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Words Matter: The Impact of "Catchy" vs Conventional Course Titles on Student Interest

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Abstract

Anecdotal evidence suggests that post-secondary institutions in Canada and beyond are experimenting with the practice of substituting conventional, discipline-centred course titles with more creatively phrased, learner-centred titles. However, we could find no scholarly research to affirm, challenge or guide this practice. This study represents a preliminary foray into that research. We surveyed 368 business undergraduate and graduate students at a mid-sized Canadian university to address, and explore the implications of, this question: "Does a catchy course title elicit more student interest than its conventional counterpart?" Our findings provide some, but not unqualified, support for the practice of using catchy course titles as a way of attracting student interest. We found the most significant influence on student preference toward conventional or catchy course titles to be year of registration (first year and fourth year students showed the most interest in catchy course titles; graduate students and those registered in second and third year showed a preference for conventional course titles). Implications regarding marketing and pedagogy are discussed, as is the need for further research.

Des preuves non scientifiques sembleraient suggérer que les établissements d'enseignement supérieur du Canada et au-delà sont en train d'essayer de substituer les titres de cours conventionnels centrés sur la discipline par des titres centrés sur l'apprenant et formulés de façon plus créatrice. Toutefois, nous n'avons trouvé aucune recherche savante qui pourrait affirmer, mettre au défi ou guider cette pratique. Cette étude représente une expérience préliminaire dans cette recherche. Nous avons fait un sondage auprès de 368 étudiants de premier cycle et de cycles supérieurs en administration des affaires dans une université canadienne de taille moyenne afin d'explorer les implications de la question suivante : « Est-ce qu'un titre de cours accrocheur attire davantage l'intérêt des étudiants qu'un titre plus conventionnel? » Nos résultats présentent un certain soutien non qualifié à cette pratique qui consiste à utiliser des titres de cours accrocheurs dans le but d'attirer l'intérêt des étudiants. Nous avons trouvé que l'influence la plus significative sur la préférence des étudiants entre les titres conventionnels et les titres accrocheurs était l'année d'inscription (les étudiants de première et de quatrième année étaient davantage attirés par les titres de cours accrocheurs; les étudiants des cycles supérieurs et ceux inscrits en deuxième et troisième année semblaient préférer les titres de cours conventionnels). Les implications en matière de marketing et de pédagogie sont discutées, ainsi que la nécessité de faire des recherches plus avancées sur la question.

Keywords
course titles, catchy titles, student engagement, student recruitment, curriculum development

Judging by the literature, the topic of catchy course titles appears not to merit scholarly research. A literature review of the relationship between catchy course titles and student interest unearths one scholarly publication (Kemper, Woods, & McBride, 2008), which is only loosely associated with this topic. This study explored the impact of course titles on student enrolment figures by marketing the same course under two different titles: a "knowledge oriented" title vs. a "behavior oriented" title. Enrolment was significantly higher for the "knowledge oriented" course title, suggesting that course titles do have an impact. The remaining articles that address the topic consist of blog postings, student newspaper editorials, and short general interest pieces. Their different insights are frequently characterized by a common tone: dismissiveness.

Perhaps the adjective "catchy" explains the lack of sustained serious interest. Imprecise, colloquial, and therefore the antithesis of academic phrasing, the word itself may act as a barrier to in depth scrutiny of the topic. Perhaps researchers are dissuaded by the commercialization that is attached to the topic. The strategy of "luring students with gimmicky course titles" (Urback, 2009) may be unsavoury for many academics, who would, therefore, prefer to distance themselves from it.

Certainly, the attempt to increase student enrolment is the most obvious reason for the rise of catchy course titles.[1] An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* sums up a recurring sentiment: faculty who feel pressured to attract students may resort to giving their courses "jazzed up titles" in the hope that these will attract "students who go shopping for courses" (Fendrich, 2011, para. 2). That post-secondary institutions would feel pressured to market themselves in this way is not surprising in light of the amount of competition they face. In Canada, Ontario alone has

> 20 publicly assisted universities and their affiliates; 24 publicly assisted colleges of applied arts and technology; three agricultural colleges affiliated with the University of Guelph and a school of horticulture; one applied health science institute; 17 privately funded institutions with restricted degree-granting authority; the federally funded Royal Military College; about 570 registered private career colleges; and many more non-degree-granting private institutions offering postsecondary education or training. (HEQCO, 2010, p. 8)

All these higher education facilities compete for their share of the undergraduate market. This competition has recently intensified for the publicly funded institutions in particular. As government funding shrinks, their low enrolment programs become increasingly vulnerable to cancellation (Bradshaw, 2012).

Marketing through catchy titles offers one means of addressing that vulnerability. This strategy appears, at least anecdotally, to work. Mainstream media reports abound with stories like the following:

> Boston College German studies professor Michael Resler went searching for a way to boost flagging interest in his "German Literature of the High Middle Ages" class a few years ago, and settled on the idea of simply giving the course a sexier name. The resulting "Knights, Castles, and Dragons" nearly tripled enrollment. Resler then replaced his class

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[1] Our reference to "the rise of catchy course titles" is based on anecdotal evidence that suggests the practice is becoming more common. As stated above, academic research on the topic is limited. We found only one scholarly article.

on "The Songs of Walter von der Vogelweide," a great German lyric poet, with "Passion, Politics, and Poetry in the Middle Ages." Again, enrollment swelled. (Schworm, 2009, para. 1)

Similar outcomes are reflected in the following headlines, all culled from popular media sites: "Creative class titles attract students" (Brimmer, 2013); "Students basing course choices heavily on name" (Kashty, 2009); "Increase student viewership with striking titles" (Buros, 2009); and by the fact that at least one American university offers the following advice to faculty on its official Course Proposal form: "catchy titles work" (Boston University School of Public Health, 2015).

The rise of catchy course titles, however, may also be linked to another cause, one more palatable for many academics: sound pedagogy. Catchy course titles may encourage faculty to develop creative courses that engage and challenge both the instructor and the students. Right now, faculty members typically inherit the courses they teach, along with their titles. Changing the latter can be a bureaucratic, time- consuming process; consequently, many courses being taught today carry a title that was developed decades earlier. However, as one faculty member explained, "there's incentive to fit what you do under rubrics that already exist" (Linton, 2013, para. 5). If that is the case, faculty may feel psychologically constrained by the conventional titles. That constraint may be reflected in what and how they teach.

In contrast, catchy titles may exert a symbolic influence, signaling to faculty members that they have the freedom to show their enthusiasm and engage in pedagogical experimentation (Brown, 2009). Certainly, this notion appears to be the incentive behind the course titles in the University of Guelph's First Year Seminars program. The program offers small classes to incoming students as a way of facilitating their transition into university. Course proposals, which include course titles, are to be developed with the intent of "breaking down barriers," providing faculty with the opportunity to "rethink their teaching" and "explore new, creative and often unconventional or experimental courses" (University of Guelph First Year Seminars Program, para. 2). Past titles in the program, such as "Forbidden Knowledge and Dangerous Minds," "The Savvy Surfer," "All about Facebook," "Sex in the 21st Century: How and Why," and "Why Do People Believe in Weird Things?" reflect that intent. Interestingly, a burgeoning enrolment was never one of the program's goals. Each course has a self-imposed cap of 18 students. The catchy titles, in this case, appear to be more about serving pedagogy than boosting enrolment.

Certainly catchy titles can reflect an important element of sound pedagogy: a learner-centred (rather than content-centred) focus. Conventional course titles (e.g., "20th Century Canadian Literature," "Organizational Behaviour," "Research Methods," etc.) tend to be content-centred, highlighting the course's subject matter or academic discipline. In contrast, catchy course titles, such as the ones in University of Guelph's First Year Seminar Program, tend to highlight the learner's needs and interests.

At the same time, however, catchy titles might also suggest lowered expectations of those needs and interests. In explaining to a newspaper reporter the rationale behind course titles such as "The Romantic Art of Walking" and "The Oprah Effect," the Dean of Arts at Wilfrid Laurier University stated that they were designed to target students' limited attention spans, the casualty of lifelong digital immersion (Brown, 2009). The same newspaper article quotes a McMaster University faculty member who renamed "Legends of Good Women in the Middle Ages" to "Good Women, Bad Girls." The faculty member wanted to omit the reference to the Middle

Ages because "the Internet generation seems to find [anything before the 1960s] intimidating. And [the original title] was long. [Students] do better with sound bites" (para. 14). Research exists that supports the claim of reduced attention span among members of the millennial generation (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Junginger, 2008).

Not surprisingly, the above view is not without its critics, most notably among the very population the titles are intended to target: students. An editor for Princeton University's student newspaper, *Nassau Weekly,* inveighs against "shameless course titles" that attempt to draw students with salacious references to popular media (Linton, 2013, para. 3). These titles suggest a disrespectful perception of current students as intellectually and culturally shallow. Another student, writing for a national Canadian news magazine, characterizes catchy titles as insulting because they suggest students require a reference to "Paris Hilton or OMG to spark their interest" (Urback, 2009, para. 6). Instead, their derision is more likely to be sparked if students perceive the title as condescending.

In short, the issue of catchy course titles is contentious, attracting both critics and supporters. However, neither camp's opinions appear to be supported by empirical research. This research is needed because course titles are likely to become increasingly important. Two factors drive the importance of course titles:

(a) The increasing prominence of online learning: as one blogger explains, "title-related issues loom even larger for online courses, since there may be fewer contexts for understanding course titles when a student isn't on campus" (Neal, 2008, para. 6).

(b) Government cutbacks to post-secondary funding: shrinking government funds mean that colleges and universities are intensifying their marketing efforts to attract more students in a highly competitive atmosphere (Enrollment Management Review, 2009). Crafting course titles that attract student interest will likely be part of that competition.

And one factor underscores the importance of course titles: the relationship between our words and our thoughts. This relationship is central to the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis. As Sapir (1958) explains, "We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" (p. 69). Orwell's (1946) iconic essay *Politics and the English Language* reminds us of the potential consequences of this relationship, whereby words not only reflect, but also shape, our thoughts: "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts" (p. 252). Words matter; therefore, they merit scholarly examination, particularly when they are being used in the service of higher learning. Course titles fall into this category. Moreover, what makes course titles a particularly topical, albeit unexplored area for research is their apparent trend toward catchy, nonconventional wording. Our study represents a preliminary foray into this research by investigating the relationship between that trend and student interest. We surveyed over 360 students, both undergraduate and graduate, enrolled in business studies at a Canadian university in order to address, and explore the implications of, the following question: "Does a catchy course title elicit more student interest than its conventional counterpart?"

Method

An online survey was sent to all undergraduate and graduate business students enrolled at a mid-sized university in Southern Ontario. Of the 1320 recipients, 368 completed the survey. Participant demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. Research Ethics Board approval for research involving human participants was granted for this study.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

	Area of Specialization							
	HAFA[1]	Tourism	Food	Marketing	HR[2]	Accounting	Ag[3] Business	Other
Frequency	140	40	13	18	7	34	17	34
Percent	46	14	4	6	2	11	6	11

	Academic Average						
	< 90%	80-89%	75-79%	70-74%	65-69%	60-64%	Below 60%
Frequency	6	89	96	71	22	11	4
Percent	2	30	32	24	7	4	1

	Year Registered In					
	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Grad.	Other
Frequency	85	50	53	71	33	10
Percent	28	17	18	23	11	3

	Age				
	17-19	20-22	23-30	31-40	41+over
Frequency	59	160	46	18	20
Percent	19	53	15	6	7

	Student Status			
	Co-op	Exchange	International	Transfer
Frequency	75	14	36	17
Percent	20	4	10	5

	Gender	
	Male	Female
Frequency	102	200
Percent	34	66

Notes. [1] HAFA refers to students majoring in the Hotel and Food Administration program.
[2] HR refers to students majoring in Human Resources.
[3] Ag refers to students majoring in Agricultural Business.

The respondents were instructed to assume that they were at the start of their business program, given a list of business course titles, and asked to rate their level of interest in each course using a seven-point Likert scale that ranged from "not interested" to "very interested". Each course title also provided a link to a short course description, similar to that which would be found in a course calendar. Respondents could choose whether or not to click on that link (survey attached as an appendix).

The courses represented five of the six core content areas for hospitality curricula that were identified by Umbreit (1992): leadership, human resources management, services marketing, financial analysis, and communication skills. We chose core courses from hospitality curricula because most of the survey recipients, and nearly 65% of respondents were enrolled in a hospitality, food and tourism management program. The courses, however, were also sufficiently general to be found in any business program.

For the sixth content area, we deviated from Umbreit by substituting the somewhat outdated "total quality management" included in his list with its more relevant contemporary counterpart "service management.".

Each content area was represented by two course titles, a conventional title and a catchy title. The conventional titles were discipline-centred, representative of the traditional course titles that might be found in the calendar of a typical business program. In contrast, the catchy titles were phrased with the intent of being "learner-centred"; they referenced the benefit or value of the course to the student. Table 2 contains a list of the titles. Here, for the sake of clarity and convenience, the two titles from the same discipline are placed together. In the actual survey, however, no effort was made to present the titles in any particular order, other than to ensure that two titles from the same discipline were not presented consecutively. All participants saw the same questions in the same order.

The respondents were not told the purpose of the study nor were they told that the twelve course titles represented only six courses, with each course being assigned two discrete titles (conventional vs. catchy) that shared the same course description. Disclosing this information to the respondents would likely bias the results (i.e., students might rank according to their perception of the "right" answer, rather than according to their actual interest). Certainly our literature review suggested that this is an emotion-laden topic that elicited strong opinions from the student stakeholders. Therefore, in the interests of obtaining objective, reasoned responses, complete disclosure was withheld.

Because we found no other studies on this specific topic, and therefore no comparable methodology or relevant published findings to consider as we designed our study, we cast a broad net with our survey. Along with the twelve course rankings, we collected as much information as possible about our respondents so that, if warranted, our subsequent analysis could address as many variables as possible.

Therefore, information was collected regarding the respondents' age, gender, area of specialization, year of study, academic average, participation in exchange program(s), and whether they were transfer, international, or co-op students. We also asked to what extent, if any, their course title rankings were influenced by how the course titles might be perceived by someone reading their official academic transcript.

Respondents were also asked to rank their interest level on a 7-point Likert scale (not interested to very interested) in each of the six core business subject areas: leadership, business communications, human resources, accounting, finance, and service management. Collecting this information would allow us to discern whether the rankings were influenced less by course title and more by the respondents' predisposed interest in a particular subject area.

That same reasoning guided our decision to focus on core courses only (as opposed to electives). It is reasonable to assume that business students would hold a balanced level of interest in the core courses of a business program. Presumably, their interest in these core courses motivated them to enroll in the business program. Elective courses, on the other hand, would likely elicit a wider range of responses, depending on each particular student (i.e., the

interest ranking of an elective course could be more influenced by an idiosyncratic predisposition for or against a particular subject rather than by the phrasing of the course title). Another way of explaining this is that we wanted the course titles to be on a reasonably level playing field; hence, we chose core course titles only.

Results

We began data analysis with a series of paired samples t-tests to test for student differences in rating of conventional course titles and their catchy counterparts. Results are reported in Table 2 and indicate several significant differences in ratings between catchy and conventional course titles. Missing cases were excluded list-wise. Skewness and kurtosis were well within expected values and no significant deviations from normality were present. Furthermore, non-significant Shapiro-Wilks tests for normality illustrate a normal distribution of the differences in ratings between title pairings. For each given pair, a difference score was calculated by subtracting the conventional rating from that of the catchy rating. Differences were then used to compute the dependent t score for each of the six pairings. Negative means indicate a preference towards the conventional title while positive values indicate a preference towards the catchy title. Thus, the negative t-values in Table 2 indicate an increase in likeability rating towards the conventional course title.

Table 2
Results of Paired Samples t-tests for Differences between Catchy and Conventional Course Title Ratings

Course Title Pairings	N	M (SD)	df	t
Foundations of Leadership How to be a Leader and a Team Player in the Digital Workplace	301	-.30 (1.74)	300	-3.04**
Business Communications Communicating With Confidence in and Out of the Workplace	301	.15 (1.53)	300	1.70
Human Resource Management Honouring and Harnessing the Power of People Within Your Organization	301	-.24 (1.80)	300	-2.30*
Principles of Accounting Debits, Credits and Beyond: Understanding the Role That Numbers Play in the Business World	301	.53 (1.78)	300	5.19***
Financial Management Managing the Company's Money: Issues, Ideas and Answers	301	.08 (1.61)	300	0.82
Service Management Customers, Profit and Power: Understanding the Role Service Plays in a Successful Business	301	.07 (1.71)	300	0.74

Notes. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

We continued data analysis by calculating an overall difference score for each participant. By averaging the differences in rating between each conventional and catchy course title pairing for all six pairings, we calculated a rough measure of overall preference towards conventional or catchy titles. Three cases (z = 4.672, z = 4.848, z = 4.142) were determined to be outliers and were removed from the study. Results suggest that, on the whole, students preferred catchy titles over conventional titles. Scores ranged from -16 (highly favourable of conventional titles) to 15 (highly favourable of catchy titles). However, this mean difference was not significant, $t(300)=.98$, p<.05.

To understand if group membership influenced the overall preference score, we ran Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test for significant differences by demographic variables. Analyses were conducted for gender, year of registration, academic average, and area of specialization. Boxplots did not detect any significant outliers, and data were normally distributed for each group (as assessed by skewness and kurtosis values). Non-significant Levene's tests (Levene, 1960) and calculation of the variance ratio (Pearson & Hartley, 1954) revealed the assumption of homogeneity of variance had not been violated. Hochberg post hoc comparisons, which account for unequal sample sizes, were used to follow up significant results.

Results provide evidence for one main effect of group membership on overall preference score. As Table 3 illustrates, there was a significant main effect of student's year of registration, $F(5,153)=2.70$, $p<.05$; partial $\eta^2 = .08$. More specifically, post hoc comparisons (see Table 4) illustrate that fourth year students (M=2.17, SD=6.36) have a stronger overall predisposition towards catchy titles than first year (M=.19, SD=5.75, $p<.05$), second year (M=-.01, SD=6.27, $p<.05$) and third year students (M=-1.71, SD=6.58, $p<.05$), but not graduate students (M=-.24, SD=5.50, ns). Furthermore, students registered in an "other" year reported a significantly higher preference towards catchy titles (M=4.06, SD=5.54) than second year students (M=-.01, SD=6.27, $p<.05$) and graduate students (M=-.24, SD=5.50, $p<.05$).

Table 3
Summary of ANOVA Results of Group Mean Comparisons for Overall Course Title Preference

Source of Variation	df	F	Partial Eta2	p
Gender (A)	1	1.57	0.01	0.21
Area of Specialization (B)	7	0.26	0.01	0.97
Year Registered (C)	5	2.70	0.08	0.02
Academic Average (D)	6	0.85	0.03	0.54
AxB	7	0.51	0.02	0.83
AxC	5	1.10	0.03	0.37
AxD	4	0.97	0.03	0.42
BxC	20	0.82	0.10	0.69
BxD	19	0.53	0.06	0.94
CxD	15	1.25	0.11	0.24
Error	153			

Table 4
Summary of Mean Post Hoc Comparisons for Years of Registration on Overall Preference Score

Year (A)	Year (B)	Mean Difference (A-B)	Std. Error	Sig.
First (1)	2	0.64	0.91	0.48
	3	0.01	0.89	0.99
	4	-2.00	0.83	0.02*
	5	0.07	1.05	0.01*
	6	-4.58	1.69	0.48
Second (2)	3	-.63	0.99	0.53
	4	-2.64	0.94	0.01*
	5	-.57	1.14	0.62
	6	-5.22	1.75	0.00*
Third (3)	4	-2.00	0.93	0.03*
	5	0.06	1.13	0.96
	6	-4.59	1.74	0.01*
Fourth (4)	5	2.07	1.09	0.06
	6	-2.58	1.71	0.13
Graduate Studies (5)	6	-4.65	1.83	0.01*
Other (6)				

Note. * Refers to significant mean differences value at the $p < .05$ level.

Discussion

Survey respondents indicated some interest in all the course titles, both catchy and conventional. This finding was not surprising. The respondents were business students being asked to rank their interest in the core business courses of a program they had all chosen to enroll in. We would expect the core courses to hold some interest for them, whether their titles were conventional or catchy.

That interest, however, was more evident for some course titles than for others. As indicated in Table 2, when the difference in ratings of the same course, phrased in either conventional or catchy language is considered, results are more telling.

For example, the leadership course pairing and the human resource course pairing were the only ones where the respondents showed a significant preference for conventional titles over catchy titles. Both were also the only courses with an obvious focus on people skills or the so-called soft skills. With their emphasis on emotional intelligence, such courses may be perceived as lacking academic rigour and even dismissed as "touchy feely." The students' preference for a conventional title that references discipline knowledge, as opposed to personal learning benefits, may suggest an attempt to counter that image, bolstering the course's (and therefore the students') academic credibility. Conversely, the accounting pairing was the only instance where students showed a significant preference for the catchy title over its conventional counterpart. Of the six course pairings offered in the survey, accounting was also the only one that suffers from a broadly perceived image as dry, whose goal is to produce "bean counters". The students' preference for a catchy title in this instance may suggest their preference for an interesting course.

Every program has its share of core courses that suffer from limited student interest before the first class even begins. Instructors of these courses are at a disadvantage right from the start, facing students who may be disengaged and lacking motivation. The course title, while certainly not a panacea, may help address this problem. It is reasonable to conclude that students who perceive a course to be interesting and academically credible – even when that perception is based solely on the title – may bring a positive mindset to the first class. For some students, a positive start may increase the likelihood of a positive learning experience throughout the course.

For the remaining choices, the catchy titles garnered higher interest rankings, although the differences were not always significant. Therefore, the study results do not provide unqualified support for the practice of assigning catchy titles to courses to attract interest from prospective students. The results suggest this practice may work in some cases, but not in all.

The ANOVA was intended to shed light on the specific circumstances in which this practice might work. More specifically, it allowed us to better understand if group membership plays a role in overall predisposition towards liking catchy or conventional titles. Our findings and their implications follow.

First year students preferred catchy titles, but this preference changed during second year when students preferred conventional titles. The preference towards conventional titles was elevated for third year students, but quickly dissipated and reversed order during fourth year, where most students preferred catchy titles. Those students who extended their undergraduate experience beyond a fourth year showed an even stronger preference for catchy titles. Finally, when students enter graduate school we see a return to a preference for the conventional course titles. In other words, we found a curvilinear trend.

The higher ratings accorded by graduate students to conventional course titles may have a pragmatic basis: employer perception of the knowledge, skills and competencies required for successful workplace performance. The graduate students who completed the survey are enrolled in a part-time, distance MBA program. Almost all of them balance their graduate studies with a fulltime job, and many have their tuition fully or partially paid by their employer. Under these circumstances, a catchy course title that highlights the learner's needs may take less priority than a conventional title that clearly identifies discipline-specific and workplace-relevant knowledge. In other words, the characteristics of this particular group of graduate students (i.e., employed, enrolled in a terminal degree associated with career advancement, and whose tuition may be funded by their employer) might explain their preference for conventional course titles.

The students registered in the fourth and fifth year of their undergraduate program occupy a position quite different from the graduate students: they are fulltime students nearing the end of a program that has already given them sustained exposure to their chosen discipline, often in the form of conventionally titled courses. Having successfully completed these courses, fourth and fifth year students may now be receptive to exploring the new territory suggested by the creatively titled courses. Confidence may also be a factor here: the preference for catchy titles increased among high performing fourth and fifth year students (i.e., those with an academic average of 90% or greater).

First year students might also share this desire to explore new academic territory: they are embarking on a new academic, and likely personal, chapter in their lives and may therefore be particularly interested in exploring courses whose titles suggest something different from what they have been accustomed to. These circumstances may explain their preference for catchy titles.

More prosaically, it may be useful to remember that first year undergraduates, unlike fourth and fifth year students, have yet to establish a track record of success in their post secondary studies. The catchy titles, because of their allusions to personal learning outcomes and interests, may be perceived as a gateway to more "academically friendly" courses than those with conventional, discipline-based titles. In other words, a course with a catchy title might be viewed as a less daunting, more comfortable option than a course with a conventional title, therefore attracting the attention of a first year student apprehensive about academic success. This view might explain why first year students with a weak academic average showed an extremely high preference for catchy titles (M=15.90).

The academic concerns of second and third year students may also help explain their preference for conventional course titles. These concerns would involve identifying a major; and ensuring their course selection sets them on a path to satisfy degree requirements. Conventional course titles that clearly identify course content would make these tasks easier.

However, while the above may be a "tidy," reasonable theory, it is based on speculation only. It also assumes that the survey respondents, despite their best efforts, may not have been able to carry out the instructions given to them at the start of the survey: to assume that they were at the start of their business program. This may be even more of a challenge for students in later years of study, due to the lengthier span of time between present day and when they first began the business program. Therefore, research examining the *reasons* students chose one course title over another would be helpful, particularly for academic advisors who could use this knowledge to anticipate and address student bias toward or against particular courses. A qualitative methodology may best serve such exploration.

In any case, these findings do not support blanket efforts to attract the Millennial cohort through replacing conventional course titles with catchy versions, suggesting that such efforts may be fuelled more by faulty stereotyping than empirical evidence.

In fact, efforts to attract students through course titles might be more fruitfully directed toward an older undergraduate demographic, since the latter is projected to account for an increasing percentage of post-secondary enrolment in Canada over the coming decade (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011). The traditional age group from which college and universities draw their enrolment is 18 to 21 years. However, the population in that age group has declined and will continue to do so over the next ten years in Canada – a situation already reflected in falling enrolments in Ontario's colleges and universities. At the same time, the population of older age groups, from 22 to 39 years, will increase. This demographic shift has the potential, according to the AUCC (2012), to "drive enrolment demand over the next five to seven years" (p. 24). If these older students share the same career-oriented focus as the similarly-aged graduate students surveyed here, conventional course titles might be an effective strategy to capture some of the enrolment demand represented by this demographic. This strategy may also be particularly effective at attracting a higher enrolment for executive programs, those short-term, typically non-credit programs from business schools that target career professionals.

Despite not finding a main effect of gender on overall title preference, one might speculate on whether the mean difference between male and female course title preference (i.e., males showed a higher preference toward catchy titles than did females) is related, at least in part, to the job market. Women graduates increased their representation in Canadian business and financial sectors from 38.3% in 1987 to 51.2% in 2009 (Statistics Canada, 2010). However, despite their overall majority status in these sectors, women are still thinly represented in

management positions. They constitute only 37% of those employed in managerial positions, and more of these positions are within lower level management than senior management. Furthermore, females in the Canadian workplace earn, on average, 26% less than men (Pay Equity Commission, 2012).

Various factors account for these numbers, but one widely acknowledged factor is the glass ceiling, the pervasive, often unacknowledged, barriers that prevent women from career advancement. Female students aiming for a professional career in the business or financial sectors would not be oblivious to this factor, which might explain their preference for conventional course titles. Employers in the business and financial sectors might perceive a transcript that references discipline-specific and work-place relevant knowledge in the form of conventional course titles more favourably than a transcript containing catchy course titles. For female business students, therefore, choosing conventional course titles might be a way of leveling a playing field that, despite employers' best intentions, still implicitly favours males.

In any case, these findings have implications for targeted marketing efforts of colleges and universities. For some time, female undergraduates in Canadian post secondary institutions have outnumbered males. The most recent available numbers bear this out: in 2007/2008, women represented 57% of the fulltime university undergraduates in Canada. In 2005/2006, they accounted for 55% of the fulltime enrolment in college diploma and certificate programs (Statistics Canada, 2009). Consequently, in 2012, 73.2% of women between 25 to 44 years old had completed post-secondary education compared to 63.1% of men within the same age group (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2012). In discussing the ratio of female to male undergraduates, however, much depends on the program. Women dominate certain disciplines, particularly education and health sciences, whereas men represent the majority in others, such as engineering, mathematics, and computer science (Statistics Canada, 2013). Certainly the business program from which we elicited our respondents reflects this gender imbalance: for the past ten years, approximately 65% of its undergraduates have been female.

In a highly competitive environment, it makes sense for postsecondary institutions to adopt marketing strategies that target or broaden their particular demographic. Therefore, a business or professional program that targets female students might increase its competitive edge by offering conventional course titles. Similarly, catchy titles might help a program with a dearth of male students achieve a more balanced male-female ratio.

Conclusion

In the issue of conventional vs. catchy course titles, words matter – but perhaps not in the way one might have envisioned. A catchy course title may elicit greater student interest than a conventional title in some cases, but not in all. We found no evidence to support either recommendation as a generic approach. Instead, our findings suggest a more "tailored" approach to course naming, one that heavily considers year of registration.

In retrospect, this conclusion should not come as a surprise. As educators, our words – and that includes the words used to name our courses – should address our students' needs. Those needs will vary depending on one's level of experience and subsequent maturational development within the educational system. Keeping this in mind as we develop our course titles means rejecting the "one size fits all" approach in favour of a more learner-centred approach.

Course Titles and Enhanced Student Learning

Our research leads us to conclude that course titles may influence student learning in various ways. For example, traditional first-year students, particularly those who are apprehensive about their academic success, may gravitate toward catchy titles as a way of easing that apprehension. Additionally, a creative course title may suggest pedagogical creativity, signaling to students that they have the freedom to explore new ways of learning and signaling, as well, that the instructor has the freedom to explore new ways of teaching.

In either case, the theories of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) can help us to better understand the important role of student task enjoyment, or satisfaction, in eliciting feelings of competence and control (Kauffman & Husman, 2004). Student satisfaction may be derived from student-level predictors (age, gender, reason for taking the course) and/or course-level predictors (class size, course type) (Baek & Shin, 2008). It may also come from more dynamic sources such as faculty-student interaction (Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010). The course title can be viewed as the students' first interaction with their instructors. It makes sense, therefore, to pay attention to its wording.

Future Areas of Research

Our study was exploratory. Certain results, particularly regarding effects of group membership on differences in title pairings, yield no clear pattern or explanation. Therefore, more research is needed to address the following questions and their implications:

*Student demographic factor*s.

- Why is year of registration such an important variable?
- What are the implications towards the projected increase in nontraditional students?
- How do catchy course titles, particularly those based on cultural references or idiomatic expressions, affect ESL/EAL students?
- Do these findings apply to nonbusiness programs?
- How do catchy course titles, particularly those based on cultural references or idiomatic expressions affect academic advisors dealing with articulation agreements between educational institutions?
- Do these findings apply to electives?

Program enrollment.

- To what extent, if any, will these results influence student recruitment and retention?

Pedagogy.

- Is the instructor's teaching/learning approach influenced by a conventional or a catchy course title?

Pursuing these areas will allow us to affirm, challenge or guide a practice that affects our students and that is becoming increasingly common throughout higher education in Canada and beyond.

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Appendix
Study Survey

Assume that you are at the start of your business degree. Review the following list of courses that will be offered to you and rate your level of interest in taking them. Click on the bubble that is most representative of your interest.

(If you wish to review the course description before you answer, click on "yes" below.)

	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Foundations of Leadership	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes ○	No ○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Communicating With Confidence in and Out of the Workplace	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes ○	No ○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Honouring and Harnessing the Power of People Within Your Organization	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes ○	No ○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Debits, Credits and Beyond: Understanding the Role That Numbers Play in the Business World	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes ○	No ○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Financial Management	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes ○	No ○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
How to be a Leader and a Team Player in the Digital Workplace	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes ○	No ○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Business Communications	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes ○	No ○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Customers, Profit and Power: Understanding the Role Service Plays in a Successful Business	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes ○	No ○					

	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Principles of Accounting	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes	No					
	○	○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Managing the Company's Money: Issues, Ideas and Answers	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes	No					
	○	○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Service Management	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes	No					
	○	○					
	Not Interested			Interested			Very Interested
Human Resource Management	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
View the Course Description	Yes	No					
	○	○					

When you chose the courses in this survey, were you influenced by how they might be perceived by someone reading your official academic transcript?

Yes	No
○	○

What is your age?

○	17-19
○	20-22
○	23-30
○	31-40
○	41 and over

What is your gender?

○	Male
○	Female

What is your area of specialization?

○	HAFA
○	Tourism
○	Food
○	Marketing
○	Human Resources
○	Accounting
○	Ag Business
○	Other

What year are you registered in?

○	First
○	Second
○	Third
○	Fourth
○	Graduate Studies
○	Other

What is your academic average so far?

○	90% and over
○	80%-89%
○	75%-79%
○	70%-74%
○	65%-69%
○	60%-64%
○	Below 60%

Which of the subject areas in your program are you most interested in? Rank the following subjects below from most interested (6) to least interested (1)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Leadership	○	○	○	○	○	○
Communications	○	○	○	○	○	○
Finance	○	○	○	○	○	○
Service	○	○	○	○	○	○
Accounting	○	○	○	○	○	○
Human Resources	○	○	○	○	○	○

Check the box that best applies to you

○	I am a Co-op student
○	I have taken part in an exchange program at another university
○	I am attending the university as an international student
○	I am a transfer student from another college or university
○	None of the above