

**Does Your PR Course Syllabus Excite, Intrigue, and Motivate Students to Learn? Syllabus Designs and Student Impressions of the PR Course and the Course Instructor**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how a format of a syllabus influences student motivation and engagement in a public relations course and students' impression of the course and course instructor. This study conducted focus group interviews and a lab experiment with undergraduate students at a large university in the Midwestern United States to examine how a format—design or length—of a PR course syllabus can affect student motivation, engagement, and impression of the course and course instructor. Results from the two focus group interviews were mixed, but students' preferences were geared toward the long version of the visually appealing syllabus. Findings from the experimental study show no effect of syllabus design on student engagement. However, the visually appealing syllabus had an effect on student motivation, and its short version produced positive impressions of the course and course instructor.

*Keywords:* course syllabus, syllabus designs, student engagement, impression on course and instructor, public relations education

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Scholars have paid special attention to how teachers can engage college students in the classroom and have called for more research to advance theory and best practices (Mazer & Hess, 2016). Instructional scholars have suggested that teachers be agile in creating and adapting course curriculum, especially the course syllabus, to engage college students in the classroom (Hosek & Titsworth, 2016). It is argued that the course syllabus can provide a first impression that may directly influence the interests and motivation of college students, possibly leading to their engagement throughout the semester (Ludy, Brackenburg, Folkins, Peet, & Langendorfer, 2016).

Despite a growing body of public relations education research, public relations scholars have not paid much attention to the importance of a course syllabus design and its implications or effects on student learning. Recently, public relations educators and professionals have recognized the importance of visual communication in public relations practice and education. Richard Edelman (personal communication, June 21, 2012), president and CEO of Edelman, called for “more informative visuals” and “visual representation of information” at the Edelman Academic Summit. Academics have also noted the importance of visual communication in PR education and student learning (Gallicano, Ekachai, & Freberg, 2014; Sisson & Mortensen, 2017). Hence, it is more appropriate for PR educators, in order to practice what they preach, to consider whether or not they should include visual elements in their course syllabus to interest, motivate, and engage students.

By conducting two studies—focus group interviews (Study I,  $N = 10$ ) and an experimental study (Study II,  $N = 81$ )—this study aims to examine the extent to which the design of a PR course syllabus could influence student motivation and engagement in a PR course, as well as students’ impressions of the course and course instructor.

### **Literature Review**

A syllabus is typically seen as a legal document or a contract between an instructor and the students concerning the overall plan of the course, course objectives, student learning outcomes, course expectations, class activities, assessments, and course policies (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014). If the syllabus contents are carefully crafted to create conceptual unity, then they can engage students (Canada, 2013). A syllabus can set a tone for the students and create first impressions on the first day of class that might inspire them to further engage for the rest of the semester (Ludy et al., 2016).

According to Fink (2012), a course syllabus plays a variety of functions, such as a communication mechanism, a planning tool for instructors, a course plan for students, a teaching tool or resource, an artifact for teacher evaluation, and evidence for accreditation. Many of these functions are more or less instructor-oriented. Therefore, more attention and research should be spent on how to construct and design a syllabus to motivate and engage students (Ludy et al., 2016). With this in mind, this study seeks to understand how syllabus design influences students' engagement, motivation, and course impression.

### **Student Engagement and Course Syllabus**

Student disengagement is one of the utmost concerns for educators and has been linked to deviant behavior at school, low academic achievement, and absences (Harris, 2008). To enhance student engagement, scholars have paid special attention to using visual images in the classroom. The findings indicate that using visual images in the classroom can stimulate active learning and enhance student engagement, appeal to students' attention (Liu & Beamer, 1997), increase their interests (Rankin & Hoas, 2001), and boost satisfaction and participation (Hagen, Edwards, & Brown, 1997), leading to pleasant classroom experiences (Ulbig, 2010). Visual images can also enhance the classroom experience

by helping students better understand abstract concepts (Levin, Anglin, & Carney, 1987). Results from an experimental study by Ulbig (2010) suggest that the use of visual images in class presentations imparted by an instructor increased student classroom engagement and student attitudes about the course in general.

Following similar rationales from such studies, other scholars have placed more efforts on how the format or design of the course syllabus (i.e., visually appealing or text-oriented syllabus) impact student interest and engagement. Palmer (2009) offered suggestions on how to use a course syllabus to set a tone of engagement by suggesting required contents in the syllabus: clear, specific learning outcomes; class format; student behavioral expectations; and professional behavioral expectations. Canada (2013) agreed, stating that a well-crafted syllabus can serve as an initial point of engagement for college students by using plain and direct language, friendliness, and humility to appeal to college students. Thus, the format can convey the instructor's style, voice, or enthusiasm to the students, leading to student engagement (Hockensmith, 1988).

To better grasp the effects of syllabi arrangement on student engagement, Ludy et al. (2016) conducted qualitative and quantitative surveys that compared student perceptions of a text-rich contractual syllabus and a graphic-rich engaging syllabus and found that a visual or graphic-rich syllabus can benefit instructors who seek to gain favorable initial course perceptions by students. Their study concludes that while students reacted positively to both designs, students judged the visual syllabus to be more appealing, comprehensive, and suitable to student engagement than the traditional contractual syllabus (i.e., text-oriented syllabus; Ludy et al., 2016). Applying previous research reviewed on student engagement and syllabus design, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Those who read a visually appealing syllabus will be more likely to engage in a PR course than those who read a text-oriented one.

### **Student Motivation and Syllabus**

It is imperative that instructors understand the underlying components of motivation as they pertain to student engagement (Oblinger, 2003). While similar to engagement, motivation remains its own separate variable (Appleton, Christensen, Kim, & Reschly, 2006). Motivation has been conceptualized as the direction, intensity, and quality of one's energies (Maehr & Meyer, 1997), answering the question of "why" for a given behavior (Appleton et al., 2006), belonging (Goodenow, 1993), and competence (Schunk, 1991). Simply put, motivation is tantamount to a student's ability to engage with the course information (Appleton et al., 2006).

According to Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) model of motivation, student motivation and engagement stem from the intrinsic knowledge of responsibility, which means that students must value the course syllabus to become motivated and engaged by it. Therefore, the combination of a student's value of the course and the perception of his or her likelihood to succeed leads to higher levels of motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). However, many students enter higher education with a lack of academic responsibility, which suggests the belief that instructors are responsible for students' learning outcomes and desires should be met (Buckner & Strawser, 2016).

With regard to the association between students' motivation and the course syllabus, Bishop (2006) argued that facilitating student ownership over course materials increases student creativity and motivation. Nilson (2010) also asserts, a syllabus might not only be "the road map for the term's foray into knowledge but also a travelogue

to pique students' interest in the expedition and its leader" (p. 33). In addition, scholars agreed that student-friendly explanations (e.g., explanation of course assignment and a list of campus resources) and warm and friendly language on the syllabus can increase student motivation to learn (Richmond, Slattery, Mitchell, & Morgan, 2016).

Recently, Ludy et al. (2016) also found that visually appealing syllabi highlighted with different colors and underlining or bold print leads students to be more motivated to learn the course than text-oriented or contractual-style syllabi. In this regard, scholars suggest that students' intrinsic motivation should be taken into consideration when crafting syllabi (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014). Based on the literature about student motivation, this study examines the extent to which the syllabus design (visual-oriented vs text-oriented) influences student motivation to learn in the PR course. The following hypothesis is posited:

H2: Those who read a visually appealing syllabus will be more likely to be motivated in the PR course than those who read a text-oriented one.

### **Impression of Course, Instructor and Syllabus**

Researchers have examined how the course syllabus affects students' impressions of the course, as well as impressions of the instructors (e.g., Jenkins, Bugeja, & Barber, 2014). Matejka and Kurke (1994) argued that the course syllabus conveys a first impression on the first day of class; it is a statement of preliminary work that instructors put into the course. Furthermore, Saville, Zinn, Brown, and Marchuk (2010) conducted an experimental study that compared a brief version of the course syllabus (e.g., a two-page document with general course information on course objectives, exams, and policies) with a more detailed version (e.g., a six-page document with additional information on course objectives, exams, and policies) and found that the detailed version resulted in higher student impressions of the instructor's effectiveness.

Grounded on Saville et al.'s (2010) findings, Jenkins et al. (2014) conducted an experimental study and found that including different kinds of syllabus information may influence initial impressions of the instructor. They suggested that "a lengthier or more detailed syllabus is not necessarily more beneficial; the addition of restrictive course policies is critical" (Jenkins et al., 2014, p. 133). In addition, Ludy et al. (2016) corroborated the previous research by finding that a more-detailed syllabus increased students' positive impressions of the instructor. However, they did not find impact of the visually engaging syllabus on the impression of the instructor. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis to provide further evidence about whether the syllabus design impacts students' impression of the course and the course instructor:

H3: Those who read a visually appealing syllabus will be more likely to have a positive impression of the course (H3a) and the course instructor (H3b) than those who read a text-oriented one.

### **Effects of Syllabus Length**

The length of a syllabus (i.e., how much information should be included) has received much attention from scholars (Becker & Calhoun, 1999; Saville et al., 2010). In general, scholars agree that a detailed syllabus is better than a brief one because the detailed syllabus provides students with important course information and influences students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness (Fink, 2012; Richmond et al., 2016). In particular, a detailed syllabus could communicate that a teacher cares about his or her students—one quality of effective teachers (Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002)—but a less-detailed syllabus could lead students to have a negative perception that a teacher is not interested in students' learning or is not approachable (McKeachie, 2002). Subsequent studies also indicate that a lengthier syllabus can influence the positive impressions of instructor effectiveness (e.g., approachable, creative, effective communicator, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and

prepared; Jenkins et al., 2014; Ludy et al., 2016). Specifically, Saville et al. (2010) suggested that a detailed syllabus serves a communicative function, providing students with information about a course, as well as a motivating function, encouraging students to do well in the course.

Despite the benefits of having a detailed syllabus, other research indicates that students tend to either ignore or have difficulty remembering a great portion of syllabi (Smith & Razzouk, 1993; Thompson, 2007) and tend to get bogged down in details (Leeds, 1992). Fornaciari and Dean (2014) also argued that the length of andragogy syllabi has “shifted from long contractually detailed to short[er] and more flexibly constructed” to optimize adaptability for student learning (pp. 712-713). Thus, there has been mixed evidence in previous studies.

Moreover, there is no study that examined the possible moderating role of syllabus length on the effects of a visually appealing syllabus. To fill the research gap, this study proposes the following research questions regarding main and interaction effects of syllabus design and length on student engagement, motivation, and impression:

RQ 1: How will the length of a syllabus affect student engagement in the PR course?

RQ 2: How will the length of a syllabus affect student motivation in the PR course?

RQ 3: How will the length of a syllabus affect student impressions of the course (RQ3a) and the course instructor (RQ3b) in the PR course?

RQ 4: How will the length of a syllabus moderate the effect of syllabus design on students' engagement in the PR course?

RQ 5: How will the length of a syllabus moderate the effect of syllabus design on students' motivation in the PR course?

RQ 6: How will the length of a syllabus moderate the effect of syllabus design on students' impression of the course (RQ6a) and



the course instructor (RQ6b) in the PR course?

### **Methods and Results**

To test the hypotheses and research questions above, two studies—two focus group interviews (Study I: FGIs) and one experimental study (Study II)—were conducted. One public relations elective course was chosen for the course syllabus because the course has a large enrollment, and thus, more participants could be recruited. In addition, since it is an elective course, the psychological pressure required to take the course for graduation can be controlled. The designs of the course syllabus with recommended features were crafted based on previous research, and two different design formats—contractual (i.e., text-oriented) and engaging (i.e., visually-appealing)—were used (e.g., Ludy et al., 2016).

#### **Study I – Focus Group Interviews (FGIs)**

##### **FGIs Methods**

##### **Procedures**

Researchers often rely on focus groups to collect data from multiple individuals simultaneously to discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts on certain issues. Focus groups are also used to explore issues before a questionnaire for a quantitative research study is developed (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Therefore, the purposes of the focus group interviews (FGIs) in this study were (1) to obtain detailed information about individual and group perceptions and opinions about the syllabus and (2) develop the stimuli for an experimental study (Study II). Researchers recruited participants using announcements in college courses, flyers, and social media posts.

After agreeing on the consent form about the purpose, procedures, statement of privacy, and benefits, students participating in the focus group sessions received \$15 gift cards as compensation. A trained moderator conducted both focus groups. Five participants were recruited for each FGI session ( $N=10$ ). The FGI sessions took place in a quiet and

comfortable room. Complimentary beverages and snacks were provided.

Two FGI sessions were conducted and voice-recorded with students enrolled in communication courses related to strategic communication (e.g., advertising and public relations) at a large university in the Midwestern United States. The information of the course instructor, especially the name, was hypothetically created based on random selection from the list of popular names over the last 100 years, provided by The United States Social Security Administration ([www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov)), in order to avoid the effects of previous experiences or relationships with the actual instructors. Other information on the syllabus (e.g., course goal, objectives, and policies) was presented the same as it was in the actual class.

After completing a demographic questionnaire, participants were asked what contents or information they typically looked for in a syllabus and how many times a semester they would refer back to that syllabus. They were then presented with four different versions of the International Advertising and Public Relations syllabus: short and long versions of text-oriented syllabi, and short and long versions of visually appealing syllabi. The short version of text-oriented and visually appealing design contained four pages that included general course information (i.e., description, instructor name and contact information, and office hours), course goals, learning objectives, required readings/textbooks, course requirements (names of assignments and grade scales), and a course schedule. The eight-page long version of the text-oriented and visually appealing syllabi added the following parts to the short version: detailed assignment descriptions, deadlines, and course policies (i.e., assignment submission, professionalism, attendance, communication, academic integrity and other campus resources such as the counseling center and disability center). The text-oriented version was crafted only using black and white colors. For the visually appealing versions, images relating to the course and

assignments were highlighted with different colors and styled with bold and underlined lettering based on previous research (Ludy et al., 2016). The first page of each design type is provided in the appendices.

Each participant received the four versions of the syllabus in random order of length and design. After reviewing all four versions, students answered questions about their impression or reaction towards the different designs, their motivation to take the course, their levels of interest and engagement in the course based on each design, their preference among the four designs, and their impression of each course instructor.

### **FGIs Results**

**Participants.** Among the total participants ( $N = 10$ ), there were six females. The average age was 21.9 ( $SD = 2.18$ ). The majority of participants were white (60%,  $n = 6$ ), followed by Asian or Asian American (30%,  $n = 3$ ), and Black or African-American (10%,  $n = 1$ ). Regarding class standing, seven students (70%,  $n = 7$ ) were seniors, two were sophomores (20%,  $n = 2$ ), and one was a graduate student (10%,  $n = 1$ ). Most of them were majoring or minoring in public relations and advertising or communication-related areas (e.g., media studies) (70%,  $n = 7$ ), and others were sociology (10%,  $n = 1$ ) and business (20%,  $n = 2$ ) majors.

**Analysis.** The focus group interviews were transcribed, yielding 45 pages of typed, double-spaced transcripts. The transcriptions did not include observational or non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, speech tones, pronunciation, or pauses reflected in the interviews. This analysis relied on a constant comparative method to interpret the transcribed interview texts for key concepts or themes that emerged from the questions posed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Attempts were made to find key concepts for syllabus design and length preferences, students' motivation and engagement in the course, and their impressions of the

course and instructor.

**General results on syllabus.** Students said they have received syllabi with text-oriented designs in most courses they have taken, many with more than five pages. Some mentioned that the visual syllabi mostly came from lower-level courses, while the text-oriented syllabi were from upper-level classes.

When asked what students looked for in the syllabus, most agreed that they looked for the course description, weekly calendars, due dates, textbook information, exams, quizzes, grading breakdowns, attendance policies, class assignments, and papers, if any.

On the first day of class when most of the class time was spent on the syllabus, students said they expected instructors to explain all class expectations. As one mentioned, “I don’t think I actually go read the syllabus besides the class schedule or reference to the assignments. I like having the expectations explained to me by the teacher on the first day.” After the first day of class, students said they would refer back to the syllabus (frequently for some students) when they needed to check on weekly class activities, assignments, and due dates.

**Design and length preferences.** Most participants preferred the visual design, and some liked the long version over the short one. They commented that the long syllabus with all the information is more “professional” and “looked important.” Although they would keep the syllabus length of eight pages, they wanted the most important parts of the syllabus (such as assignments, class projects, or grading policy) to be on the first few pages. They would not read all pages at first but would know all of the information was there in the long syllabus. One student commented on the visual design of the syllabus: “I like this one because it’s colorful. If you got lots of these on the table, you can find that easier. And I like that the highlights and the words are a little bit bigger than the text one.”

When asked whether they would like to get a short syllabus with additional handouts on assignments provided later, students said they prefer to have an “all-in-one” syllabus with detailed descriptions of all assignments over getting separate handouts. Students pointed out: “That (separate handout) is going to be lost or be thrown out. I’m going to lose it anyway” and “I like keeping the length, and I like keeping the project descriptions and stuff like that in the syllabus because it’s easy to reference.” Another student said:

Here is the thing about the long one: it tells you all the stuff that you have to do.... When I was doing the group project, I would literally have the syllabus on half of my computer screen, so I know I was going through all the components and stuff.

An additional student agreed and explained the reasons for the preference:

I like the long one more. The short one doesn’t have all the information. The short version has all the links, but if you type in all the links, it’s more of a pain to do than if you have the information written in front of you already.

But a few students in both focus group sessions expressed that the long version of the text-oriented syllabus “stressed me out,” “is cluttered,” and is “so much information.” These students prefer a concise version with links to additional information, such as university policies that can be found on a website.

**Motivation and engagement.** Most students in both sessions commented that, while the visual design of the syllabus looked appealing and interesting, their motivation to learn and engage in class is not based on the syllabus design only. They voiced that it depends on the teacher’s attitude and enthusiasm on the first day of class. Student feedback on this was represented by the following quotes:

- “It’s about the professor’s personality, course contents, and a lot of things. Sometimes they just give you very simple, not so

appealing syllabus, but the class is amazing.”

- “I don’t think my motivation in the class is going to be based on the syllabus. If the teacher passes the syllabus and was super-excited, then I’ll probably be motivated to come to the class.”

But one student differed and perceived that the visually-appealing syllabus reflected the instructor’s efforts to motivate students. She explained, “They want to make sure you are going to learn something out of the class. And they kind of took the time, so you should take the time to care for the class too.”

**Impression of the course and the instructor.** Students mentioned that the visual design of the syllabus indicated that the instructor spent time and effort on the syllabus, meaning they care and want students to be successful. Some said that teachers who hand out the visual syllabus are probably more creative and “trying to get a different perspective.” One student remarked: “If the professor gives me a syllabus like this (visual), I’m like, ‘Oh, we’re going to be friends. We will have so much fun this semester.’”

One student noted that she preferred either of the visual designs—four or eight pages—because they indicated that the instructor put time and effort into creating the syllabus.

I think the visually appealing one shows that the professor took time and cares about your success in the class...I mean if I’m handed the 4-page black and white, no pictures versus this one and it’s the same class just taught by a different professor, I’m taking this professor over this one because it shows that they actually care about students.

Some students further noted that the short version of the text-heavy syllabus with no pictures could be interpreted that the teacher was uncaring. One student commented: “They had to hand you a syllabus, this

is what you get. Figure it out. Got a problem, let me know. Have a nice day.”

On the other hand, the text-oriented syllabus might convey the seriousness of the course for some students. One student noted that the text-only syllabus made her feel like “I need to work. This teacher means business, and you don’t want to mess around in this class.” For her, the visual designs with colors and graphics made her think that she can “slack off a little bit” and it would be all right to “get away with missing a few assignments.”

In sum, the results from the two focus group interviews showed that most students liked the visually appealing syllabus. However, they did not provide a clear answer in terms of the length of the syllabus and the effect on students’ engagement and motivation in the course. At any rate, most students reported positive impressions of the course and the course instructor when they read the visually appealing syllabus, regardless of the length. To find clearer results with reliable statistical significance, we conducted further analysis through an experimental study.

### **Study II – Experimental Study**

After conducting two FGIs, an experimental study was conducted with the students who did not participate in the FGIs. All sessions of the experimental study took place in a lab setting, equipped with tables and computers that allowed students to read the printed syllabus and answer the questions online.

#### **Experimental Study Methods**

**Participants.** Through announcements in college courses, e-mail, flyers, and social media posts, 83 individuals were recruited from undergraduate communication courses at a large university in the Midwestern United States. Deleting two cases with missing data resulted in a total of 81 participants for data analysis ( $N = 81$ ). All subjects participated in the experimental study voluntarily and received \$10 gift

cards as compensation. Ages ranged from 18 to 31 years old, with an average age of 20.83 ( $SD = 2.41$ ). Nearly 90% ( $n = 73$ ) were female, and 10% ( $n = 8$ ) were male. The majority of participants (82.7%,  $n = 67$ ) were White, 7.4% ( $n = 6$ ) were Hispanic/Latino, 6.2% ( $n = 5$ ) were Asian/Asian-American, and 3.7% ( $n = 3$ ) were other races (e.g., Native American). The senior students were dominant (51.8%,  $n = 42$ ), followed by sophomores (19.8%,  $n = 16$ ), juniors (18.5%,  $n = 15$ ), and freshmen (9.9%,  $n = 8$ ).

**Procedures.** This study used a 2 (design: text-oriented or visually appealing) x 2 (length: short or long) between-subjects experimental design. The same stimuli from the FGIs were used in the experimental study because all participants in the two FGIs confirmed syllabus contents, design, and length in terms of ecological validity.

The questionnaire for the experimental study was created on Qualtrics. After signing a consent form, student participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, produced by a cross combination of syllabus design (text-oriented or visually appealing) and syllabus length (short or long). According to each condition, a printed version of a syllabus, as a stimulus, was provided for the participants. After reading each type of syllabus, the participants answered questions measuring dependent variables: motivation, engagement, and impression of the course instructor.

A pre-test ( $N = 21$ ) was conducted to check the procedure (e.g., stimulus manipulation and randomization) and other issues (e.g., clarity of questions), and there was no issue in the pre-test. The main test ( $N = 81$ ) was conducted by the same procedure confirmed in the pre-test.

**Measures.** Multiple items in the experimental study were used for each variable and measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very much). All items for main variables were adopted from previous research.

The 17-item instrument to measure student engagement is from



Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002), consisting of six items related to vigor (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ) (e.g., after reading the syllabus, I would feel strong and vigorous when I am studying or going to this class), five items related to dedication ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) (e.g., after reading the syllabus, my studies in this class would inspire me), and six items about absorption ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ) (e.g., after reading the syllabus, I feel happy when I am intensely studying for this class). All dimensions were combined into one construct for engagement.

Motivation was measured by one item (i.e., how likely the syllabus motivates student interest in the course), adopted from Ludy et al. (2016).

Student impression was measured in two aspects—impression of the course syllabus and impression of the course instructor. Adapting Saville et al.'s (2010) measures for Syllabus Detail and Students' Perceptions of Teacher Effectiveness, the impression of the course syllabus was measured with two items ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ; the syllabus is easy to read and understand, and the syllabus is easy to navigate and find information). The impression of the course instructor was assessed by the students' feelings about the instructor's characteristics and expertise (i.e., teacher effectiveness) based on the syllabus (Ludy et al., 2016). Six items (e.g., the course instructor is enthusiastic) measuring the impression of the instructor's characteristics ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and four items (e.g., the course instructor is knowledgeable) measuring the impression of instructor expertise ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) were used in this study.

Demographic information, including gender, race, major, and school year (class identification), were gathered at the end of the experiment.

### **Experimental Study Results**

**Manipulation checks.** Randomization was successful as all conditions were balanced. Each group was almost an equal size, and demographics in each group (e.g., major, race, and school standing) were

all balanced without any significant differences at 0.05 ( $p > 0.05$ ). The manipulation of syllabus design was successful, as intended. To check the manipulation of design and length, the following question was used: “the syllabus provides detailed explanation of obligations for both instructor and student in text-rich design with black and white,” and participants were asked to provide an answer on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The independent samples T-test revealed that there was a significant difference in the mean scores for the text-oriented version ( $M = 6.39$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and visually appealing syllabus ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ) conditions,  $t(79) = 5.38$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . The manipulation for length was checked through the independent samples T-test. The result demonstrated that those who received the long version ( $M = 5.80$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) were more likely to report “the detailed explanation of obligations for both instructor and student” (i.e., course policy) than others who received the short version ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ),  $t(79) = 2.13$ ,  $p = 0.03$ .

For the length manipulation check, participants were also asked to provide answers to true or false questions about one of the course policies (i.e., late assignments are accepted without any penalty), which was included only in the long version. Those who received the long version ( $n = 76$ , 93.8%) were more likely to answer true than others who read the short version ( $n = 5$ , 6.2%). There was significant difference between two groups,  $t(1) = 5.20$ ,  $p = 0.02$ . Overall, the analyses demonstrated that participants perceived different length and design among conditions as expected.

**Testing hypothesis.** H1 hypothesized that a visually appealing-syllabus would have a more positive effect on student engagement, and RQ1 and RQ4 asked how the length of a syllabus would affect or moderate the effect of syllabus design on student engagement in a PR course. To test H1 and answer RQ1 and RQ4, a two-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run by using SPSS Statistics 24 for

the different effects of syllabus design and length on engagement. For the engagement, significant main and interaction effects were not found. Differences of visually appealing and text-oriented design ( $F(1, 77) = 0.09, p = 0.77, \eta^2 = 0.00$ ), short and long length ( $F(1, 77) = 0.58, p = 0.48, \eta^2 = 0.00$ ), and an interaction term of design\*length ( $F(1, 77) = 0.84, p = 0.36, \eta^2 = 0.00$ ) did not reach statistical significance in terms of engagement in the course. Therefore, H1 (a more positive effect of a visually appealing-syllabus on student engagement) was not supported.

For the student motivation by different syllabus design and length, H2 predicted that a visually appealing syllabus would have a more positive effect, and RQ2 and RQ5 asked how the length of syllabus would affect the motivation or moderate the effect of syllabus design. ANOVA was conducted again and revealed that there was a significant difference only for design,  $F(1, 77) = 8.29, p = 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.10$ . Participants who received the visually appealing design ( $M = 4.93, SE = 0.30$ ) were more likely to be motivated in the course than others who received the text-oriented design ( $M = 3.70, SE = 0.30$ ). Therefore, H2 (a more positive effect of a visually appealing syllabus on student motivation) was supported. There was neither a main effect for length nor interaction effect of length and design for student motivation.

Regarding the impressions of the course, H3a suggested that a visually appealing syllabus would have a more positive effect, and RQ3a and RQ6a asked how the length of a syllabus would affect the impression of the course or moderate the effect of a syllabus design. ANOVA yielded that there was a significant difference only for length,  $F(1, 77) = 4.65, p = 0.03, \eta^2 = 0.06$ . The shorter syllabus ( $M = 5.87, SE = 0.27$ ) was more positively associated with impressions of the course syllabus than the longer one ( $M = 5.01, SE = 0.27$ ). Hence, H3a (more positive effect of a visually appealing syllabus on the impression of the course) was

supported.

For the impressions of the course instructor, H3b suggested that a visually appealing syllabus would have a more positive effect, and RQ3b and RQ6b asked how the length of a syllabus would affect the impression of the course instructor or moderate the effect of a syllabus design on the impression of the instructor in a PR course. To test H3b and answer RQ3b and RQ6b, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted because there were multiple dependent variables that were conceptually correlated. Impressions of instructor characteristics and expertise were measured separately. When there is more than one dependent variable, a MANOVA is preferred over a series of ANOVAs because a MANOVA has an advantage of “the protection against inflated Type 1 errors” caused by conducting multiple ANOVAs independently (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013, p. 246). Prior to conducting a MANOVA test, a Pearson correlation ( $r$ ) analysis among the variables for the impression with two factors ( $r = 0.50, p < .001$ ) was conducted to justify the use of a MANOVA analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Preliminary assumption testing was conducted to check for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outlier, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and multicollinearity, with no serious violations noted.

There were the main effects, as well as interaction effect with statistical significance. Specifically, significant differences were found between text-oriented and visually appealing designs,  $F(2, 76) = 13.65, p = 0.00$ ; Wilks' Lambda ( $\lambda$ ) = 0.74, Partial Eta Squared ( $\eta^2$ ) = 0.26, between short and long lengths,  $F(2, 76) = 6.98, p = 0.00$ ;  $\lambda = 0.84, \eta^2 = 0.16$ , and the interaction term of design and length,  $F(2, 76) = 8.13, p = 0.00$ ;  $\lambda = 0.82, \eta^2 = 0.18$ , for the combined impressions of the course instructor.

When the results for the dependent variables, impressions for the course instructor characteristics and expertise were considered

separately, significant differences were found only for impressions of the characteristics of design:  $F(1, 77) = 13.46, p = 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.15$ , and length:  $F(1, 77) = 7.65, p = 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.90$ . There was no significant difference found for the impressions of the course instructor expertise. The mean scores indicated that those who read the visually appealing syllabus were more likely to have a positive impression of instructor characteristics ( $M = 5.13, SE = 0.18$ ) than those who read the text-oriented syllabus ( $M = 4.20, SD = 0.18$ ). Also, those who read the short version of the syllabus were more likely to perceive instructor characteristics positively ( $M = 5.00, SD = 0.18$ ) than those who read the long version of the syllabus ( $M = 4.31, SD = 0.18$ ). Thus, H3b (more positive effect of a visually appealing-syllabus on the impression of the course instructor) was partially supported.

Regarding RQ6b, in addition, the interaction effect of design and length was found only in the impression of instructor characteristics,  $F(1, 77) = 8.75, p = 0.00, \eta^2 = 0.10$ . Those who read the visually appealing syllabus were more likely to have a positive impression of the instructor characteristics when they read the short version ( $M = 5.85, SD = 0.26$ ) than when they had long version ( $M = 4.40, SD = 0.26$ ). Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean differences ( $M = 5.85$  and  $M = 4.40$ ) of visually appealing syllabi were significantly different at the significance level of 0.01 ( $p = 0.004$ ). However, the mean differences of those who read text-oriented syllabi were not significantly different regardless of the length differences—the short version ( $M = 4.22, SD = 0.25$ ) or the long version ( $M = 4.17, SD = 0.26$ ) (See Figure 1).

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to examine the extent to which a format or a design of a PR course syllabus influences student engagement and motivation for the course and the impressions of the course and the course instructor. Two studies—focus group interviews and an experimental study—revealed that (1) the design and length of a syllabus did not

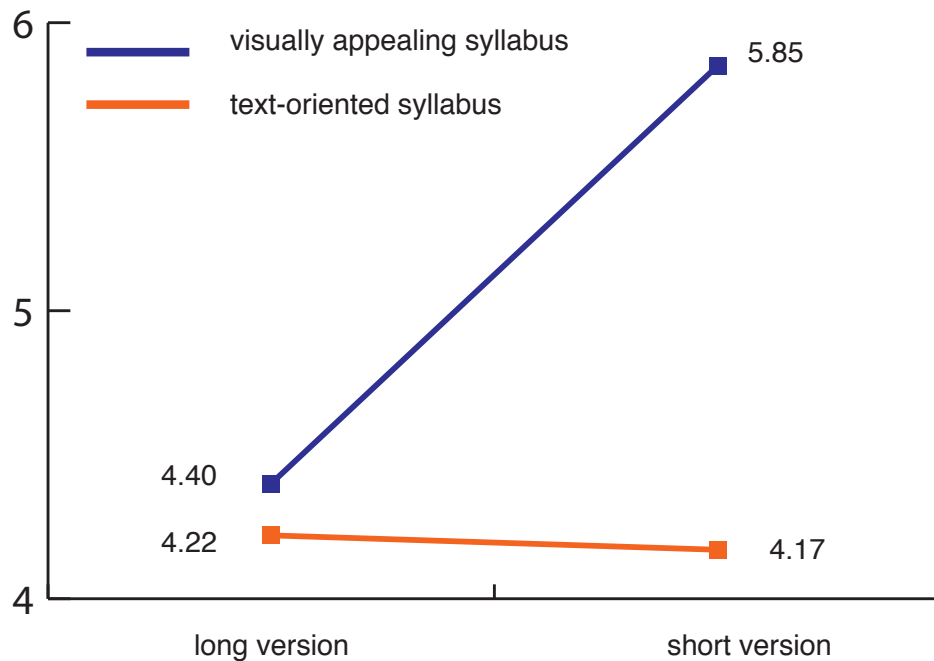


Figure 1. Interaction effect for design  $\times$  length for the student impression of the course instructor characteristics.

make any difference for student engagement in the course, (2) a visually appealing design made a difference for motivation in the course, and 3) a visually appealing syllabus mattered for the course impression and the course instructor.

In both studies, students preferred visually appealing syllabi with different elements of design. They found the visually appealing syllabi to be more interesting but not significantly engaging. Focus group participants preferred a visual design, and some liked the long version over the short one. However, the design of the syllabus did not necessarily motivate them to learn or engage in the class. This finding is similar to a result in the experimental study, which indicates that student engagement in the course was not influenced by differences of syllabus design, length,

or the interaction of two independent variables. It could be plausible that the participants may be highly engaged already in the course itself, demonstrated by the high mean scores across independent variables (above 4 on a 7-point Likert-type scale). Also, the finding could be caused by consistent tone and style in the syllabus languages across the different designs that might generate different psychological or emotional factors (e.g., students' sense of belonging or emotional climate), which can be influential for engagement (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

In the experiment, however, the visually appealing syllabus was positive with statistical significance for student motivation in the course, consistent with findings from FGIs in this study. The findings are also in line with previous research that accounts for the positive effect of visualized contents in students' classroom experience (e.g., Ulbig, 2010), as well as student motivation in the course (e.g., Ludy et al., 2016). Not surprisingly, the results indicated that the course instructor can stimulate more active learning from students through visual images or contents of the course syllabus. However, this result could be limited to the general motivation for the course due to a single-item measurement. Further research should be conducted to provide more fruitful results indicating more detailed motivations related to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

Regarding students' impressions of the course, there were inconsistent results across the two studies: the FGIs and the experiment. The participants from the focus groups also preferred a long version because they wanted complete, step-by-step instructions of assignments in the syllabus. However, the results of the experimental study demonstrated that students who read a short syllabus would be likely to think that the syllabus is easy to read and understand, as well as to navigate and to find information. In addition, the experimental study found that the shorter syllabus is better for positive characteristics of the course instructor such

as being approachable, personable, creative, enthusiastic, and open-minded.

This result indicates that additional information for the longer version, such as assignment description with deadlines, course policies, and other campus resource information (e.g., counseling and disability center), is not beneficial for positive impressions of the course, as well as the course instructor. In this regard, this study extends the previous research about preferences for a lengthier or more detailed syllabus regarding course effectiveness (e.g., Ludy et al., 2016). Contrasting with the findings from the previous research, this study suggests that the syllabus is sufficient for itself and course instructor effectiveness if it contains general information about the course, textbook, categorized assignments with grade scale, and course schedule. Also, this could be added into the empirical evidence for how flexible syllabus features or contents should be included in support of researchers who advocate for the shorter and flexible construction for the syllabus (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014).

This study also found that the visually appealing syllabus can generate positive impressions of the course instructor, compared to the text-oriented one. Based on the focus group interviews, students perceived the instructor who designed a visually appealing syllabus to be more creative and caring. In the experimental study, the positive characteristics of the instructor were also influenced by length, particularly short—a result of an interaction of length and design. Especially, the effect of the visually appealing syllabus on the impressions of the course instructor became stronger when students read the short version, as the post-hoc test revealed (See Figure 1). This result demonstrates how important a visually appealing syllabus is for perceived course instructor effectiveness—that is, design matters in an effective syllabus. The plausible explanation for the finding is that current students have more familiarity and enjoyment



of being provided with a variety of visualized inputs (Phillips & Trainor, 2014).

### **Implications**

As a pragmatic implication, the results provide insight into the importance of making syllabi a well-crafted document by using visually appealing contents. As some participants addressed in the FGIs, visualized content is not limited to visual images but can be achieved by underlining or highlighting text with different colors or bolded letters. By doing so, PR course instructors can benefit from the positive impressions of their course, as well as themselves, as the first impression may be weighted more heavily than other sources of information (e.g., instructor reputation; Buchert, Laws, Apperson, & Bregman, 2008). More importantly, the results for the length (i.e., a short syllabus) indicate the elevated importance of the type of information that is included.

Furthermore, these results provide meaningful insight into how course instructors build and develop relational rapport with their students through the course syllabus. Relational rapport with the course instructors is of paramount importance to college students (Morreale & Staley, 2016). It can increase students' class participation, affective learning, and satisfaction with the course (Frisby & Myers, 2008). By creating a short, visually appealing syllabus, instructors can build relational rapport with students and expect positive results subsequently. Thus, the results in this study provide the need for the course instructors' efforts on the syllabus for teaching effectiveness, as a well-designed syllabus can help them increase student learning (Monaco & Martin, 2007).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are some limitations that should be addressed for future research. Both studies, the FGIs and the experimental study, relied on a convenience sample as the researchers recruited students based on availability at a Midwestern university. Although this nonprobability

sample was cost-effective and efficient for this study, more studies are needed to replicate and generalize the results. In addition, the PR course selected (International Advertising and Public Relations) may have contents or topics that students are already interested in, which could have resulted in high scores on their likelihood to engage, regardless of the design and length. Different PR courses should be used in future research. Prior attitudes for the course should also be controlled in future research. With today's increasing use of online syllabi on the web, a comparison between a printed, visually oriented syllabus and an online web version should also be explored in future research.

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## Appendix A

### The First Page Example for Text-Oriented Syllabus Used in the Study

#### **ADPR 4600 International Advertising and Public Relations**

Spring 2017, Section 101  
Tu/Th: 09:30 a.m. ~ 10:45 a.m.

Professor: Jacob Miller, Ph.D.  
Office: Johnston Hall 413  
Phone: 414-288-0826  
Email: [Jacob.miller@marquette.edu](mailto:Jacob.miller@marquette.edu)  
Office hours: 1:30 ~ 3:00 p.m.  
on Monday & Wednesday

A career in advertising or public relations requires imagination, dedication and a willingness to embrace the challenges of ever-more diverse marketplace. My objective is to help each of you develop a thirst for and knowledge about international brands, people and the cultures in which people and brands live. In this course you will be asked to stretch critically and intellectually, often stepping outside your comfort zone.

#### **COURSE GOAL**

This course is designed to help you develop knowledge and skills related to strategic communications with global audiences. The course addresses a variety of topics including the role of culture in strategic communication, differences in styles of communication across groups, and the role brands play in this process. The course explores culture as it applies to integrated marketing communication (advertising), public relations, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and public diplomacy.

#### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this semester, students will learn to:

- Acquire knowledge related to the role of culture in communication, differences in styles of communication across groups, and the role brands play in this process.
- Gain knowledge about the ever-increasing development of the field across the world and the opportunities it offers, especially in governmental, transnational business, NGOs, and agencies.
- Evaluate a range of characteristics across various international audiences and be able to determine effective ways to strategically communicate with these audiences.
- Increase awareness of the different types of private, public, for-profit, non-profit, and activist organizations that use public relations strategies in a global arena.
- Understand multiculturalism and diversity and socially responsible ways of communicating with international audiences that respects the cultural and economic needs.

#### **Required Reading / Textbook:**

- Mueller, B. (2010). *Dynamics of international advertising: Theoretical and practical perspectives* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Peter Lang Inc.
- Freitag, A. & Stokes, A. (2009). *Global public relations: Spanning borders, spanning cultures*. New York: Routledge.

*Other reading assignments (e.g., journal articles, book chapters) will be assigned throughout the semester. All additional readings are posted on D2L. You will be expected to read, in advance, all readings assigned for each class meeting. This course is highly discussion-based, and therefore the expectation is that you will read and prepare for each meeting so you can fully participate in class.*




## Appendix B

### The First Page Example for Visually Appealing Syllabus Used in the Study

**ADPR 4600**  
**International  
Advertising and  
Public Relations**  
Spring 2017, Section 101  
Tu/Th: 09:30 a.m. ~ 10:45 a.m.

Professor: Jacob Miller, Ph.D.  
Office: Johnston Hall 413  
Phone: 414-288-0826  
Email: [Jacob.miller@marquette.edu](mailto:Jacob.miller@marquette.edu)

Office hours: 1:30 ~ 3:00 p.m.  
on Monday & Wednesday



A career in advertising or public relations requires imagination, dedication and a willingness to embrace the challenges of ever-more diverse marketplace. My objective is to help each of you develop a thirst for and knowledge about international brands, people and the cultures in which people and brands live. In this course you will be asked to stretch critically and intellectually, often stepping outside your comfort zone.

#### COURSE GOAL

This course is designed to help you develop knowledge and skills related to strategic communications with global audiences. The course addresses a variety of topics including the role of culture in strategic communication, differences in styles of communication across groups, and the role brands play in this process. The course explores culture as it applies to integrated marketing communication (advertising), public relations, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and public diplomacy.

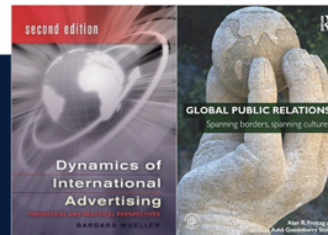
#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this semester, students will learn to:

- Acquire knowledge related to the role of culture in communication, differences in styles of communication across groups, and the role brands play in this process.
- Gain knowledge about the ever-increasing development of the field across the world and the opportunities it offers, especially in governmental, transnational business, NGOs, and agencies.
- Evaluate a range of characteristics across various international audiences and be able to determine effective ways to strategically communicate with these audiences.
- Increase awareness of the different types of private, public, for-profit, non-profit, and activist organizations that use public relations strategies in a global arena.
- Understand multiculturalism and diversity and socially responsible ways of communicating with international audiences that respects the cultural and economic needs.

#### Required Reading / Textbook:

- Mueller, B. (2010). *Dynamics of international advertising: Theoretical and practical perspectives* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Peter Lang Inc.
- Freitag, A. & Stokes, A. (2009). *Global public relations: Spanning borders, spanning cultures*. New York: Routledge.



*Other reading assignments (e.g., journal articles, book chapters) will be assigned throughout the semester. All additional readings are posted on D2L. You will be expected to read, in advance, all readings assigned for each class meeting. This course is highly discussion-based, and therefore the expectation is that you will read and prepare for each meeting so you can fully participate in class.*