

132 '5 secrets they won't tell you': Analysing YouTube Advice Videos on Contacting a Potential Doctoral Supervisor

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Aspiring doctoral researchers seeking guidance about locating and contacting a potential supervisor can access a range of advice, including institutional webpages, independent blogs, advice books and social media. Much guidance can also be found freely available on the internet, where videos are presented by 'insiders' including current/past students, academics and institutions. This paper analyses advice videos about initial supervisor contact found on YouTube. Situating the videos as texts in the doctoral advice genre, it analyses a sample to gain insight into their style, types of advice, contextual positionality and how they utilise notions of authority to communicate expertise. The paper demonstrates that whilst there is a wealth of doctoral admissions advice on YouTube that might be helpful, particularly for those without existing knowledge or the privilege of networks, these videos contribute to a complex advice market that requires critical scrutiny in terms of motivation and message.

Full paper

Introduction

Doctoral advice is a broad field of self-help materials and enquiry. As scholars have noted, there is advice available for various phases of the doctoral journey (Oliver, 2004), and these texts have also been interrogated to discern how advice both abates and exaggerates concerns about the challenges of doctoral study (Kamler and Thomson, 2008). A domain that is particularly susceptible to concern is pre-application doctoral communications (PADC), which are the queries and conversations that take place between applicants and staff prior to formal application. PADC is not only a source of confusion (Kim and Spencer-Oatey 2020), but also a site for potential exclusion and bias (Milkman et al. 2015). It is therefore unsurprising that there are an array of advice videos about how to find, contact and secure a supervisor. This paper outlines a study of these YouTube videos, their styles and their pedagogies, and positions them within the scholarly conversation about the rhetorical construction of doctoral advice.

The study

This study, which was part of a wider study of PADC (www.warwick.ac.uk/padc) undertook a search of YouTube videos focused on the topic of "How to contact a potential PhD supervisor" (including variants on this phrasing). It then sought to establish what types of advice are given in YouTube PADC guidance videos, and to identify common features of the PADC video advice. After a rigorous search process, a corpus of 100 videos was developed. Videos included in the study all had over 100 views, were in English only, and no more than 10 years since posting. The ten videos with the highest views were then selected as a sample and then subjected to thematic and discursive analysis for this paper.

Findings

This paper presents a sample of ten videos in order to paint a picture of popular advice about how to locate, contact and secure a supervisor. Views in the sample ranged from 31,717 to 429,749 at the time of writing. The sample included three videos from institutions (University of Kent, Memorial University of Newfoundland and the Graduate School Western Sydney University) with the other seven being presented by academics or students who run PhD advice and experience accounts, or what could be termed 'doctoral influencers'.

Whilst some videos had a sense of national context and the different process in, e.g. Humanities and Sciences or the US vs the UK (Clark, 2016; WeDesified, 2020), there was an observable tendency to generalise the complex relational aspects of gaining supervisor endorsement, for example, '5 easy steps of getting a PhD' (Clark, 2016), '5 secrets' about supervisors (Stapleton, 2020) or 'best format' to email (WiseUp Communications, 2022).

Institutional videos favoured multiple speakers, either in the form of colleagues in dialogue or shifting from shots of students and academics covering different topics, possibly representing notions of academic community (Western Sydney University, 2015). Dialogue was also the presentation style of one 'influencer' who spoke to a fellow doctoral student (Onyina, 2022), but the rest of the sample featured individuals speaking directly to the camera. Influencer accounts reflected a strong sense of 'brand identity' – channels have a name, visual identifier/logo, and one even had merchandise for sale (Stapleton, 2020).

In addition, the study was concerned with how authority was constructed. In doctoral influencer videos, authority was often suggested through unsubstantiated claims about PADC: '80% of emails...end up in trash' (Infosessionswithkingsley, 2020); suggestive pronoun use to position supervisors as secretive and on another side: 'all of the things they don't want you to know about them' (Stapleton, 2020); and notions of being an insider based on personal experience or autobiographical detail. Although it can be helpful to hear personal stories of success, it was possible to locate connotations between personal preference and general advice: 'they are not going to care...I don't really care unless you're highly accomplished or you're a superstar' R3ciprocitiy Team, 2018)

Discussion

Supervisory PADC is an important informal stage of the admissions process. This paper critically explores PADC advice freely available on YouTube to better understand how advice is circulated in the context of global higher education. Although these videos are potentially helpful for applicants, it is important to bear in mind that there is also money to be made on YouTube from advice in similar ways as is possible in other advice markets, for example advice books (Thompson and Kamler, 2008). Arguably, the proliferation of advice about how to 'break in' to a doctorate does not address the underlying problem of opaque institutional processes.

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