

# 59 Cultural Studies and University Rankings

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## Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

## Abstract

We offer a Cultural Studies approach—a transdisciplinary field of study critically examining contemporary culture—to illuminate the roles of cultural producers and consumers in mediating the meaning of university rankings amidst a global media landscape. Using the case study of Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and drawing on the concepts of a) meaning-making, b) cultural texts, and c) audiencing, we illuminate how QS, as a commercial ranker, aims to ‘fix’ meanings about quality and excellence in global higher education (HE) through its various outreach efforts. Based on a multi-method analysis of QS’ digital texts, specifically a YouTube video and a press release, we demonstrate how interactions between cultural producers and consumers complicate a ranker’s efforts to fix and diffuse meanings about HE. We argue that a Cultural Studies approach helps us probe the meaning-making process underlying university rankings amid a digital media culture.

## Full paper

Defying traditional understandings of the roles and impacts of university rankings in higher education (HE) (Hazelkorn, 2017; Lo, 2014; Stack, 2021), we offer a Cultural Studies (CS) approach to studying the relationship between university rankings and culture. CS is a transdisciplinary field of study critically examining contemporary culture from non-elite and counter-hegemonic perspectives with an openness to the culture’s reception and production in everyday life (During, 2007). Using the case study of Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and drawing on the concepts of a) meaning-making, b) cultural texts, and c) audiencing, we illuminate how QS, as a commercial ranker, aims to ‘fix’ meanings about quality and excellence in global higher education (HE) through its various outreach efforts. Based on a multi-method analysis of QS’ digital texts, specifically a YouTube video and a press release, we demonstrate how interactions between cultural producers and consumers complicate a ranker’s efforts to fix and diffuse meanings about HE. We argue that a Cultural Studies approach helps us probe the meaning-making process underlying university rankings amid a digital media culture.

First, central to cultural production and consumption is the question of *meaning-making*. From a CS perspective, the ‘meaning’ of an object (i.e., rankings) is not inherent in the “object itself” but shaped by broader socio-cultural processes, such as signifying practices (Hall, 1997). As such, meaning-making is a negotiated process, whereby the cultural producer (author) seeks to fix and communicate particular meanings for their audience (reader) using cultural texts and signifying practices. Second, meaning-making is also mediated by the role of *cultural texts*. Here by “text” we are signifying that a cultural product serves as a text, producing meaning and is authored with particular audiences in mind. A cultural text thus interfaces the cultural producer with the consumer. Third, meaning-making is mediated by the role of *audiencing*. The role of audiences, or consumers, in meaning-making, is not simply passive, but also mediated by their social positionality, contexts, and whether they can identify with the meanings being communicated (During, 2007; Kellner, 2011). Examining audiencing is key for understanding how cultural producers, like QS, and their audiences, from varying social locations, negotiate what to think, do, fear, and desire (Kellner, 2011).

We analyzed QS Top Universities YouTube channel’s most watched video’s foundational narrative and its audience comments. Our chosen video artifact is titled, “Meet the UK’s Top Universities 2019” and has amassed 483,652 views and over 500-plus comments since its posting on June 6, 2018. We examined the participatory dimension of the QS video, specifically the 500+ comments the video received, and observed that audiences consumed and negotiated the QS “story” (meaning) about the UK’s top universities from various standpoints. While some identified with the QS story (compliance), others added or challenged the QS story. As such, multiple audiences surfaced through the cultural consumption process by attributing different meanings to the QS video. QS occasionally replied to audiences’ comments. Audiencing helps us illustrate how meanings are not unidirectional between a cultural producer (QS) and

consumer (audiences) through a cultural text (e.g., YouTube video), but are negotiated based on audiences' HE status, aspirations, interactions, identities, and critiques.

After reading The Economic Times' 2021 article on Indian universities' 2022 QS ranking results, we noticed the exact quote below from Ben Sowter, the QS Director of Research, regarding QS' Asian Rankings. A quick Google search with Sowter's above quote resulted in 10+ news releases from various national and independent news media, such as The Korea Herald, The Standard, Global Giants, Asia One, Malay Mail, and others. We eventually confirmed that Sowter's quote was initially circulated by PR Newswire in an original press release authored by PR Newswire on their website, which cited QS Quacquerelli Symonds as the source. The pervasive use of Sowter's quote despite differences in media actors speaks to the nature of rankings as a meaning-making tool that can sell news and attract audiences, and perhaps why QS employs a company like PR Newswire for their outreach. While some of the news media act as cultural producers by recontextualizing QS' meaning-making, others merely consumed QS' story, with both seeking to engage and form new/local audiences. Taken together, these media networks and their digital platforms help diffuse and normalize the use of university rankings as a meaning-making tool for assessing and articulating the quality and excellence of local HE institutions.

## References

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