important factor in informing LIS professional identity as professional often ground their identity in services that they provide (Fagan et al., 2021; Hicks, 2016).

## Limitations

The use of a non-probability sampling strategy to recruit participants limits generalizability of the results to a larger population. A confirmatory factor analysis needed to increase the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the instrument may have a North American bias in questions related to accreditation as such an external accreditation structure may apply to other parts of the world.

## Conclusion

The results of the study supported that proposed constructs were mostly consistent with LIS professional identity scale factors. Though there is extensive research in professional identity development of LIS professionals, this is a first step to developing a scale to measure LIS professional identity. Such a scale can be useful tool for LIS education and training programs to assess the impact of their activities on participants' professional identity development. LIS students and early career professionals may also use such a scale to assess their own preparation for the profession by identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

## About the author

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