

Student Perceptions of Guest Speakers in Strategic Communication Courses

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ABSTRACT

Using linkage beliefs theory, focus group and survey methods, we conducted a systematic investigation to understand students' perceptions of having guest speakers in strategic communication courses. Our findings suggest that students prefer relatable speakers from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and alumni and recent graduates are two of the most preferred types of guest speakers. Students prefer to hear about networking tips, career advice and speaker's professional background and journeys. Course-tied topics are less preferable than career-related topics. Visual aids are preferred in guest presentations. Career-related benefits are perceived to have more value than academic and classroom learning benefits. The preferred number of guest speakers in a semester is three.

KEYWORDS: Public relations, advertising, strategic communication, guest speakers

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In many college classrooms, across many disciplines, guest speakers have become a familiar figure and teaching tool. Past research shows that if utilized correctly, they can be a valuable educational asset, particularly in disciplines that emphasize practical experience and hands-on skills. But that outcome is by no means guaranteed, depending upon the quality of guest talks.

The idea that such speakers are a welcome addition to a class is well documented. Students view speakers as someone who can teach them more about “real life” experience in the field of their choice and serve as a potentially valuable professional connection who can help them succeed in that field (Byrd et al., 1989; Kamoun & Selim, 2007; Merle & Craig, 2017; Metrejean et al., 2002; Wortman, 1992; Zou et al., 2019). A recent review of 18 studies across 13 disciplines suggests that having guest speakers enhances pedagogy by improving teaching outcomes and leads to a mutually beneficial relationship for the students, professors, and speakers (Zou et al., 2019). In some cases, the speakers themselves may view their appearance in the classroom as a potentially valuable recruiting trip to scout for young talent who could be an asset to their firms. Instructors see the speakers as bringing perspectives and knowledge to the subject that the instructor may not have, and perhaps on a less lofty note, as a way to fill valuable class time and provide a needed break (McCleary & Weaver, 2008). However, the mere presence of such a speaker in the class does not guarantee a successful or valuable educational experience, particularly if there has not been adequate communication between the instructor and speaker, sufficient integration of the speaker’s appearance into the course curriculum, or a clear assessment of student needs and interests, including the desired topics and preferred formats (Kamoun & Selim, 2007; Laist, 2015; Lang, 2008; Metrejean et al., 2002).

Previous studies suggest that a good guest speaker is knowledgeable, dedicated, and credible (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth, 2009;

Farruggio, 2011). Also, a good guest speaker is an excellent communicator who understands students' needs, prepares well, and knows how to engage and motivate students in the classroom (Lee & Joung, 2017).

There are only a few empirical studies that focus on the use of guest speakers in communication and journalism courses, in addition to some anecdotal essays that offer tips on having guest speakers in the classroom. Given the potential value of the classroom speaker to the learning experience, we believe it is important to supplement anecdotal evidence with new empirical data on how to ensure a positive experience. Using focus group interview and survey approaches, this study examines what makes a successful guest talk in strategic communication courses and how students perceive guest speakers. This research takes an important step in that direction by learning and conveying what students want, expect, and respond to when a guest speaker enters their classroom.

Literature Review

In this conceptualization, we relate linkage beliefs theory to guest speakers and review literature regarding guest speakers.

Linkage Beliefs Theory

Based on associationist theory with a presumption that attitude is derived from linked beliefs, Culbertson and his colleagues proposed the linkage beliefs theory and further developed and tested the theory by conducting a series of studies (Culbertson, 1992; Culbertson et al., 1993; Culbertson & Stempel, 1985; Denbow & Culbertson, 1985). The theory proposes that a person's attitude is connected to the linkage between the attitude object and a person's beliefs and goals. In their survey study of patient perceptions of the image of a medical center, Denbow and Culbertson (1985) found that salient positive beliefs, including the patient's feeling that "physicians care about their patients," "up-to-date care is associated with teaching function," and "people who answer the phone at the center are usually informed and helpful," positively affect the

patients' perceptions of the center's image.

In addition to applying the linkage beliefs theory to the patient relations from the attitude impact perspective, Culbertson (1992) tested the theory in alumni relations but from the behavioral impact perspective. He found that the similarity-based linkage, ego-involvement linkage, and instrumental linkage contributed to the intent to join an alumni chapter.

These studies developed and tested the linkage beliefs theory in public relations settings. The linkage beliefs theory connects the audience and public relations practitioners and is useful in audience segmentation. The practical value of the linkage beliefs theory is that it can help a practitioner identify salient linkages, strengthen existing positive linkages, build new useful linkages, and strategically link the target audience's goals, needs, and values to the organization's goals via persuasive messages. As such, the public relations strategies and tactics, such as creating clear, creative, and appealing message content and selecting appropriate communication channels, mirror the efforts for effective linkage (Culbertson, 1992; Denbow & Culbertson, 1985).

In a pedagogical setting with strategic communication elements, the linkage beliefs theory connects the target audience (i.e., students) and instructors. In the case of a guest speaker event, the theory guides an instructor to identify the salient positive links between the student beliefs/needs and teaching-learning goals, and further devise strategies of planning an effective guest talk, such as the choice of a guest speaker and the topic and format for the guest talk.

Guest Speaker Studies

Previous studies have discussed various aspects of the use of guest speakers, specifically planning details, types of guest speakers, topics of guest talks, formats for guest talks, guest talk tests and assignments, benefits for guest speakers, and guest talks in an online setting. This research is reviewed below.

Planning and Implementing a Guest Speaker Event in Classes

Designing and implementing a guest speaker event requires the instructor's efforts before, during, and after the event. Before the event, the instructor should set appropriate expectations for the guest talk that tie to the course objectives, share the necessary course materials with the speaker, ask for the guest speaker's biographical information, and communicate with the speaker about the logistic issues and do's and don'ts in the classroom as needed (Cloud & Sweeney, 1988; Henderson & Streed, 2013; McClearly & Weaver, 2008; Metrejean et al, 2002; Payne et al., 2003). Also, the instructor should prepare students for the guest talk by informing them of the guest speaker's visit, providing the speaker's information, and asking students to prepare questions (Cloud & Sweeney, 1988; McClearly & Weaver, 2008; Metrejean et al, 2002; Payne et al., 2003). During the event, the instructor should make sure the guest speaker talks about their professional background and includes a Q&A session (McClearly & Weaver, 2008; Metrejean et al., 2002; Payne et al., 2003). After the event, the instructor sends the speaker a thank-you letter and obtains feedback from both the speaker and students to help improve the future guest speaker events (McClearly & Weaver, 2008; Metrejean et al., 2002; Payne et al., 2003).

While the importance of guest speakers has been well documented in various disciplines (e.g., Zou et al., 2019), the studies on the use of guest speakers in communication and journalism courses are rare, other than some anecdotal essays. Envisioning the guest speaker as a supplement to the instructor, Roush (2013) suggested best practices in terms of using guest speakers in mass communication and journalism courses, such as "Don't overuse guest speakers" and "find guest speakers who have personalities" (p. 15). In a PRSA article, Henderson and Streed (2013) offered guidelines for a successful guest speaker event in a public relations course. They emphasized guest speakers should respect students

and professors, and “collaboration between the professor and the guest speaker, mutual preparation and clear expectations are essential to a successful classroom experience for everyone” (para. 22).

Only one empirical study was found that assessed students’ perceptions of guest speakers in communication courses. Merle and Craig (2017) surveyed journalism and mass communication students from a variety of communication classes at two institutions on their perception of guest speakers, including preferred topics, types of speakers and presentation formats, and perceived effectiveness and benefits. Their study analyzed student perceptions of guest speakers in mass communication and journalism curriculum overall as opposed to any specific sub-field, such as public relations and advertising, which was encouraged by the authors as a topic for future research and is one of the factors driving the present study.

We started by asking the first question about students’ experiences with guest speakers in strategic communication courses (RQ1), which was a topic largely missing from the literature.

RQ1: What experiences did students have with guest speakers in strategic communication courses?

Types of Guest Speakers

A variety of guest speakers can be invited to the classroom. Past studies in other disciplines offered some guidance, including inviting a mix of professionals, faculty members, and even graduate students (Lang, 2008; McCleary & Weaver, 2008; Metrejean et al., 2002; Payne et al., 2003; Soiferman, 2019). In mass communication courses, Cloud and Sweeney (1987) suggested using recent graduates and avoiding people who are out of the loop. Instead of aiming for recent graduates, Roush (2013) suggested professors “shoot for the moon with guest speakers” (p. 15) by inviting high-profile professionals to journalism and mass communication courses. In their survey of journalism and mass

communication students' perception of guest speakers, Merle and Craig (2017) found that students like guest speakers from the industry better than professors.

The diverse and even seemingly contradictory advice that emerges from the literature makes an opportunity to further examine students' preferred types of guest speakers, particularly in strategic communication courses. Thus, the following two research questions are presented:

RQ2: What types of guest speakers do students prefer in strategic communication courses?

RQ3: What types of organizations that guest speakers are associated with do students prefer in strategic communication courses?

Topics of Guest Talks

Previous studies indicated that students like to hear about the guest speaker's personal experiences and professional journey (McCleary & Weaver, 2008; Soiferman, 2019), particularly "when a guest speaker can use industry experiences to illustrate how to apply (or not to apply) a theory, concept, or idea that incorporates the learning objectives of the course" (McCleary & Weaver, 2008, p. 406). Career-oriented advice is also a popular topic of guest talks (Kamoun & Selim, 2007; Metrejean et al., 2002).

In journalism and mass communication courses, Merle and Craig (2017) found that students prefer to have a guest lecture that is professionally oriented. Course-related guest talks seem not to be as preferable as career-related topics. They found that less than 16% of participants like the topics of theoretical frameworks or methodological issues in guest talks. With a focus on guest talks in strategic communication courses, this study proposes the following research question:

RQ4: What topics do students want guest speakers to cover in strategic communication courses?

Format for Guest Talks

Previous research suggested that guest talks should have visual aids (Payne et. al, 2003), but reading from notes should be avoided (Metrejean et al, 2002). In journalism and mass communication courses, students tend to prefer an active presentation style from guest speakers that includes components such as providing examples and an interactive Q&A section (Merle & Craig, 2017). With a focus on guest talks in strategic communication courses, this study proposes the following research question:

RQ5: What format for the guest talk in strategic communication courses do students prefer?

Being Tested and Having an Assignment Based on Guest Talks

Should students be tested and have an assignment based on guest talks? Very few empirical studies have addressed this topic. In their experimental study on the role of test-expectancy on student learning and evaluations of guest speakers, Hite et al. (1985) found students in marketing courses do not want to be tested over guest talk content, but they also found if students know they are going to be tested, a more positive learning experience occurs. The scarcity of research prompts the research question below:

RQ6: How do students perceive being tested and having an assignment based on guest speaker content in strategic communication courses?

Benefits of Guest Speakers

Guest speakers enrich students' learning experiences by helping them gain first-hand knowledge from practitioners, as well as networking opportunities (Byrd et al., 1989; Wortman, 1992). Metrejean et al. (2002) found that accounting students consider guest talks helpful in "alleviating students' fears about career choices," offering "encouragement," giving "some insight that will expand on what they are studying or give them information they would not get directly from the course material" (p. 360),

helping “to focus more on the future” and providing “insights into what employers want in an accountant” (p. 357).

Merle and Craig (2017) found that journalism and mass communication students tended to believe guest talks can enhance their learning experience, are effective in the classroom, and add overall value to the class content. To explore student perceptions of the guest speaker benefits in strategic communication, a sub-field of mass communication, a research question is posited:

RQ7: What benefits of guest speakers do students perceive in strategic communication courses?

Guest Talks in an Online Setting

With the increasing use of online teaching, the use of guest speakers in an online setting can be both beneficial and challenging. Using an example in an online social work course, Sage (2013) asserted that technical assistance will be needed for guest speakers, and that students should be encouraged not to post distracting notes during the session. Privacy and copyright issues need to be taken into consideration as well.

The effectiveness of using virtual guest speakers is mixed. Henderson et al. (2018) found that MBA students evaluated using a guest speaker in a face-to-face setting as a more effective teaching method than the online setting. L. Hemphill and H. Hemphill (2007) found that guest speakers can be used “sparingly in online discussions while still maintaining the quality of the online discussion and frequent, meaningful interactions among students” (p. 287).

In a 2012 PRSA article, some public relations professors emphasized the importance of having guest speakers face the challenges of teaching millennials public relations in the fast-changing technology environment. The tactics they shared included inviting guest speakers to speak in both classes and PRSSA clubs, and inviting them to speak in person or via video conferencing (Jacques, 2012). Thus, the last research

question explores online guests:

RQ8: How do students perceive having guest speakers in online strategic communication courses?

Methods and Results

This study had two phases. In Phase 1, we conducted two focus groups to explore student perceptions of guest speakers in strategic communication courses. In Phase 2, we further examined the research questions via a survey to confirm and add to the findings from a larger sample.

Phase 1: Focus Groups

A qualitative focus group approach was employed in this study, and the method details and findings are reported as follows.

Focus Group Interview Methods

Considering the scarcity of empirical studies on how students perceive guest speakers in strategic communication courses, initial focus groups were an appropriate research method to explore insights from students and to provide a foundation for a follow-up survey.

Two focus groups were conducted in September 2017. The target participants were students who enrolled in strategic communication courses in fall 2017 in a journalism school at a public Midwestern university that offers strategic communication courses, including introductory, writing, creative concepts, research, and capstone topics.

After the research protocol was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, the recruitment process started. A recruitment flier was posted on the Blackboard sites of three strategic communication classes. These were undergraduate courses with a few seats available for graduate students. The study was also announced in classes. Each participant received one percentage point of extra credit in exchange of their time/effort. Pizza was provided during each focus group session.

Seven students participated in the focus group on Sept. 25, 2017.

The participants included one male student and six female students; the breakdown in educational level was one master's student and six undergraduate students. Eight students participated in the focus group on Sept. 27, 2017. The participants included one male student and seven female students. All participants were undergraduate students.

Each session lasted about 45 minutes. Both sessions were audio recorded and took place in a conference room. In both sessions, one of the authors who was not the instructor of the participants served as a moderator. A research assistant served as a note taker. Letters were assigned to participants in place of their names for the sake of their privacy. The focus group discussions started after participants signed the consent form.

The focus group discussions were semi-structured, including the topics of students' preferences of the types of guest speakers, preferences of the content and format for the guest talk, and benefits of having guest speakers.

The recordings of the two focus groups were transcribed after the focus group sessions were completed. The research proposal, transcripts, field notes, and the three authors' reflections were used to analyze the data. Each of the three authors independently read these study-related documents carefully, and identified the emergent themes, points with supporting evidence, and quotes. Then the three authors met and discussed their findings and came to a consensus.

Focus Group Results

All the participants in both focus groups reported they have had experience with guest speakers in their various courses. The first research question explored their experiences with guest speakers.

Likes and Dislikes. Most participants stated that relevance and fit were particularly important to them. If the guest speaker did not fit in with their interests or the overall theme of the course, they did not seem to care

much about them. Furthermore, students felt a need to have their voice heard by having some agency in choosing guest speakers by participating in a poll early in the semester.

Students also acknowledged having a variety of speakers was informative and eye opening and at times, resulted in a change in career paths. For example, one participant stated: “I had a speaker come in my freshman year in my first semester. I came in as a strat. comm. major... she completely...changed everything that I wanna do, and she’s been an inspiration to me since.”

The participants did not like speakers who put an excessive focus on themselves, did not leave ample time for questions and answers, did not have aesthetically pleasing visual aids, had too much material on visual aids, read off the PowerPoint slides, or reiterated course material. For example, one participant complained of a speaker who “kind of talked at us, not with us.” Another participant criticized a guest speaker who “talked a little bit too much about herself.” One student lamented a speaker who “followed her PowerPoint [too much], I don’t know, she...read directly from her PowerPoint...that’s almost insulting, I could read it just as well as you could.”

Participants also seemed to suggest that smaller classes are more conducive to having guest speakers than larger class sizes as the former provide an environment that fosters connections by engaging in a more intimate interaction with the guest speakers. In smaller classes, students preferred spending more time and engaging with guest speakers; in larger classes, students seem to emphasize a more general introductory approach and some way to network with the speakers.

The majority of the participants stated that the opportunity to network was one of the primary advantages of having guest speakers in class. Furthermore, participants liked when the instructor or the guest speaker themselves provided the students an opportunity to connect with

them either through social platforms such as LinkedIn or via email.

Participants stated they did not particularly like it if they were expected to know the content from the guest speaker's presentation for an exam, but also said it was a good motivator to attend the presentation. One student stated that she did not have guest speakers in the online class she took and really missed that aspect of class.

Types of Guest Speakers. In terms of the types of guest speakers, most participants preferred to have working professionals (compared to academics), alumni, and a mix of early career and senior-level executives. For example, one participant stated:

I think both [recent graduates and senior-level professionals] are very, very, very valuable 'cause the recent grads are the ones that [we] can most connect with, and they have been in your shoes most recently. But the higher-level-up professionals may be the ones that get you your internship or your job. So again, from a networking standpoint, they are both important.

Due to the global nature of the field of strategic communication, most participants expressed a desire to have more international guest speakers in their classes. The following quote from a participant illustrates this sentiment clearly: "I think [they] give you a whole new perspective, especially [in] our field . . . it's a global field now. So it's important to have that."

There were no differences expressed in preference based on gender. In both focus groups, none of the participants cared if a guest speaker was a male or a female.

Types of Organizations. In the same vein, none of the participants were particularly concerned about the organizations that guest speakers were associated with. The participants did not care if the guest speakers worked in government, for-profit, or not-for-profit organizations. However, participants did appreciate hearing the differences between agency work

and working with a particular organization and suggestions about how they themselves might apply the knowledge once they start working.

Topic Preference. None of the participants suggested a desire to have guest speakers cover course content. Overwhelmingly, the participants were interested in hearing about each guest speaker's journey. All the participants echoed a desire to learn about the speakers' personal narratives, their experiences, day-to-day working conditions, and the challenges that they faced and how they solved them. In addition, most participants liked to hear about things that would advance their career, including job hunting and personal growth tips. The following quote further illustrates this point:

I think novelty is very important. When people . . . give their backstory . . . I think that's super important. Just kind of understand and kind of humanize them a little bit, makes you more comfortable with listening to them. So it is not just some adult talking at you.

Format Preference. Both groups suggested that guest speakers should adopt a conversational tone, should be interactive, engaging, interested in answering students' questions, and show warmth and respect for students. Some students mentioned that having an activity such as discussing a case study that emulates real-world problems could also be an interesting way to engage students. As mentioned previously, students preferred a visual aid, and they did not like speakers reading off the slides.

In sum, our focus group interview findings suggest that students prefer speakers from a variety of backgrounds and experiences with whom they could relate and prefer to hear about tips related to networking, job search, and career advancement. The focus groups served as a precursor or pilot for a larger follow-up survey, to answer further research questions.

Phase 2: Survey

A quantitative survey approach was employed, and the method

details and survey results are reported below.

Survey Methods

Procedure. The target survey participants were students enrolled in strategic communication courses in spring 2018 in the same journalism school where the focus group sample was formed. While we only recruited 15 focus group participants from three strategic communication courses to help explore students' perceptions of guest speakers as a foundation for the follow-up survey, we tried to recruit survey participants more broadly from all strategic communication courses offered in that semester in order to further examine student perceptions of guest speakers with a larger sample size. The strategic communication courses offered during that semester were taught by eight instructors, including two of the authors. The researchers reached out to the six other instructors, asking them to help distribute the survey to their students. All instructors agreed and helped.

After the survey protocol was approved by IRB, the survey instrument was developed for online delivery and data gathering via Qualtrics. On April 2, 2018, an invitation letter including a survey link was sent via email to those instructors who agreed to help. The students were asked to answer the questions about their perceptions of guest speakers in strategic communication courses.

On April 10, a reminder was sent to participating instructors except for one author, who sent this reminder email, asking the participating instructors to encourage their students to take the survey as soon as possible. The survey was closed at 1:40 p.m. EST on April 24, 2018. One hundred and seven students completed the survey. Unfortunately, it was not possible to calculate the response rate because one student may take several strategic communication courses.

Some participating instructors offered one percentage extra course credit in exchange for the students' time/effort, and some did

not. The consent form appeared after the survey introduction page. The questionnaire was devised to be completed within 15-30 minutes.

Participants. Of the 107 respondents, 79.4% were female, 15.9% were male, and 4.7% did not provide their gender information; the vast majority were white (80.4%), 5.6% were black, 2.8% had Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin, 2.8% were Asian, and 8.4% had other ethnicity background or did not provide their ethnicity information. Of the 102 students who provided their information on age, year in college, and major, their average age was 20 years old; 32.4% were sophomores, followed by 28.4% juniors, 25.5% freshmen, 12.7% seniors, and 1.0% graduate students; 53.9% were majoring in journalism ($n = 55$), among which 72.7% were in the strategic communication track ($n = 40$); 23.5% were non-journalism communication majors ($n = 24$), such as communication studies and commercial photography; and 22.5% were in other majors, including marketing, and retail merchandising and fashion product development ($n = 23$).

In all, 93.5% of the 107 respondents had heard guest speakers in their strategic communication courses before. The students' guest speaker experiences were largely in traditional classrooms. Only three students said they had guest speakers in their online strategic communication courses.

Measurement. Guided by our focus group findings and related studies, the measurement of key variables was developed and explained as follows.

Experience of Having Guest Speakers. Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with their guest speaker experiences in strategic communication courses on a 5- point scale ranging from 1 (highly satisfied) to 5 (highly dissatisfied).

Types of Guest Speakers. Eight statements were evaluated by respondents using a 5- point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5

(strongly disagree) to assess the preferred types of guest speakers. These statements included “I would really like to have faculty members as guest speakers in my strategic communication courses.” And “faculty members” was replaced by “junior-level professionals,” “senior-level professionals,” “recent graduates,” “alumni,” “men,” “women” in the other six statements respectively. We also included a statement “I would really like to have international guest speakers in my strategic communication courses.” These eight statements had a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.82.

Types of Organizations. Four statements were rated by respondents using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) to assess the preference for the guest speaker’s organization. One statement was “Guest speakers in strategic communication courses should come from corporations and industry.” In the other three statements, “corporations and industry” were replaced by “advertising and PR agencies specially,” “nonprofit organizations specially,” and “government departments and agencies,” respectively (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.85).

Topics of Guest Talks. Participants were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with five statements on hearing the topics of “career advice,” “network tips and opportunities,” “personal backgrounds, experiences, and back stories of the guest speaker’s professional journeys,” “industry trends,” and “a specific topic tied closely to the course” on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The five statements measuring topic preference had a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.90.

Format for Guest Talks. Similarly, participants were asked to indicate their preferences on “a conversational format” and “use visual aids,” by using a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Participants were asked to indicate the importance of having a Q&A session in guest talks on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (extremely

important) to 5 (not important at all). Also, participants were asked to indicate what percentage of time should be saved for Q&A.

Being Tested and Having an Assignment Based on Guest Talks. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale with the statement that “Students should be tested on guest speaker content,” ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). They were also asked to rate the helpfulness of having an assignment based on guest talk content, ranging from 1 (extremely helpful) to 5 (not helpful at all).

Benefits of Guest Speakers. Based on Merle & Craig (2017) and our focus group study, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) with eight statements regarding benefits of having guest speakers, including “giving me an opportunity to network with the guest speaker,” “so I can feel more confident in strategic communication career decisions,” “so I can be more aware of strategic communication career opportunities,” “to help understand the industry at large,” “to help enrich the curriculum,” “to help improve my attention in class,” “to help me take a break from the same instructor,” and “to help enhance my learning experience” (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.88).

Having Online Guest Speakers. Participants were asked to evaluate the importance of having guest speakers in online strategic communication courses, using a 5-point scale from 1 (extremely important) to 5 (not important at all). They were also asked to rate their level of agreement with two statements: “Guest speakers should be invited to participate in online strategic communication courses,” and “Advances in technology (e.g., Skype or FaceTime) can enable guest speakers’ participation in online strategic communication courses.”

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “Instructors should have students participate in a survey

early in the semester to help choose topics for guest speaker talks” on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Participants were asked how many guest speakers they would like to have in their strategic communication courses in a given semester. Participants were also asked to provide their age, major, year in college, and ethnicity.

Survey Results

The 107 responses received from our survey generated some informative data that allowed us to answer the research questions using descriptive statistics. In tables, certain items have fewer than 107 responses due to missing data.

RQ1: What experiences did students have with guest speakers in strategic communication courses?

Eighty two percent of respondents were highly satisfied or satisfied with their guest speaker experience, and only 5% were dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 0.74$, $n = 100$).

RQ2: What types of guest speakers do students prefer in strategic communication courses?

As Table 1 shows, alumni were the most preferred guest speakers in strategic communication courses ($M = 1.81$), and 82.5% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to have alumni as guest speakers. Recent graduates were perceived as the second most preferred type of guest speakers ($M = 1.83$) with 81.7% of the respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would like to have recent graduates as guest speakers.

Similar to what was found in our focus groups, respondents tended not to care much about the guest speakers’ gender. Less than half of the respondents preferred either male (32.7%) or female guest speakers (48.1%). More students preferred senior-level professionals (77.9%) than junior-level professionals (68.9%).

Unlike the focus groups findings, which suggested that students

tended to prefer working professionals to academics, the survey data revealed that there were not many differences in preference between senior-level professionals (77.9%), faculty members (68%) and junior-level professionals (68.9%). Focus group data suggested strong support for having international guest speakers. The survey data confirmed the majority of the respondents would like to have international guest speakers (69.2%).

RQ3: What types of organizations that guest speakers are associated with do students prefer in strategic communication courses?

Our focus group data suggested that students were not concerned about the guest speaker's organization, but the survey results tell a different story. Descriptive data in Table 2 indicated 75.7% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that guest speakers should come from advertising and PR agencies specially, and only a little more than half of the respondents (56.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that guest speakers should come from government departments and agencies. About six out of ten of the respondents preferred guest speakers coming from corporations and industry (62.1%) and from nonprofits (66.0%).

RQ4: What topics do students want guest speakers to cover in strategic communication courses?

The survey data were somewhat in line with the focus groups' findings in terms of preferred topics. In focus groups, none of the participants appreciated course content being covered by guest speakers; instead, guest speakers' personal journeys were the overwhelmingly preferred topic. Our survey results (see Table 3) indicated that nearly nine out of ten respondents would like to hear career advice (88.3%), networking tips and opportunities (86.4%), and professional backgrounds, experiences, and backstories of the guest speaker's professional journeys (85.4%). Comparatively, hearing about a specific topic tied closely to the course was lower (72.5%) in preference, though still appreciated by a

majority of the students.

RQ5: What format for the guest talk do students prefer in strategic communication courses?

Table 4 shows that the vast majority of the respondents (87.4%) preferred that guest speakers use visual aids ($M = 1.65$). Most respondents (65.0%) preferred that guest speakers employ a conversational format ($M = 2.24$). Our focus group study also suggested that a conversational format and visual aids were the preferred methods of presentation.

When asked about the importance of the Q&A session in a guest talk, 36.9% of the respondents said it is extremely important, and 34% said very important; no respondent said not important at all ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.89$, $n = 103$). They were also asked their opinion about what amount of time as a percentage of the presentation should be saved for Q&A in a guest talk. Forty-six point six percent of respondents said 11 to 20% of time should be saved for Q&A, 30.1% of the respondents said 1 to 10%, 13.6% of the respondents said 21 to 30%, and 9.7% of the respondents said more than 30% of time for Q&A.

RQ6: How do students perceive being tested and having an assignment based on guest speaker content in strategic communication courses?

The survey results were in line with the focus groups' findings that students did not like having an exam based on the guest talk, but they can see it as motivation for attending class. In fact, more than half of the participants did not like the idea of being tested on guest speaker content (57.4% disagree or strongly disagree) ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.99$, $n = 101$). Also, nearly half of the students who responded considered having an assignment based on guest speaker content to be slightly helpful or not helpful at all (46.6%). Only a handful of the respondents (2.9%, $n = 3$) said having an assignment based on guest speaker content was extremely helpful, and 13.6% of the respondents said very helpful ($M = 3.52$, $SD =$

1.10, $n = 103$).

RQ7: What benefits of guest speakers do students perceive in strategic communication courses?

In focus groups, the majority of the participants stated that networking was the primary advantage of having guest speakers in class. The survey results show richer data on the benefits of guest speakers. Table 5 shows about eight out of ten respondents perceived the benefits of guest speakers to be career-related, including providing an opportunity to network with the guest speaker (87.1%), being more aware of strategic communication career opportunities (84.3%), feeling more confident in strategic communication career decisions (79.4%), and helping to understand the industry at large (78.4%). Although 85.3% of the respondents perceived the benefit of guest speakers as enhancing the learning experience, the pedagogical benefits were not perceived as greater than career-related benefits including helping improve attention in class (53.9%), enriching the curriculum (69%), and helping take a break from the same instructor (72.5%).

RQ8: How do students perceive having guest speakers in online strategic communication courses?

About two thirds (67.6%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that guest speakers should be invited to participate in online strategic communication courses (see Table 6). And overwhelmingly, 91.4% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that advances in technology (e.g., Skype or FaceTime) can enable guest speakers' participation in online strategic communication courses.

Our study also revealed some interesting findings regarding students' perceptions of their involvement in choosing topics for guest talks. Involvement in choosing a guest speaker and getting their voice heard was one of the "likes" expressed by most of the focus group participants. In the survey, when asked about the degree to which they

agree or disagree with the statement of “Instructors should have students participate in a survey early in the semester to help choose topics for guest speaker talks,” 73.5% of the respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.88$, $n = 102$).

Also, we found three guest speakers in strategic communication courses in a given semester was the number preferred by the respondents (49%), followed by two guest speakers (18.6%), four guest speakers (16.7%), at least five guest speakers (10.8%), and one guest speaker (2.9%). Only two of the respondents preferred having no guest speakers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of our study support the linkage beliefs tenets. With mostly satisfactory guest speaker experiences, students’ salient beliefs on the benefit of the guest talks and preferences on the types of guest speakers, topics, and formats of the guest talks suggest what the positive links are and what areas instructors can work on to strengthen the connections between students’ beliefs and the effective teaching- learning outcome by using guest talks. On the other hand, the breadth of the preferred types of guest speakers and preferred topics of guest talks also suggest the complexity of the links. Our study suggests instructors need to understand the complexity of the links while mapping out the contributing factors to a successful outcome for a guest talk. Our findings are also in line with previous research from Zou et al. (2019) who conducted a review of studies on guest speakers across various disciplines and proposed a “Trilateral Model” delineating benefits of having guest speakers in courses. Our findings have also provided pedagogical implications in using guest speakers in strategic communication courses.

Types of Guest Speakers

It appears students find alumni and recent graduates, two types of most preferred guest speakers, to be a valuable link between their life as a student and their imagined future professional selves, due to

the perceptions of similarity (Culbertson, 1992). The finding of recent graduates as preferred guest speakers is in line with Cloud and Sweeney's (1988) suggestion that having recent graduates as guest speakers could be advantageous because students can relate to them and establish a rapport. Instructors can build their own list of potential guest speakers by attending existing alumni events to network with alumni.

It is not surprising that students prefer a good mix of senior-level and junior-level professionals as preferred guest speakers. Obviously, the junior level position would be a starting point for students, but the greater attractiveness of the senior level professionals might be due to their capacity to arrange internships and even job placement. Planning to invite a mix of senior-level and junior-level professionals to serve as guest speakers in a semester would be advisable to benefit students in different ways.

Given the increasing globalization of the strategic communication field, preferring international guest speakers is only natural. For an international public relations course, having an international guest speaker would be ideal. As instructors in the U.S., we are not always mindful of bringing in international speakers. We suggest instructors make contact with their university's international scholar services, which could be a starting point to learn more about international scholars on campus and to identify people who might fit in with their courses. Also, technology could be employed to have guest speakers address the class from remote locations so that the students could hear from a diverse range of speakers.

Guest Talk Topics and Formats

In line with Merle and Craig's (2017) findings, the preferred topics of guest talks were around career advice, networking tips, professional backgrounds, and journeys. Career advice was perceived as the top topic, which suggests students in strategic communication are eager to learn professional advice and practical tips. It is also understandable that the

personal journeys of speakers were among the highly preferred topics, as a guest speaker's personal story sharing can enhance students' engagement (Soiferman, 2019).

Should the topic of the guest talk be tied closely to the course? The answer is probably yes. Soiferman (2019) asserted that both declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge are important for students. In practice, guest speakers don't want to stray too far from the course content. The instructor and guest speakers may want to work together to maximize the effectiveness of guest talks by discussing course content before the guest talk.

Our research suggested that ideally, conversational style talks, plus visual aids would be best. Also, it would be wise to present the idea of a Q&A session to guest speakers in advance. These findings are in line with Merle and Craig's (2017) findings. The class dynamics may affect the duration and effectiveness of a Q&A session. An instructor can facilitate the session by asking some general but personal questions such as what you enjoy most about your job and what is the most challenging part of your job.

Survey data also indicated that only about half of the students would like to be tested or have an assignment on guest content, which is somewhat in line with Hite et al.'s (1985) findings that students didn't want to be tested over the guest speaker content. However, as they suggested a more positive learning experience occurred when students are told they would be tested over guest talks, perhaps giving students an assignment or test based on guest content would be a good idea to enhance the learning outcome.

Experience of Having Guest Talks and Benefits of Guest Talks

Our research suggests it would be wise to have guest talks as a teaching tool. It is interesting to see career-related benefits were perceived as higher than academic and particular classroom learning benefits. This

may be related to the practical nature of the strategic communication courses. The pedagogical benefits were recognized, although they were not appreciated as much. In order to maximize the benefits of guest speakers, instructors may want to consider the nature of the course and students' year in college and work with the guest speaker to devise the focus of the talk and the timetable. For example, in an upper-level public relations campaign/capstone course, instructors may want to ask the guest speaker to talk about networking tips and opportunities and career advice and leave some time to allow students who are mainly juniors and seniors to network with the guest speaker.

Online Guest Speakers

Although online courses have been implemented in many schools, students' experience with online strategic communication courses is limited, and having guest speakers in online strategic communication courses is rare as well, at least in our sample. Even with such limited experience, students expressed the desire to have guest speakers online. This calls for further empirical studies on the effectiveness of online guest speakers, particularly given the mixed findings on this subject (Henderson et al., 2018; Hemphill & Hemphill, 2007). Instructors could experiment in incorporating guest speakers in an online format with the help of technology, such as incorporating Skype, Google Hangouts, or FaceTime, which can enable participatory behavior in online sections.

Students' Voice and Number of Guest Speakers

Students tended to like playing a role in choosing the topics of guest talks. Previous research suggests when students perceive their voice is being heard and they have agency in their own educational process, that leads to better learning outcomes (Cook-Sather, 2006). Thus, circulating a poll a week or two before the semester starts and inviting students to provide their input on selecting guest speakers based on their interests may help set the right tone for the course and may result in a more enjoyable

semester, for both the students and faculty.

Having three guest speakers in a given semester was the most preferred option, which is in line with the tips offered by Roush (2013), who suggested not overusing guest speakers and no more than three or four guest speakers during a class. Indeed, too many guest speakers may affect the course content an instructor may want to cover, and it may also be difficult to manage.

While the students' perceptions of guest speakers will help instructors understand the needs and wants, it is worth noting that that students do not always know what's best for them, and instructors may react to students' perceptions differently according to their knowledge about their students and their experience of hosting guest talks. On the other hand, a successful guest talk cannot be separated from the efforts of a guest speaker. We recommend that guest speakers work closely with the instructors before the talk to learn about the instructor's expectations, understand students' needs, and present the talk in an engaging manner.

Limitations and Future Research

The samples for focus groups and survey research were convenience and purposive in nature. Researchers should be cautious when generalizing the findings of this study to a larger population. Another limitation lies in the sample size. Future research should conduct more focus group discussions to enrich the data. Our survey sample size was also small and limited to one campus. Future research can use large-scale survey research to derive findings based on representative samples that could be generalized to a larger population in various contexts.

Focus group participants were not excluded from the survey, which may affect their survey responses due to their previous exposure to the focus group discussion. Also, a student could take the survey multiple times. Although our data did not suggest that happened, we should have taken a precaution when designing the online survey.

Although the results from our survey research provide useful information, it remains descriptive in nature. Due to the smaller sample size, the present study focuses on the student perception of guest speakers as a group. However, basic statistics show some noticeable and interesting differences in preferences of guest speakers by major, which provides useful information for educators. For example, journalism majors tended to prefer junior-level professionals and senior-level professionals much more than non-journalism majors (see Table 1a) and prefer the industry topics much more than non-journalism majors (see Table 3a). Also, journalism majors tended to prefer the following benefits more than non-journalism majors--opportunity to network with the guest speaker, feeling more confident in strategic communication career decisions, being more aware of strategic communication career opportunities, helping understand the industry at large, and helping enrich the curriculum (see Table 5a). As for the differences in perceptions by year in college, it is worth noting that underclassmen tended to prefer faculty members more than upperclassmen, and prefer recent graduates less than upperclassmen (see Table 1b). Underclassmen tended to prefer the benefits of having an opportunity to network with guest speakers, being aware of strategic communication career opportunities, and taking a break from the same instructor more than upperclassmen (see Table 5b). With a bigger sample size, advanced statistical analysis could be employed to examine statistical difference and generate more information.

Some issues are worth further investigation. For example, students tend to dislike being tested on a guest speaker. What alternative testing tools to examine the guest talk effectiveness exist? Students tended to want to have a say in choosing the topics of guest talks. How should this take place? Collecting more data can offer more robust findings and analyses. In addition, future studies could examine how the type of public relations course might affect student perceptions of guest speakers.

In conclusion, the key things we learned from our research suggest an overwhelming preference for guest speakers from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, who share their personal journey, career advice, and networking tips. This allows students to learn from the guest speakers' personal experiences, so they may apply the knowledge of the speakers' job searching and networking to advance their own careers. Our findings have important practical implications and suggest that diversity and variety of guest speakers and topics create an enriching pedagogical experience. While an instructor plays a key role in planning and facilitating a guest talk, the outcome of a guest talk would also involve the guest speaker's effort and audience's engagement.

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Table 1. Preference of types of Guest Speakers

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% (agree/ strongly agree)	<i>N</i>
Faculty members	2.25	0.87	68.0	103
Junior-level professionals	2.15	0.85	68.9	103
Senior-level professionals	1.9	0.81	77.9	104
Recent graduates	1.83	0.82	81.7	104
Alumni	1.81	0.74	82.5	103
International guest speakers	2.11	0.91	69.2	104
Male guest speakers	2.76	0.84	32.7	104
Female guest speakers	2.29	0.97	48.1	104

Note: 5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree
Cronbach's *Alpha* = 0.82

Table 1a. Preference of Types of Guest Speakers by Major (% of agree/
strongly agree)

	Journalism Major (<i>n</i> = 55)	Non-journalism major (<i>n</i> = 47)	Total (<i>N</i> = 104)
Faculty Members	69.1%	67.3% ^a	68.0% ^b
Junior-level professionals	78.2%	56.5% ^a	68.9% ^b
Senior-level professionals	87.3%	66.0%	77.9%
Recent graduates	89.1%	74.5%	81.7%
Alumni	89.1%	74.5%	82.5% ^b
International guest speakers	78.2%	59.6%	69.2%

Male guest speakers	36.4%	29.8%	32.7%
Female guest speakers	54.5%	42.6%	48.1%

Note: Journalism majors fall under two tracks: news & information track and strategic communication track.

^a *n* = 46.

^b *n* = 103.

Table 1b. Preference of Types of Guest Speakers by Year in School (% of agree/strongly agree)

	Underclassmen (<i>n</i> = 59)	Upperclassmen (<i>n</i> = 42)	Graduate Students (<i>n</i> = 1)	Total (<i>N</i> = 104)
Faculty Members	72.4% ^a	61.9%	100%	68% ^b
Junior-level professionals	69.0% ^a	69.0%	0	68.9% ^b
Senior-level professionals	78.0%	76.2%	100%	77.9%
Recent graduates	79.7%	88.1%	0	81.7%
Alumni	81.4%	85.7%	0	82.5% ^b
International guest speakers	72.9%	66.7%	0	69.2%
Male guest speakers	32.2%	33.3%	100%	32.7%
Female guest speakers	49.2%	47.6%	100%	48.1%

^a *n* = 58.

^b *n* = 103.

Table 2. Preference of Types of Organizations that Guest Speakers are Associated With

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% (agree/ strongly agree)	<i>N</i>
Come from corporations and industry	2.21	0.84	62.1	103
Come from government depts. and agencies	2.4	0.94	56.3	103
Come from advertising and PR agencies	1.93	0.87	75.7	103
Come from nonprofit organizations	2.17	0.82	66.0	103

Note: 5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree
Cronbach's *Alpha* = 0.85

Table 3. Preference of Topics of Guest Talks

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% (agree/ strongly agree)	<i>N</i>
Hear career advice	1.59	0.72	88.3	103
Hear networking tips and opportunities	1.57	0.75	86.4	103
Hear about professional background	1.75	0.78	85.4	103
Hear about industry trends	1.85	0.88	75.7	103
Hear about a specific topic tied closely to the course	2.02	0.90	72.5	102

Note: 5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree
Cronbach's *Alpha* = 0.90

Table 3a. Preference of Topics of Guest Talks by Major (% of agree/strongly agree)

	Journalism Major (<i>n</i> = 55)	Non-journalism major (<i>n</i> = 47)	Total (<i>N</i> = 103)
Have career advice	94.5%	80.9%	88.3%
Hear networking tips and opportunities	92.7%	78.7%	86.4%
Hear about professional background	89.1%	80.9%	85.4%
Hear about industry trends	85.5%	63.8%	75.7%
Hear about a specific topic tied closely to the course	74.1% ^a	70.2%	72.5% ^b

^a *n* = 54.^b *n* = 102.

Table 4. Preference of Format for Guest Speakers

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% (agree/ strongly agree)	<i>N</i>
Prefer a conversational format	2.24	0.91	65.0	103
Prefer guest speakers to use visual aids	1.65	0.72	87.4	103

Note: 5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree

Table 5. Perceptions of Benefits of Guest Speakers

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% (agree/ strongly agree)	<i>N</i>
Giving me an opportunity to network with the guest speaker	1.78	0.73	87.1	101
So I can feel more confident in strategic comm career decisions	1.86	0.87	79.4	102
So I can be more aware of strategic comm. career opportunities	1.75	0.79	84.3	102
Help understand the industry at large	1.86	0.85	78.4	102
Help enrich the curriculum	2.13	0.88	69	100
Help improve my attention in class	2.44	1.02	53.9	102
Help me take a break from the same instructor	2.11	0.88	72.5	102
Help enhance my learning experience	1.81	0.73	85.3	102

Note: 5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree
Cronbach's *Alpha* = 0.88

Table 5a. Perceptions of Benefits of Guest Speakers by Major (% of agree/strongly agree)

	Journalism Major (<i>n</i> = 55)	Non-journalism major (<i>n</i> = 47)	Total (<i>N</i> = 102)
Giving me the opportunity to network with the guest speaker	98.1% ^a	74.5%	87.1% ^b
So I can feel more confident in strategic comm career decisions	89.1%	68.1%	79.4%
So I can be more aware of strategic comm. career opportunities	94.5%	72.3%	84.3%
Help understand the industry at large	89.1%	66.0%	78.4%
Help enrich the curriculum	80%	55.6% ^c	69.0% ^d
Help improve my attention in class	58.2%	48.9%	53.9%
Help me take a break from the same instructor	80.0%	63.8%	72.5%
Help enhance my learning experience	90.9%	78.7%	85.3%

^a *n* = 54.^b *N* = 101.^c *n* = 45.^d *N* = 100.

Table 5b. Perceptions of Benefits of Guest Speakers by Year in School (% of agree/strongly agree)

	Underclassmen (<i>n</i> = 59)	Upperclassmen (<i>n</i> = 42)	Graduate Student (<i>n</i> = 1)	Total (<i>N</i> = 102)
Giving me the opportunity to network with the guest speaker	93.1% ^a	78.6%	100%	87.1% ^b
So I can feel more confident in strategic comm career decisions	79.7%	78.6%	100%	79.4%
So I can be more aware of strategic comm. career opportunities	88.1%	78.6%	100%	84.3%
Help understand the industry at large	81.4%	73.8%	100%	78.4%
Help enrich the curriculum	64.9% ^c	73.8%	100%	69% ^d
Help improve my attention in class	55.9%	50%	100%	53.9%
Help me take a break from the same instructor	78.0%	66.7%	0	72.5%
Help enhance my learning experience	84.7%	85.7%	100%	85.3%

^a *n* = 58.^b *N* = 101.^c *n* = 57.^d *N* = 100.

Table 6. Perceptions of Guest Speakers In Online Strategic Communication Courses

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% (agree/ strongly agree)	<i>N</i>
Guest speakers should be invited to participate in online strategic communication courses	2.26	0.90	67.6	105
Advances in technology can enable guest speakers' participation in online strategic comm course	1.68	0.66	91.4	105

Note: 5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree