



University Vlog Culture

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Abstract

This Cardiff University Summer Research Opportunities Programme (CUROP) project (2022) explored "How and Why Universities and Students Engage with YouTube Vlogger Culture?". Vlogger content about 5 of the "top 10" UK universities according to previous Times Higher Education rankings was analysed. This involved a critical digital discourse analysis of vlogs created by influencers independently of universities, and vlogs explicitly created for or in partnership with universities. In total, 20 vlogs were analysed. Key findings and recommendations relate to issues regarding identity, inequality, the idealisation of university life, and the work and labour experiences of students.

Keywords

Education, influencer, marketing, students, studying, university, YouTube, vlog, work



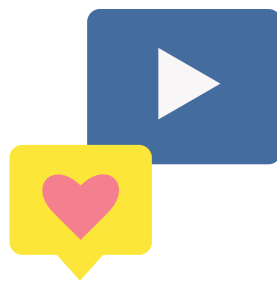
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About the Authors



Jeevan Kaur

Jeevan is interested in the increasingly intertwined and evolving relationships between digital culture, marketing, and communications in academia and beyond. Her research explores the (in)visibility of experiences, representation, and intersecting online inequalities such as classism, ableism, sexism, and racism. She seeks to further understand the role of institutions such as universities in ensuring appropriate protections for content creators, enabling meaningful student interactions and improving experiences for a range of students.

Francesca Sobande

Francesca Sobande is a senior lecturer in digital media studies at Cardiff University. She is the author of *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and *Consuming Crisis: Commodifying Care and COVID-19* (SAGE, 2022). Francesca is also co-editor with Akwugo Emejulu of *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (Pluto Press, 2019), and is co-author with layla-roxanne hill of *Black Oot Here: Black Lives in Scotland* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

Project Overview

For decades, digital culture has played a significant part in students' experiences of university life in the United Kingdom (UK).

Although social media is no longer a "new" phenomenon, the relationship between video blogger (vlogger) culture and higher education in the UK is still relatively recent.

The rise in online content-sharing platforms that offer people the chance to create and post videos has presented new ways for students to source and share information, as well as new ways for universities to market themselves and respond to students and the public.



What depictions and discourses are part of university vlogger culture in the UK?

How and why are universities and their students creating and engaging with vlogs?



Project Overview

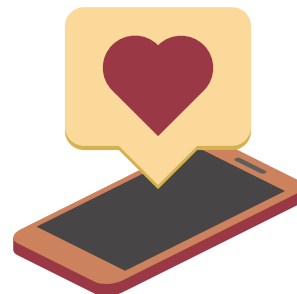
The 2010s saw a societal move towards more instant messaging platforms, and the rising popularity of smartphones and mobile devices with video creation functions.

By the 2020s, aspects of influencer culture (e.g., vlogging practices) were part of many people's daily lives, as creators and viewers.

From producing content, to attempting to engage with existing viral trends – universities began to incorporate vlogging into their marketing and communications strategies, with varying degrees of success and sustainability.

Often ahead of how universities engage with vlogs, students have resourcefully used vlog content creation processes to inform and interact with each other.

Focusing on this, we analysed some of the meanings and messages associated with YouTube vlog content about university life.



Project Overview

Our work was guided by an intention to aid nuanced understandings of students' and universities' use of YouTube vlogger culture, particularly to support educators, professional services, and institutions that strive to improve student experiences.

This involved a critical digital discourse analysis of vlog content about 5 of the "top 10" UK universities according to previous Times Higher Education rankings.

We examined **vlogs created by influencers independently of universities, and vlogs explicitly created for or in partnership with them.** But distinguishing between such content can be difficult as some universities strategically associate themselves with vloggers (e.g., by publicly engaging with their online posts), without officially partnering with or paying them.



Project Overview

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic catalysed an increase in universities' use of online video and vlog content to engage with students between 2020-2022.

Accounting for that, we explored different components of "university life" vlogs to examine opportunities, challenges, and issues involved in students' and universities' use of vlogging which raises awareness of aspects of university life and institutional resources.

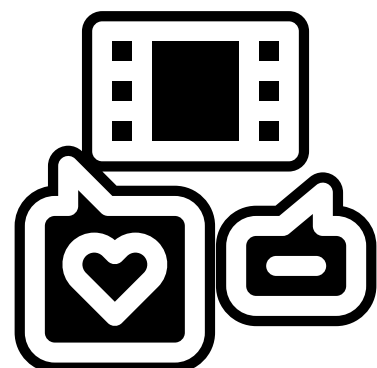
We analysed 20 vlogs in total, which involved critically reflecting on:

- **How is university life framed in the content?**
- **Whose and what experiences of university are foregrounded, and why?**
- **What genre/sub-genre does each vlog appear to be part of?**

Vlog genres/sub-genres included, but were not limited to, "moving in" vlogs, "study skills" vlogs, "life in the university city" vlogs, "homesick" vlogs, "food" vlogs, "international student" vlogs, and "postgrad study" vlogs.



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Findings

Some universities created student vlog series that specifically focused on life during the COVID-19 "lockdown", while others opted not to create content that explicitly addressed these circumstances.

As well as noting thematic patterns within and across the vlogs that we analysed, **we observed absences which powerfully point to how "university life" vlogger culture is impacted by intersecting oppressions** such as racism, sexism, classism, and ableism.



Figure 2. "Invisible" experiences in vlogs

Findings

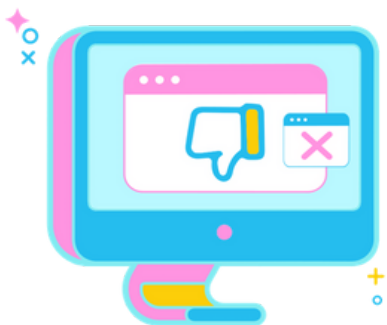
Our research project was relatively short and small scale, but it yielded valuable insights such as the following:

- **The perceived "authenticity", "accuracy", and "relatability" of "university life" vlogs** can contribute to students' expectations and experiences of such institutions.
- **Universities offering paid collaborative work opportunities can contribute to potentially meaningful or precarious connections** between students (e.g., as content creators) and universities.
- **Universities must establish suitable policies and support mechanisms** to ensure that students who are content creators are not exploited by universities or exposed to harm as part of any work that they do for them.



Findings

- The "university life" vlogger culture landscape – and the vlogger landscape more generally – is **not inclusive of a wide range of different student experiences, life circumstances, and inequalities** (e.g., limited content concerning the experiences of disabled students, student carers, LGBTQIA students, working-class students, mature students, and Black and Asian students).
- **This is suggestive of how intersecting inequalities impact student life**, its portrayal in vlogs, and the likelihood of certain student demographics receiving paid content creation opportunities in higher education.
- **Transparency, accountability, and regulation** surrounding student content creator work and labour conditions should be addressed.
- **The work-personal/home life boundaries of student content creators must be respected by universities.**



Findings

Overall, we gained unique insight into the complex framings and constructed meanings of university student life within the evolving YouTube vlogger landscape.

The project identified where online and offline worlds collide, which is increasingly prevalent for university students, especially during so-called "post-covid" times.

Digital messages in vlogs must be understood beyond the promotional content they present. Such messages often mirror interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., ableism, sexism, misogyny, racism, colourism, homophobia, and classism).

Limited access to resources and regulatory protections for student content creators can contribute to online inequalities and exclusionary working practices.

Through our project on vlogs about "university life", we ask, and encourage universities to critically consider: Who is missing and why? What is shown and what is hidden? How will this be addressed?

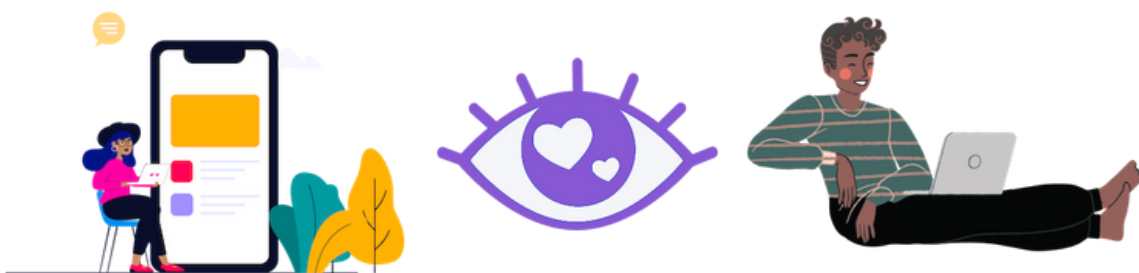
Recommendations

For universities eager to celebrate and support their “diverse” student communities, what are steps towards creating more equitable environments?

By enhancing the visibility of different student groups and life circumstances in vlogs, institutions can more effectively align their messaging with the different realities faced by a wide range of students.

However, action must move beyond solely focusing on matters regarding visibility and representation, and to guarantee that the work and labour conditions that student content creators experience do not expose them to harm and/or reinforce inequalities.

Accordingly, **universities must ensure that the work and labour of student content creators is adequately and equally compensated**, and does not involve universities encroaching on their work-personal/home life boundaries in ways that students are uncomfortable with.



Recommendations

The expanding nature of "university life" vlogger culture may be helpful to students, researchers, and institutions seeking to improve student experiences, but **there is work to be done to ensure that "university life" vlogs do not reinforce inequalities.**

Related areas that require further study and analysis include:

- The different perspectives and paid work experiences of student content creators across academic disciplines and stages of studying.
- The various ways that universities position themselves in proximity to viral trends and aspects of digital remix culture, as well as influencer culture.
- The extent to which universities have clearly established and upheld policies related to the online harassment and abuse of students and staff.



Thanks for reading



By Jeevan Kaur and Francesca Sobande
IMAGES FROM CANVA AND BLUSH