# Virtual guest speakers in textile and apparel courses: Student experiences and expectations

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In higher education, one especially noticeable effect of pivoting to deliver course content during the COVID-19 pandemic was the greatly increased reliance upon technologies such as Zoom (https://zoom.us/), Canvas (https://www.instructure.com/canvas), and Webex (https://www.webex.com/). Remote versions of university courses may have also included virtual visits of industry guest speakers as a part of the curriculum. Inviting working industry professionals to the classroom to share their insights is a frequently used practice in university textile and apparel courses. While the use of virtual guest speakers in college classes was not unprecedented before the lockdowns that commenced in 2020, the widespread dependence upon these videoconferencing technologies has shone a spotlight on the possible benefits and drawbacks of virtual modalities for educational purposes, including visits of industry professionals to apparel classes.

Even as pre-pandemic methods of teaching classes reappear throughout institutions of higher education, the online medium will certainly continue to be utilized under certain circumstances. With industry guest speakers who may be unable to make the trip to the physical classroom for reasons such as being located across the country or simply because of their demanding work schedules, a virtual visit may be a much-desired variant to the traditional in-person visit (Ghalebeigi & Gharaie, 2021). As such, the phenomenon of virtual guest speaker

visits to college classrooms deserves greater investigation. Moreover, like other textile and apparel scholars (e.g., Butler et al., 2005; Byun et al., 2012; Karpova et al., 2011; Sadachar et al., 2017), the researchers believe that the input of those who are intended to reap the most benefit from pedagogical techniques deserves to be examined. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore virtual industry speaker visits from the viewpoint of college students, with the overarching question framing this research being, "What are student perceptions of virtual guest speakers?" The ultimate objective is to provide results that will help to instructors in textile and apparel classrooms to optimally make use of special guests in their own courses.

## Literature Review

### Guest Speakers as Curricular Resources

Inviting practitioners from a relevant industry into the college classroom is a common practice in higher education, including in textile and apparel courses (Foster, 2005; Frazier & Cheek, 2005; Ha & Lennon, 2006; Kimmons & Spruiell, 2005). Scholars have noted that industry guest speakers can help to directly link course content to current industry concerns, widen students' viewpoints about a given topic, and serve to as up-to-date resources for career information (Casper & Balgopal, 2020; Craig et al., 2020; Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Jablon-Roberts & McCracken, 2020; Metrejean et al., 2002). In the textile and apparel field, it is not uncommon to find courses with learning objectives aimed at familiarizing students with many facets of this continuously changing industry, as well as options for careers within it. Thus, the use of industry speakers, whether face-to-face or virtual, in these types of courses may help fulfill what Hodges and Karpova (2010) described as "the ongoing need for curriculum and program development to keep pace with industry dynamics" (p. 74). Further, it may be argued that this pedagogical practice is in alignment with at least two of the International Textile and

Apparel Association's critical meta-goals for the four-year baccalaureate degree, as students can increase their knowledge of the apparel industry and its processes, as well as their professional development in relation to careers (ITAA, 2008).

## Practices and Procedures for Industry Speaker Visits

Authors of articles centered on industry speaker visits, both in-person and virtual, typically generate many suggestions for best practices and caveats for instructors who may be considering inviting industry practitioners to speak. Recommendations have been proffered on the attributes of an ideal guest and how best to prepare both these speakers and the students for an ideal experience (McCleary & Weaver, 2008; Payne et al., 2003; Zheng et al., 2018), such as having an instructor act as interviewer to guide the speaker through a prearranged series of topics or assigning students to research the speaker and write questions that are then forwarded to the speaker in advance of the visit (Dalakas, 2016; Duening & Markiewicz, 2013). In a study focused on student perceptions of the guest speaker phenomenon, Jie et al. (2021) reported that student respondents in their communications classes were rather particular about the number of industry guests that they would prefer to encounter in any given semester, with three speakers being the ideal number. Writing of their experiences with online-only courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghalebeigi and Gharaie (2021) recalled that they purposefully sought out industry guests who had substantial previous experience speaking via live videoconferencing, as they believed that speakers who were uncomfortable with the technology would greatly lessen student learning and engagement.

## Virtual Guest Speakers

Research specifically on the use of virtual guest speakers is still somewhat scarce because of its relative novelty. To date, the term has been employed in the literature to categorize

industry professional interactions with students in either the asynchronous or synchronous format. Asynchronous classes are held without instructor, students, and speaker being online together at the same time, so contact may occur in message boards or in comments to prerecorded videos, for example, while synchronous classes are when students, speakers, and instructor meet live using internet-based technology.

### *Asynchronous Courses*

Although it may not be the most obvious category of industry guest "visits," asynchronous communications between industry practitioners and students in college classes is well-represented in the literature. Farruggio (2009, 2011) and Ostorga and Farruggio (2013) described the participation of guest speakers in online class forums or message boards, recommending it as a way to assist in developing "professional identity formation" (2009, p. 26). Similarly, Hemphill and Hemphill (2007), Kumari (2001), and Powers (1999) detailed asynchronous interactions where guest speakers participated in class discussion boards, conversation threads, or listservs, respectively. Eveleth and Baker-Eveleth (2009) considered how successful exchanges were created between industry guest and students via an online discussion board contained in the institution's learning management system or outside collaboration software. They used a team-based approach that featured groups of student deciding upon, inviting, and then hosting an industry guest speaker, who was asked to post an opening statement and then answer class questions in a discussion board during a week-long engagement.

### *Synchronous Courses*

Synchronous virtual visits were less frequently found in the academic literature. Song (2010) found that he integration of synchronous virtual guest speakers into a hybrid course

(composed of both in-person and distance students) led to increased student engagement. Sage (2013) described essential points to keep in mind when planning a synchronous class speaker in a distance social work graduate program, such as logistics and legal requirements resulting from the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Olsen (2021) began using recent alumni as virtual guest speakers in information systems classes that moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that the necessary shift to online coursework allowed for a rethinking of how best to use outside industry contacts. The fact that these speakers were recent graduates of the program seemed to promote greater engagement from students, who peppered the virtual visitors with questions that were often focused on how the alumni secured their jobs. Finally, in a journal issue devoted exclusively to online education during the height of COVID-19, Fulton (2020) examined a collaborative process between instructor and students in deciding upon virtual guests; these guests then presented synchronously to an online graduate course on communication. Active learning in the course was further enhanced by the requirement for students to develop questions for each virtual visit.

Although Boorady and Hawley (2008) explored the internet and video streaming as they considered the potential of several virtual means of delivering educational content in the future of teaching of apparel and fashion design, and Jacob (2007) imagined that textile, apparel, and retail education in 2050 would incorporate distance learning lectures, no academic research has, as of yet, concentrated on the practice of virtual guest speaker visits in college courses in this field. Thus, this research is intended to fill a gap in the literature.

## Methods

During the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years, students in 17 of the researchers' undergraduate-level textile and apparel classes[1] were required to respond to an online qualitative survey. The results detailed herein are inclusive of all of these classes.

If a guest speaker was scheduled for a given class, students in that class completed the survey before the visit. This was done to focus on students' perceptions of the concept of guest speakers and impressions of speakers that they remembered from any point in their college career, rather than feedback focused on a specific guest. Industry guest speakers were defined for the purposes of this survey instrument as former or currently working professionals in apparel, retail, and other affiliated areas who spoke to a textile and apparel class, either in person or virtually. Excluded from the definition were university personnel who might come to a class to present on topics like scholarships or clubs, as well as recordings of speakers.

Guests were chosen because of their relationship to course content and spoke for a single synchronous class session (75 minutes for both universities). They were typically found through instructors' personal networks, with a particular emphasis on alumni when possible. Examples of speakers students had seen include a board member of the National Retail Federation, a marketing manager for a retail lighting firm, and a celebrity stylist/desigher.

The survey instrument consisted of 14 open-ended questions divided into three main areas. First, a set of questions asked about overall perceptions of guest speakers. These questions were answered by all students, whether or not they had ever experienced a guest speaker. Questions in the second section were answered only by students who had guest speaker visits in earlier classes, regardless of modality. The third set was for students with experience with virtual industry guests. These questions were asked of all students meeting the criteria, both before the pivot to remote learning due to COVID and after. In these three survey areas, no questions asked

students to consider a specific speaker, but rather the entirety of their guest speaker experiences. A fourth area consisting of demographic questions was also included in the instrument, to be answered by all students. Those questions asked for respondents' age, gender, year in school, and status as first-generation college students.

The survey instrument was designed to begin with general questions and move to more focused topics, as recommended by Sommer and Sommer (2002). Questions were developed with input from the literature, previous student comments, and the researchers' own experiences. For example, Riebe et al. (2013) asked Australian undergraduate business students, "What are your expectations of an excellent industry guest speaker?" which led to that question's inclusion in the survey. Conklin et al. (2005) concluded that guest speakers can influence perceptions of topics in people with open minds, which led to the survey question, "Has an industry guest speaker ever made you rethink or change your mind about a topic?" From Dalakas (2016) and Duening & Markiewicz (2013), the researchers noted the authors' assumptions and developed questions to examine them further, such as "What do you think is the purpose of an industry guest speaker in a college class?" and "What is your least favorite aspect of industry guest speakers?" Specific questions on virtual speakers included: "How many experiences with virtual industry guest speakers (e.g., via Zoom or Skype[2]) have you had?" and "Overall, how does a virtual guest speaker compare to an in-person guest speaker?" The latter question was inspired by Merle and Craig (2017), who found that students desired in-person guest speakers but did not explore why.

Subsequent data were analyzed with grounded theory and the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory was originally formulated to deal in a rigorous but flexible way with qualitative data, particularly when there are no preconceived

hypotheses about what the resulting data may show (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Chun Tie et al., 2019). As noted above, no research to date has been found in the literature about the phenomenon of virtual guest speakers in college textile and apparel courses, which led to grounded theory as an appropriate methodological framework. As noted by Straus and Corbin (1998), a grounded theory methodology can lead to the organization of data into categories "and then using description to elucidate those categories" (p. 19). Elaboration of these categories will facilitate the objective of this study, which is to provide guidance to instructors about the optimal use of virtual guest speakers.

Use of the constant comparative method is central to grounded theory's inductive discovery process (Bronk, 2012). With the constant comparative method, data are analyzed right as they are received, while data gathering is still happening. This permits the researchers to adjust and refine interview or survey instruments to gain additional information that they have realized is important from their data analysis (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Analysis began with the two researchers each coding ten responses and then comparing their coding, creating the first codebook. Using the coding guide thus generated, the researchers coded the remaining data separately, meeting regularly to discuss new codes and meanings and negotiate any disagreements. Codes and themes that emerged continued to be refined and integrated throughout the process. Ultimately, the researchers achieved an intercoder reliability rate of 94%, surpassing the suggested levels of Creswell (2007) and Saldaña (2013).

Respondents consisted of students in the researchers' textile and apparel classes at their respective institutions: a mid-sized private Northeastern (NE) university and a large public Midwestern (MW) university. Upon receipt of Institutional Review Board approval at each university, the online survey instrument was assigned to students in the researchers' courses. The

survey was a graded assignment in all classes, but those individuals who did not give their consent to take part in the research had their data excluded from analysis, as were students without virtual guest speaker experiences. Like other class assignments, there was a due date to submit the survey. Charting potential changes in participants' thinking over the course of the semester was beyond the scope of this study, so there was only one administration of the survey per semester or term in any given class. Individually identifying information was removed from the data before analysis commenced, and the researchers were not aware of which students agreed to participate and which did not.

**Respondent Characteristics**

Overall, a total of 406 students agreed to participate in this study over two academic years; of these, 130 had experience with virtual guest speakers (47 from the NE university and 83 from the MW university; see Table 1). Only data from those 130 students were analyzed for this paper. Within those 130 students, for both NE and MW samples, the majority of respondents were female (93.6% and 92.8%, respectively), upper-level students (97.9% and 59%), aged 20 or older (97.9% and 62.7%), and non-first generation students (68.1% and 81.9%).

Because of the longitudinal nature of this study, students participated both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the 130 respondents who had experience with virtual guest speakers (n=97, 74.6%) participated during the pandemic, through their enrollment in remote courses in Spring 2020 or during the 2020-2021 academic year. A minority, but a still sizable group (n=33, 25.4%), participated while enrolled in face-to-face classes before the pandemic. This latter group was predominantly made up of MW students, (32 of the 33 respondents; 97%); only one NE student had experience with virtual guest speakers before classes went online.

[place Table 1 about here]

## Results

Respondents from both sites of survey administration shared not only demographic characteristics but numerous attitudes towards virtual guest speakers. This is made all the more noteworthy because participants were providing their impressions of different speakers in different courses at different universities. The most frequently shared perceptions about the virtual guest speaker experience were about its weaknesses, such as the ease of getting distracted, the sometimes-unfulfilled need to feel connected, attendant difficulties with technology, and the effort of asking questions. However, several strengths in the virtual modality were identified as well, though primarily only by respondents in the NE sample. For instance, NE students perceived a lower level of anxiety with virtual guest speaker experiences and were appreciative of the access to a greater variety of guest speakers and the convenience the virtual medium offered to guest speakers.

### Perceptions of the Weaknesses of Virtual Guest Speaker Experiences

Students in all samples stated that it was more difficult to remain attentive during virtual guest speakers because *distractions* abound outside the physical classroom. The opportunity for distraction (e.g., “zoning out” [Student HNE], “tuning out” [Student RNE], and “losing focus” [Student JMW]) and the related difficulty in paying attention were the most common issue raised by respondents in this study. As student BRMW said, “Virtually, it is much easier to get distracted by different things or turn off your camera, and for example, put away laundry or do your hair and not fully focus.” PNE believed that “in-person guest speakers are more impactful because the class feels more pressured to pay attention.” Perhaps students feel like BEMW does:

230 "When it is a virtual guest speaker, I feel like they are not really there with us and I get distracted
231 by outside extremities [*sic*]."

232 Feeling a *connection* with the speaker helps students pay attention, which was also found
233 to be more challenging virtually. As AHNE said:

234 It is much easier to make a connection to a guest speaker in person than it is to do it by
235 Zoom. That is not to say that every in-person guest speaker was an excellent guest
236 speaker. I'm just saying that Zoom makes it harder to really make a connection with a
237 guest speaker.

238 Another term students used in this context included *interaction*. This included QNE, who
239 indicated that she appreciates virtual guest speakers, even though "the only downfall, of course,
240 is human interaction." Other terms were *engagement* and *personal*, a word used by eight
241 students, from both the NE and MW samples. As BMW stated, virtual guest speakers "can be
242 less personal so you might not get as much out of it. It's harder to engage with the conversation
243 when they aren't there in person." Students wanted to "gain better relationships" (AWNE) with
244 guest speakers and feel like they are having "an open conversation" (AZNE), which many found
245 impossible virtually. AJNE summed up her feelings about connection in this way: "Virtual is less
246 empathetic, I feel, compared to physical because virtual lacks humanity qualities." This desire
247 for individual and personal connection to the guest speaker, and the difficulty in achieving it
248 virtually, was noted in all samples.

249 Based on the need for videoconferencing software, it is unsurprising that *technical issues*
250 were included as another weakness of the virtual guest speaker experience. As RMW stated,
251 "Sometimes, when you have a virtual guest speaker, the connection can go bad and you might
252 not be able to hear or see the speaker when compared to in-person speakers, where you don't

have to worry about that." Several students used the word "frustrating," like ABMW, who said that "it can be a little frustrating at times just because if the connection is low from one side." Some students blamed their classmates' use of technology for poor virtual guest speaker experiences, like AUMW who disliked virtual guest speakers because "it's less interactive since most of the people would mute and close their cameras."

Interestingly, the students for whom technical issues were the biggest concern were the pre-COVID MW sample, with 25% of these respondents indicating it as a problem. Only 10% of NE students considered it important enough to note, and even fewer mid-COVID MW students mentioned it (8%). There are several ways of interpreting this data. Perhaps guest speakers and instructors became more adept at virtual presentations during the pandemic, resulting in fewer technical glitches, or perhaps after months of remote learning, students became more tolerant of them. At the very least, they became more familiar with them, because a national survey of undergraduate students administered during the COVID-19 pandemic found that 43% of students surveyed had never taken an online course before the spring of 2020 (Means et al., 2020).

The lack of concern over technical issues is also supported by Means et al. (2020). In Means et al.'s national survey, students were asked to explain the greatest challenges to their learning after courses moved online, and technology was not identified as a response, even though the survey asked specific questions about the topic. In the report (Means et al., 2020), the authors stated that "internet connectivity issues were serious enough to interfere with students' ability to attend or participate in their course at least occasionally for 44% of students" (p. 8) and that "almost a quarter of students (23%) experienced hardware or software problems serious enough to impact their ability to attend or participate in their course at least occasionally" (p. 9). Yet, like the participants in this virtual guest speaker study, during the period of remote learning

due to COVID, technology impacted respondents, but those issues were not conspicuous enough for students to remark upon them.

There was another area of concern raised by students from all samples: the ease with which they could ask questions, an essential part of any guest speaker experience in their eyes. *Asking questions* was the second most common issue raised by students in this study, after the difficulty of paying attention. Many students across all samples believed it was "easier to ask questions" in person (stated verbatim by five respondents). WMW preferred in-person guest speakers because "we can go up to them after class and ask more questions," an ability other students also desired.

**Perceptions of the Strengths of Virtual Guest Speaker Experiences**

While students – even those who ultimately preferred virtual guest speakers or considered those experiences equal to those with in-person guest speakers – identified many weaknesses of the virtual guest speaker experience, strengths were identified as well. For instance, while all samples agreed on the importance of asking questions, only half (50%) of the students thought the best method was through face-to-face interaction. In fact, 35% thought it was better virtually, and 15% thought the two methods were the same ("I think they are just the same in person or virtually, you can still ask them question and get their information" [CSMW]). Student who liked asking questions of virtual guest speakers explained that the experience "gives the opportunity for somebody who is less outspoken to ask questions" (ANNE) and that "when you have a question you can ask in the chat at any time and then the speaker can answer when they are ready, instead of having to wait and maybe forgetting your questions" (BGMW).

The "chat" mentioned by BGMW is common in many videoconferencing platforms. It allows participants to type comments and questions to the host, individuals, or the entire group,

depending on settings. TMW also appeared to be referring to the chat feature when she said "not enough questions [are] asked in person because people are shy. I like virtual better because I don't have to directly ask my question." It seems that students very much appreciate this feature during virtual guest speaker experiences.

In fact, the perceived ease with which they can ask questions is the primary strength that motivated those MW students who preferred virtual guest speakers. NE students who favored virtual guest speakers referred to questions as well, in addition to several other strengths. For example, they saw a higher level of *comfort*, particularly with technology but also in a general sense. Several students used this word, like AENE, who said "I believe students and speakers are becoming more comfortable with Zoom and how to properly take advantage of it." Others discussed a more encompassing level of comfort that is possible with virtual guest speakers, such as ASNE who remarked that "I think it is a more comfortable conversation. Everyone seems to be more relaxed and a bit more comfortable being on video chat from our own homes." BTMW, part of the mid-COVID MW sample, was the only MW student to discuss comfort, saying that virtual guest speaker experiences were "a lot more relaxed."

These increased feelings of comfort and relaxation corresponded with decreased feelings of anxiety. That is illustrated through PNE's statement that "it is definitely less intimidating having a virtual guest speaker versus an in-person guest speaker." AQNE also discussed feeling "less intimidated" by virtual guest speakers, and AYNE said, "I think a virtual guest speaker is better because everyone is less nervous, and it seems to run smoother." BCNE reflected that:

> I have noticed [virtual guest speakers] seem more comfortable and open when talking because they're somewhere they're comfortable as well as us students. It is overall a

> more natural and effortless conversation which is very helpful and I look forward to it more.

This set of factors identified by students as influencing their perceptions of virtual guest speakers (i.e., distractions, personal connection with the speaker, technical issues, ability to ask questions, and comfort) could apply to most virtual learning experiences. However, NE respondents also identified strengths applicable to the speakers themselves, specifically that the virtual modality allowed access to a greater *variety* of speakers and positively impacted speakers' *convenience*. As MNE said, "Virtual guest speakers are nice because it gives more opportunity for the speaker to agree to speak if they don't have to take the time to travel, plus it gives us a chance to hear from people all over." This point was similarly made by eight NE students, like ANNE, who said that the online medium "makes it possible for people all over the world to speak to a class rather than somebody who is more local and can come in person." This is especially compelling when considering the highly globalized nature of the contemporary apparel industry (Jacob, 2007; Karpova et al., 2011), where a desirable industry guest may well be located on another continent.

However, no MW respondents commented on this. Perhaps those students have always had a wide variety of speakers come to their classrooms, so the opportunity for more is not meaningful. Regardless, NE students were pleased by this aspect of the virtual experience. QNE linked this to the pandemic, saying:

> I also feel that COVID-19 has opened up every industry to virtual communication. It makes more sense. I was able to hear from a famous fashion designer while she was busy in NYC, which is pretty cool if you ask me.

**Guest Speaker Preferences**

While many students commented that asking questions virtually was easier or better than in person, and that virtual experiences can be more comfortable and allow for a deeper pool of guest speakers, these strengths did not always influence students to prefer virtual guest speakers over those face-to-face. The majority of respondents in this study (63.8%) preferred in-person guest speakers, supporting previous research that found students surveyed during COVID preferred in-person learning in general (Gherhes et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021) and Merle and Craig's (2017) conclusion that students would rather have in-person guest speakers over those who are available by phone, social media, or video chat. However, the proportion of students who wanted guest speakers in a face-to-face setting varied quite a bit depending on the sample (see Table 2). The pre-COVID MW sample was overwhelmingly in favor of in-person guest speakers, with 78.1% of respondents in that group expressing this sentiment, while the mid-COVID MW group was smaller at 66.7%. Of the NE sample, only 53.2% preferred face-to-face visits.

[place Table 2 about here]

Second to the preference for face-to-face visits was the opinion that the in-person and virtual guest speaker experiences were equivalent. This was the second most-frequently cited preference in total and across all samples, but again, there was variance within the respondents who expressed this preference, though not as much as within the group who preferred face-to-face. The students who participated in the study mid-COVID were more likely to select this option (30.4% of the mid-COVID NE students and 27.5% of the mid-COVID MW students) than the pre-COVID students (18.8%). Many of these students (70.6% of all students who rated the two visit formats as equal) simply made statements along the lines of "it is the same" (SMW) or "I see no difference" (QNE).

The remaining 29.4%, however, discussed the strengths of both types of events, ultimately concluding that "virtual guest speaker experiences are very comparable to in-person guest speakers" (ADNE). For instance, AMNE said that "a virtual guest speaker feels more intimate because it seems more one on one. In person, it is also beneficial because there is a lot more interactiveness." BUMW was very pragmatic when discussing the comparison of virtual and in-person guest speakers: "Doesn't matter – their information is information and there's something to learn from each person after hearing from them. You can still talk to them after or introduce yourself via email or ask them questions virtually to get yourself noticed." Interestingly, YNE considered how the format affected the speaker: "It is pretty much the same. I think it would only be different from the speakers' point of view depending on how many people are actually showing themselves on camera."

The smallest group in all samples preferred virtual guest speakers (9.2%), and the samples varied the most in this preference: 17% of NE students chose virtual guest speakers as the best option, compared to 5.9% of the mid-COVID MW sample and only 3.1% of the pre-COVID MW sample. Therefore, in reviewing all the data, it appears that students learning remotely consider being in the same room as a guest speaker less important than they did while learning in the classroom, with NE students considering it less important than MW students. Given the remote nature of learning during the pandemic, these changes could indicate students' greater familiarity with virtual modalities and therefore more satisfaction with them, but the results are also likely influenced by the individual speakers. Perhaps NE speakers were more engaging and answered questions in a more desirable fashion or maybe, pre-COVID, NE students felt higher levels of anxiety, leading to a calmer state of mind when learning in comfortable surroundings. With the plurality of student experiences, it is difficult to draw clear

conclusions beyond that students seem to be more satisfied with virtual guest speakers than might have been expected.

## Discussion

The results of data analysis in this study revealed student perceptions of strengths and weaknesses in the virtual guest speaker experience. Based on these findings, suggestions can be made to help guide educators as they consider their own use of guest speakers, whether in a face-to-face or online setting. Though the majority of students prefer in-person guest speakers, a large portion consider in-person and virtual experiences as equal, and the size of that group seems to be increasing. Conversely, problems with technology seem to be decreasing. Therefore, even in face-to-face settings, educators should not limit themselves only to speakers who are available to visit in person, and if educators choose to work with a virtual guest, the whole class could be virtual to give students access to the chat feature in the videoconferencing platform and the comfort of attending from the location of their choice.

To encourage students to remain focused during a virtual visit (or, in fact, any distance-learning scenario), educators could require all students ask a question, either verbally or textually, or give a post-speaker assignment. These techniques would encourage students to pay at least partial attention. It is not recommended that educators require students to turn their cameras on. First, many institutions forbid establishing such a requirement, but even if they did not, there are issues of equity to consider, and some students simply do not have the technological capabilities to do so. In any case, even with cameras on, it is impossible to remove distractions when students are not in the classroom, which is the primary reason for choosing in-person guest speakers rather than virtual. However, given the strengths that students identified in

the online format, educators should not eliminate a virtual guest speaker as a viable option for the future, even if the course is scheduled as face-to-face.

Students did have other concerns, however. To alleviate those, speakers in any modality should be briefed on student desires for interaction and connection, which could include speakers using student names when answering questions, offering their contact information for students to ask questions at a later date, or staying after class to have conversations directly with interested students. A guest speaker might also converse with the class in an asynchronous manner, perhaps taking part in a class online discussion board for the week during which they are scheduled to speak live. In terms of questions, given the number of students who pointed to the chat feature as a strength of the virtual experience, educators could create a similar method of asking questions (e.g., Google Doc[3] or Blackboard Discussion[4]) when speakers appear in person. Whether the speaker is in-person or virtual, students could be told to type questions into the "chat," along with whether they would prefer to read their question aloud. Then, instructors could either read the question themselves or call for the student to do it, based on the student's indication. This way, students who want an individual moment with the speaker could have it, but all students would get their questions asked. Again, this technique could support both virtual and in-person speakers, and, like all suggestions here, could be applied to any course within the textile and apparel curriculum, or even to courses in outside disciplines.

## Conclusions

Based on the results of this stage of a larger guest speaker study project, it seems that students share similar perceptions of guest speakers regardless of the individual guest speakers upon whom the students are reflecting. Most surprising are the insights that, while students prefer in-person guest speakers over virtual, the margin is much narrower than was anticipated

and that concern with technical issues has decreased since the COVID-19 pandemic began. With virtual guest speakers, students find it difficult to stay focused and they miss the personal connection they feel during in-person presentations. However, students appreciate the chat feature inherent to most videoconferencing platforms, making virtual guest speakers a valuable alternative. Overall, the results of this study imply that utilizing the virtual modality for guest speakers may eventually be regarded by students as equally valuable and as efficacious as the face-to-face modality.

Limitations of this study include the sample size and the wide variety of student experiences given the differences in speaker, course, university, and location, along with the qualitative nature of the study. These limitations prevent findings from being generalized. Additional aspects of this topic that are still to be explored include whether and how student attitudes change as higher education returns to face-to-face learning post-COVID, and student appraisals of assigned work designed to prepare them for speakers or assess their learning from the speaker's presentation. Moreover, further research could be conducted to examine the reasons student acceptance of industry guests speaking remotely seems to be increasing; the results of a quantitative study on this topic could be generalized, providing support to the conclusions in this paper. The purpose of this study was to explore student perceptions of virtual guest speakers at a specific moment in time and to offer guidance to educators to aid them in their planning for guest speakers in the future, either virtually or in person.

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## Footnotes

[1]In the NE university, the courses in which the survey was administered were Introduction to Retail, Forecasting, Visual Merchandising (in two semesters), and Strategic Planning in the Fashion Industry (in two semesters). The MW classes included Retail Merchandising (in three semesters) and Fashion Styling (in eight half-semester courses and one summer session).

[2] https://www.skype.com/en/

[3] https://www.google.com/docs/about/

[4] https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Ultra/Interact/Discussions