Virtual guest speakers in fashion courses: Student experiences and expectations

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Introduction: This paper focuses on college student perceptions of virtual guest speakers. Virtual visits of industry professionals to university classes were not unheard of before the to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the resulting use of Zoom, WebEx, and other videoconferencing platforms during the pandemic has brought greater attention to their potentials and pitfalls. Even as universities return to more "normal" operations, virtual guest speaker visits will likely continue. The results described in this study can help educators better understand college students' attitudes towards the virtual visit experience.

Literature Review: The academic literature on virtual guest speakers is fairly recent and analyzes two kinds of guests: asynchronous and synchronous. Several articles detail the practice of inviting virtual guest speakers to serve as leaders or hosts of asynchronous online class discussion boards and listservs (Farruggio, 2009, 2011; Hemphill & Hemphill, 2011; Kumari, 2001; Ostorga & Farruggio, 2013; Powers, 1999). Song (2010) and Sage (2013) examined the logistics and student feedback for specific synchronous virtual guest speakers. The disciplines covered in the literature include civil engineering, teacher education, instructional technology, social work, and sociology. To date, there has been no academic research focused on fashion and apparel that concentrates on the use of virtual guest speakers.

Method: The main research question of this study was "What are student perceptions of virtual guest speakers?" The researchers asked students enrolled in their fashion courses to complete a qualitative Qualtrics survey that was taken prior to any guest speaker visits to their classes. The survey asked open-ended general questions about industry guest, as well as specific questions about virtual guests. For the survey, industry guest speakers were defined as professionals who work or have worked in the apparel or retail sectors, or a related field. Questions included: "How many experiences with virtual industry guest speakers (e.g., via Skype or Zoom) have you had?" and "Overall, how does a virtual guest speaker compare to an in-person guest speaker?"

The resulting data were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory method. The researchers coded the data separately and achieved an intercoder reliability rate of 94%, surpassing the levels suggested by Creswell (2007) and Saldaña (2013).

Results and Discussion: A total of 130 participants had experience with virtual guest speakers, with 47 enrolled in a mid-sized private Northeastern (NE) university and 83 in a large public Midwestern (MW) university. Within those 130 students, the majority were female (93.6% in the NE sample and 92.8% in the MW sample) and upper-level students (97.9% and 59%). Per student responses, all virtual visits were synchronous events. Data analysis revealed that the largest group in both samples favored in-person guest speakers, the second largest group

thought in-person and virtual guest speakers were the same, and the smallest group preferred virtual speakers. However, the size of these groups varied between samples; 53% of NE students preferred in-person speakers compared to 70% of MW students.

It is worth noting that 39% (n=32) of the MW respondents participated in the study before the COVID-19 pandemic and 61% (n=51) participated during. When comparing those sub-samples, those who preferred in-person to virtual guest speakers decreased from 78% to 67%, and the number who liked the two equally increased from 19% to 28%. Given the remote nature of learning during the pandemic, these changes could indicate students' greater familiarity with virtual modalities, but the results are likely influenced by the individual speakers, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions.[1]

Students across all samples preferred in-person guest speakers primarily because of how difficult they found it to *pay attention* when watching a guest speaker on a screen. Additionally, students preferred in-person guest speakers over virtual because of the sense of *personal connection* to the speaker that students lacked when watching a presentation through a screen. As Student BMW stated, "virtual ones can be less personal so you might not get as much out of it. It's harder to engage with the conversation when they aren't there in person." This desire for a personal connection, and the difficulty in achieving it virtually, was noted in all samples.

The samples further agreed on the importance of *asking questions*, but there was disagreement about the best method with which to accomplish this. Most who discussed this factor believed it was "easier to ask questions" in person (stated verbatim by five respondents). But others liked virtual speaker visits better "because when you have a question you can ask in the chat at any time" (Student BGMW).

Another interesting pattern emerged as well. In the pre-COVID MW sample, students voiced their frustration with *technical issues*; it was the second most common factor in comparing in-person and virtual guest speakers. However, this factor was only the fifth most common in the mid-COVID MW sample and ninth in the NE sample. The lack of concern over technical issues as the pandemic progressed is supported by Means et al. (2020), who found that, while problems with technology were prevalent during remote learning, students did not note them as a challenge. It appears that, after months of remote learning, students stopped considering technological problems as significant.

Conclusions: The results of this stage of a larger guest speaker study indicate that students prefer in-person guest speakers over virtual, but not by so wide a margin as may have been expected. Concern with technical issues has decreased since the COVID pandemic began, and students appreciate the chat feature inherent to most videoconferencing platforms, making virtual guest speakers a valuable option. However, students find it difficult to stay focused with virtual guest speakers, and they miss the personal connection they feel during in-person presentations. The purpose of this presentation is to offer this guidance to educators to aid them in their planning for guest speakers in the future, in either modality.

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[1] Of the NE sample, pre-COVID data was gathered from only one respondent who, like the majority of respondents, preferred in-person guest speakers.

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