# '5 secrets they won't tell you': The content and rhetoric of YouTube advice videos about searching for a doctoral supervisor

Sophia Kier-Byfield, James Burford & Emily F. Henderson

Published online: 12 Nov 2023.

Submit your article to this journal ⎘

Article views: 124

View related articles ⎘

View Crossmark data ⎘

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# '5 secrets they won't tell you': The content and rhetoric of YouTube advice videos about searching for a doctoral supervisor

Sophia Kier-Byfield (iD), James Burford (iD) and Emily F. Henderson (iD)

Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

**ABSTRACT**

Much guidance on how to identify and contact a doctoral supervisor can be found on YouTube. There is a wealth of advice videos presented by 'insiders' including students, academics, consultants and institutional representatives. This article explores such 'find a supervisor' videos, characterising them as texts in the broader genre of doctoral writing advice. The article examines a sample of these videos thematically and then discursively, offering insight into the advice they give, as well as their positionality and rhetorical constructions of authority. Although potentially helpful to applicants, particularly those without strong networks, these videos nonetheless contribute to a complex advice market which requires critical scrutiny in terms of motivation and message. The article argues that, although supervisor advice videos may provide accessible support, they also capitalise on doctoral anxiety and perpetuate a culture of compliance with higher education norms, rather than encourage institutional and cultural transformation towards inclusivity.

## Introduction

This article explores the content and discursive nature of YouTube advice videos which inform prospective doctoral applicants about how to contact and secure a research supervisor. Such videos fit within a wider body of advice about Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC), that is, contact between potential doctoral applicants and university staff prior to submitting a formal application to study (Burford et al., 2023, 2023). PADC is typically private, largely unregulated and highly variable not only between institutions, but also between departments and individuals (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). This limited regulation raises concerns, particularly because of the importance of PADC in securing a doctoral position in many contexts. As a result, there is a growing interest in this informal stage of the graduate admissions cycle and how it may contribute to systemic inequalities in doctoral recruitment (Burford et al., 2023, 2023).

**CONTACT** Sophia Kier-Byfield ✉ sophia.kier-byfield@southwales.ac.uk Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Whilst existing research into PADC has considered applicants' use of web forums to seek and share advice (Kim & Spencer-Oatey, 2021a, 2021b), as well as the use of email (Milkman et al., 2015 studying the advice functions of YouTube is important due to the popularity of the platform (Bhatia, 2018). Therefore, this article asks: (1) What advice is given in 'find a doctoral supervisor' videos?; (2) How do these videos rhetorically construct the identity and authority of supervisors and applicants? The article presents a corpus of 100 YouTube videos about how to find and contact a doctoral supervisor. It then takes a sample of ten of the most viewed videos, exploring not only the advice they offer but also how presenters exercise discursive constructions of insider status and knowledge. Rather than simply debating the potential utility of these videos, we approach them as objects of rhetorical enquiry, connecting them to ongoing debates about inclusion and access in doctoral admissions (Posselt, 2016). Ultimately, we argue that 'find a supervisor' videos capitalise on anxiety surrounding doctoral admissions whilst simultaneously seeking to assuage it, a tension that perpetuates cultures of compliance with institutional norms rather than pushing for institutional transformation.

## Literature review

This literature review positions our inquiry in relation to two key areas of research: studies on doctoral admissions and the transmission of advice on digital media platforms. It then introduces our conceptual framework, which extends existing models which examine the rhetoric of doctoral advice (Kamler & Thomson, 2008).

### *Doctoral admissions*

The international body of research on doctoral admissions comprises a broad array of foci (Jung et al., 2023; Nerad, 2020). Much doctoral admissions scholarship is framed by concerns about the expansion of doctoral education (McKenna, 2017, as well as inequalities in doctoral recruitment and how these shape the disproportional representation of minoritised communities (e.g. on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender or disability status) accessing doctoral education (AdvanceHE, 2022; Maggin et al., 2022). A notable interest in the field is a concern with entry criteria (Littleford et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2019), ranging from discussions about the importance of academic references (Young, 2005) and personal statements (Chiu, 2019), to critiques of test score-driven admissions policies (Posselt, 2016). A further area of interest is the role and identities of those who make admissions decisions, and what impact increasing the diversity of decision-makers might have (Squire, 2020). Increasingly, studies on exclusionary practices associated with doctoral admissions have suggested and even trialled initiatives related to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) (e.g. Lindner, 2020; NEON Postgraduate Diversity Working Group, 2022). While there is limited research on the informal pre-application stage considered in this article, previous studies have shown that it is a source of confusion (Kim & Spencer-Oatey, 2021a, 2021b); a site for potential exclusion and bias, partly due to the tendency for these communications to take place over email (Milkman et al., 2015); and a practice that involves multiple actors, practices and tacit expectations (Burford et al., 2023, 2023). It is therefore unsurprising that there is a proliferation of advice videos about

how to find, contact and secure a supervisor on popular platforms like YouTube. There is, however, limited research on such video advice to date, which is the core research gap that we address in this article.

## YouTube advice

This article also extends scholarship investigating the connections between media platforms and education by positioning YouTube advice videos as sites of knowledge about contemporary global higher education (HE). Designating sites such as YouTube as networks rather than platforms acknowledges that they are not neutral spaces, but rather complex interactions between developers, users, markets and material technologies (Gillespie, 2010). Doctoral advice videos also represent a version of what Marsh (2016) refers to as online, 'peer to peer textual practices' (p. 371), with presenters potentially appealing to an affective sense of familiarity to convey their message. Gouseti (2017) has also noted how doctoral students supplement their learning with informal sources on YouTube. However, previous studies have identified risks associated with this type of dissemination. First, as health researchers have observed (Basch et al., 2021; Fode et al., 2020), YouTube can expose information seekers to poor advice that needs to be regulated by authorities. Second, as Sefton-Green (2022) argues, 'sharing frustration, ameliorating our friends and family awkwardness, bringing every-body up to speed are all forms of compliant behaviour [...] rather than challenging the nature of the authority' (p. 907). It is our argument that studying such advice videos builds on existing knowledge about digital platforms in three key areas: (1) how people educate themselves on topics that lack mainstream consensus; (2) how peer-to-peer content is used to create a simultaneous sense of community and culture of compliance; (3) the advice that is given, and the extent to which other bodies (e.g. HE institutions themselves) ought to intervene to address poor quality information.

## Theoretical framework: Rhetoric of doctoral advice

Theoretically, this article is informed by doctoral writing studies scholarship, in particular the framework of rhetorical tropes developed by Kamler and Thomson (2008) to analyse doctoral self-help books. Kamler and Thomson (2008) argue that simplified advice reproduces the notion that doctoral study can be completed in a series of straightforward steps, a message that erases the complex relationships and '*text work/identity work*' involved in doctoral study (p. 508). Such a position on doctoral writing has been further explored by Johnson (2017), who observes that writing manuals often 'address emotion within a behavioral frame', suggesting that 'writing should be an emotionally detached activity and that behavior is ultimately the solution to all affective concerns' (p. 58). These observations are relevant for our inquiry. As Kim and Spencer-Oatey (2021a) have noted in their work on South Korean applicants to the UK, there is a deep investment in and confusion about adhering to 'correct' cultural norms in the pre-application stage of doctoral admissions. When prospective applicants with queries are unable to receive assurance on the interpersonal components of applications, they can turn to 'extractive strategies' for searching for information (Kim and Spencer-Oatey 2021b, p.203). The emphasis on behaviour or generalised guidance in advice found through extractive strategies may, if prevalent in PADC advice, aggravate anxiety rather than address it,

particularly for minoritised applicants already facing challenges on the often-opaque pathway to doctoral study (Posselt, 2016). Research is therefore required on the subtext and appeal of PADC advice videos. In the section that follows, we outline the study we designed to contribute to and extend the studies we have surveyed here.

## Study design

### Data collection

A previous study undertaken by the authors with two further colleagues (Burford et al., 2023, 2023) identified YouTube advice videos as a key source of PADC grey literature. The authors therefore conducted a second study focused on these videos specifically. We recognise that some applicants cannot access YouTube, that they may access advice in languages other than English and that trust in technology is also culturally inflected (Jung & Lee, 2015). However, due to our focus on English language content, YouTube was the platform we chose to investigate.

The YouTube video search was conducted by the lead author and began with the phrase: 'How to contact/find a potential PhD supervisor'. The search was conducted whilst the researcher was logged out of other accounts. No filters were enabled, but hits were organised by relevance. The phrase 'How to contact/find a potential PhD supervisor' was supplemented with different search terms to reflect international diversity (e.g. PhD/doctoral/HDR/PGR and supervisor/advisor/guide/Professor). Making these adjustments did not return any noticeable variation in search results. The search retrieved videos from the main results page, not the sidebar that shows other content.

The search was conducted between March and May 2023. A corpus of 100 videos was compiled in an Excel spreadsheet (for information on inclusion and exclusion criteria, see Table 1), and the following information was recorded about each video: video title; presenter name and account background; perceived gender, race and nationality; video length, views and likes; comment number; publication date; date viewed and the video description.

### The corpus

The categories used to organise the presenters in the full corpus of 100 videos reflect only inferred observations as no self-identified identity information was available for presenters (see Table 2). Alongside other researchers (e.g. King et al., 2018), we acknowledge the limitations of this approach and the exclusions it may engender, whilst maintaining that imperfect interpretations of inferred identity may also assist researchers to address inequalities. Additionally, categories were developed to capture how presenters may be

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for YouTube search.

| Include | Exclude |
| --- | --- |
| Videos with views over 100 views | Videos with views under 100 views |
| Videos in English | Videos in other languages |
| Videos giving advice about how to identify and contact a potential supervisor | Videos about other aspects of the doctoral application process |
| Videos no more than ten years old | Videos posted more than ten years ago |

Table 2. Presenter types across the wider corpus.

| Video detail | Number of instances |
|---|---|
| **Presenter type** | |
| Student | 28 |
| Student talking to academic | 1 |
| Students with consulting business | 13 |
| Consultants with a visible doctoral credential | 4 |
| Consultants without a visible doctoral credential | 4 |
| Academics with visible institutional affiliation or stated position | 12 |
| Academics with a visible position who also have a consulting business | 4 |
| Academic talking to students | 1 |
| Independent Researchers without a visible institutional position | 12 |
| Institution | 14 |
| Academic Association/Society | 2 |
| Unclear | 5 |
| **Gender** | |
| Women | 29 |
| Men | 63 |
| Mixed gender groups | 8 |
| **Ethnicity** | |
| White | 29 |
| Black | 24 |
| South Asian | 20 |
| Asian | 10 |
| Latinx | 2 |
| Arab | 1 |
| Not identifiable or mixed groups | 14 |

associated with HE and doctoral study (e.g. as current students or consultants) and whether that might be leveraged to support advice claims. A broad spectrum of these positions is represented in the sample of ten videos selected for detailed analysis. It is also noteworthy that many of the individuals presenting videos (including students, academics and independent researchers) can be understood as 'doctoral influencers' (The Academic Designer, 2020; O'Neill, 2021) due to their large social media followings. These presenters regularly upload content about the experience of applying for and completing a doctorate and different aspects of research and research careers. Information about the inferred national context of the videos was also recorded. Context was inferred by several factors, including information about the speaker's location; stories told by the speaker about their own experience in certain contexts; information in the video title or description. Contexts represented in the full corpus include: Australia, Austria, Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Spain, UK and the USA.

## *Method of analysis*

The corpus was then filtered by views to identify a sub-sample of the ten videos with the highest views, which were subject to closer analysis for this article (see Table 3). Views in the selected sub-sample of ten ranged from 31,717 to 429,749 at the time of writing. The ten videos were subjected to three stages of analysis. First, *common features* were identified and are presented below. Second, the videos were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify the *types of advice* present in the videos. Third, a close reading of the videos was then undertaken to identify the *rhetorical features* of the videos (Kamler &

**Table 3.** Sample of ten videos for analysis.

| Video | Presenter | Portrait |
|---|---|---|
| How to get a PhD in five easy steps (UK) – YouTube | Simon Clark | A doctoral student (white, man) at the University of Oxford in Astro Physics, condenses getting a PhD into five steps, starting with getting a Bachelor's degree. |
| Ph.D. in USA as an International Student \| How to approach professors \| Does your background matter? – YouTube | WeDesified | A doctoral student in Economics in the US (South Asian, woman) discusses how to create the perfect PADC contact email to a supervisor. |
| How To Write An Email To A Professor For Graduate School Admission?(Contacting Professors) – YouTube | R3ciprocity Team | An academic and consultant (white, man) in the field Entrepreneurship discusses how to write a successful supervisor approach email based on his experience. |
| Considering a PhD? \| Tips on selecting a supervisor, writing a proposal and applying – YouTube | University of Kent | Various academics from different disciplines at the University of Kent talk about what qualities one needs to have to be a doctoral student, what a PhD is and how to go about finding an appropriate programme. |
| What to Consider When Choosing a PhD Supervisor – YouTube | Graduate Research School Western Sydney University | Various academics and students from different disciplines at Western Sydney University talk about what qualities one needs to have to be a doctoral student, what a doctorate is and how to go about finding an appropriate programme. |
| How to Contact Grad Coordinators/ Professors,Potential Supervisors\|Cold Email Professors for Funding – YouTube | Kingsford Onyina | A Masters student (Black, man) talks to another student (Black, woman) about getting entry to university in North America and what to include in a PADC email. |
| Best format to write research emails 🖊 \| For MS, PhD & internships – YouTube | WiseUp Communications | A consultant and content-creator (South Asian, woman) talks about the best way to organise a supervisor approach email. |
| Finding a Research Supervisor – YouTube | Memorial University of Newfoundland | Two academics from Geography and Physics respectively (White, women) talk to the camera about a range of topics related to doing a doctorate and writing PADC emails to supervisors. |
| How to choose your PhD supervisor \| 5 secrets they won't tell you – YouTube | Andy Stapleton | A former academic and consultant (white, man) shares his insights into the mistakes doctoral students make when picking a supervisor. |
| How to ace your first email to a potential academic supervisor – YouTube | Infosessionswithkingsley | The presenter (Black, man), a student and consultant, shares insights into what people get wrong in PADC and how to write better emails to supervisors for endorsement. |

Thomson, 2008). The analysis in this article therefore connects these examples of advice on YouTube to existing conversations about advice in the field. Although the paper briefly addresses the unique audio-visual qualities and author positions of this sub-genre, the decision was made to focus on the rhetorical features of the advice to conduct an in-depth analysis of a salient aspect of the videos, rather than give an overview of all features.

## *Common features*

In the sub-sample of ten, videos with institutional affiliations favoured multiple speakers in dialogue or shifting from shots of students and academics, possibly to represent notions of academic community. Although dialogue was also the

presentation style of one student 'influencer' who spoke to a fellow student (Onyina, 2022), the remainder of the sample featured individuals speaking directly to camera, possibly to enhance notions of individual authority. Background settings ranged from institutional rooms to bedrooms/offices and plain walls. Most videos featured light music either as an introduction or quietly behind the advice. Finally, although it is unsurprising that institutionally produced videos would feature some aspects of branding, the doctoral influencer accounts also had a strong sense of brand identity: channels have a name, visual identifier/logo and sometimes options for viewers to support their content creation (e.g. monetary donations; products for purchase) in addition to advertisement revenue made from hosting videos on YouTube.

## Findings

This section presents the findings of the study and is shaped by the primary research questions. After outlining the types of advice and some of their implications, this section goes on to demonstrate how rhetorical features consolidate the advice and connect YouTube advice videos to the broader doctoral advice genre.

### *Types of advice*

Thematic analysis of the sample of ten videos (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified three broad categories or types of advice the videos offered, which are presented below.

### *Finding a project or supervisor*

The most common type of advice related to searching for a supervisor and finding a project match. Match was discussed in two primary ways: research interest and personality. In terms of research match, viewers are advised that 'it is really important that you find a potential supervisor who has expertise in your area of interest' (University of Kent, 2016). In terms of finding a personality fit with a supervisor, applicants are advised to talk with supervisors 'about your expectations' of the relationship because 'communication is the most important part of the student-supervisor relationship' (Memorial University, 2020). Another video advises that applicants should 'make sure that you and the supervisor are a good fit with each other. What I'm talking about is in terms of the level of commitment they want to have into your project' (Graduate Research School Western Sydney University, 2015).

The words/phrases 'important' or 'most important' were common, but it can be argued that the reliance on framing a detail as significant can lead to the avoidance of nuance or revealing the complexity of tasks and relationships. Furthermore, despite offering these seemingly simple tips, unclear advice was also visible. For example, R3ciprocity Team (2018) asks viewers to consider whether they want a 'younger professor, for example, that might be more likely to publish . . . but they will be really stressed out and not have a lot of time for you, uh, maybe they might have more time for you, I don't know'. This quote conveys the paradox of advice giving in this space:

despite all of the assurances, ultimately no one can know how things will work out with a different supervisor.

### How to contact supervisors (tone and what to include)

Another common form of advice concerned how to reach out to potential supervisors via email. One of the most salient tips within this theme that was present in almost all the videos was appealing to the supervisor individually: 'focus on the research and what they are doing' (R3ciprocity Team, 2018, and never be generic because 'it is also about him or her' (Infosessionswithkingsley, 2020). Another aspect of advice was to not ask for too much in the initial contact: 'this is just to introduce yourself and express your interest in the university as well as their research area' (WeDesified, 2020).

The emphasis on appealing to the supervisor results in mixed messaging across the videos about what applicants should or should not include about themselves. For instance, whilst some advised applicants to include personal achievements and experience (InfosessionswithKingsley, 2020; WiseUp Communications, 2022), one video gave a different message and demonstrated the possibility for conflation between personal preference and advice:

> To be honest, they are not really going to care for all of these other kinds of things, what you've done in the past, you're on student committees, all this kind of stuff, I don't really care so much, unless you're highly accomplished or you're a superstar. (R3ciprocity Team, 2018)

### How to contact supervisors (format and structure of the email)

Several videos offered step-by-step advice on how to compose an initial approach email. This advice often included explicit guidance as to what should be mentioned and in what order, paragraph by paragraph (InfosessionswithKingsley, 2020; WeDesified, 2020). In some cases, the entire video was dedicated to the email structure (WiseUp Communications, 2022), and some YouTubers offered email templates for download (WeDesified, 2020; WiseUp Communications, 2022. There was even advice to be found about sending the email last thing at night or early in the morning so it lands at the top of the prospective supervisor's inbox (InfosessionswithKingsley, 2020).

In some cases, email structure advice was vague:

> You don't need to write a very lengthy essay – I think that like four or five lines will do. So first you can talk about yourself [. . .] Then the subsequent letter you write about how did you meet this lecturers [sic]? How did you meet this professor? [. . .] I read your paper in one of my seminar papers [. . .] I have done something similar in this area [. . .] I would want you to guide me if possible this fall. Are you there? Are you available? (Onyina, 2022)

### Rhetorical features

After identifying key themes in terms of the type of advice offered, our next analytic step was to closely read the texts alongside the conceptual framework about doctoral advice published by Kamler and Thomson (2008).

### An expert–novice relationship is produced and reproduced

Kamler and Thomson (2008) argue that doctoral researchers are positioned as 'novice' in advice books. This positioning is achieved through the second person address of 'you' (p. 509), which maintains the author as the 'authority' who knows what 'must' or 'should' be done and limits the possibilities for the person being addressed to question instruction (p. 510). Addressing applicant viewers as 'you' and directing through the imperative was a common feature across our video sample. In addition, it was notable that the anonymous collective pronoun 'they' was often used to signify supervisors and add emphasis to the division between supervisors and applicants, simultaneously creating a sense of greater need and urgency for the advice being given: 'So today we're going to talk about how to choose your PhD supervisor and all of the little things that they don't want you to know about them' (Stapleton, 2020). Whilst YouTube does provide greater opportunities to answer back and query advice than the advice books analysed by Kamler and Thomson (2008), as the platform enables comments and interaction with creators, most comments on advice videos were positive and expressed gratitude.

Kamler and Thomson (2008) then explain how this authority/novice dynamic is consolidated through claims to expertise that rely on 'status rather than scholarship' (p. 510). They note how odd this is in an academic context that would not normally accept unsubstantiated claims. However, the advice genre often embraces experience as an indicator of expertise, and this trope was identifiable across the spectrum of the video sample. In some cases, broad claims were made about the nature of supervisor contact that were unsupported by research. For instance, the presenter from the channel *Info Sessions with Kingsley* opens his video with the rhetorical question: 'Did you know that 80% of first-time emails sent of professors end up in trash?' (Infosessionswithkingsley, 2020). In other cases, it was possible to locate conflations between personal preference and advice: '*they* are not going to care … *I* don't really care unless you're highly accomplished or you're a superstar' (R3ciprocity Team, 2018, emphasis added).

### The process of writing is simplified to a series of linear steps

Doctoral advice texts also tend to portray completing a doctorate via 'hidden rules' and 'concrete steps to follow' (Kamler & Thomson, 2008, p. 510). The risk of this approach is that it 'constructs an oversimplified understanding of what is actually at stake in the often messy, unanticipated experience of conducting research and writing a dissertation' (Kamler & Thomson, 2008, p. 510). This trope was also identifiable in the PADC advice videos, perhaps most obviously in the video by Simon Clark (2016) which organises getting a PhD into five 'easy' steps. Although portraying the process of finding a supervisor and accessing doctoral study as just one small step in the overall process might make it seem achievable for viewers, the notion of linear steps arguably misrepresents reality.

Kamler and Thomson (2008) interrogate the metaphor of the doctorate as a journey, as they observe that advice texts often provide very little helpful guidance beyond employing loose allusions to travel, getting lost and finding one's way (p. 510). In the PADC advice videos, the process of finding and contacting a supervisor was not referred to as a journey, but the overall doctoral process was: 'Ultimately you want to enjoy what you're doing, so

make sure in *the whole journey* that you have fun' (Graduate Research School Western Sydney University, 2015, emphasis added); 'Hence we wanted to make this video to clear at least some of those questions and help you to be successful in *your PhD journey*' (WeDesified, 2020, emphasis added).

### Writing advice is packaged as a set of overgeneralised rules

The doctoral writing advice genre also provides 'rules about writing that look self-evident and give a sense of security', but the potential problem with such rules is that they remain hard to actualise (Kamler & Thomson, 2008, p. 510). In the videos we analysed, this observation can equally be applied to the rules that advice givers offer about writing emails to supervisors. The process of writing an email is more straightforward than writing a thesis, and therefore the step-by-step guidance for emails is arguably not as problematic. However, as Kingsford Onyina (2022) notes in his video, even the process of writing emails is a 'skill that we master'; it is not enough to have a 'format'. Although Onyina does also provide the kind of generalised email format advice that he is critiquing, this awareness was, on the whole, lacking from the videos that offered template email structures.

### The texts are emphatic and offer a paradox of reassurance and fear

The final rhetorical gesture associated with the doctoral writing advice genre is the tendency to simultaneously 'assuage and heighten students' anxieties through a mix of certainty and relief whilst peppering their advice with 'scary stories'' (Kamler & Thomson, 2008, p. 511). This trope was identifiable in videos such as Andy Stapleton's (2020), which both emphatically insists what the 'most important thing to remember is . . .' whilst also sharing negative stories. Stapleton's (2020) appeal to both reassurance and fear is evident in statements such as 'I don't want you to make the same mistakes that PhD students make' and 'Follow these steps and you'll be sure not to be caught out by the change of personalities once you enter the academic world'. By addressing the viewer as 'you' whilst also positioning the vague subject position of 'PhD students' as other and in error, Stapleton demarcates the applicant as different and able to avoid getting into trouble – if they follow his advice. The notion of being on the cusp of stepping into 'the academic world' also consolidates this liminal position and strengthens the appeal of the advice.

## Discussion

The findings in this paper demonstrate the range of advice found in YouTube 'find a supervisor' videos and their latent discursive traits. Advice videos do more than give neutral tips: they construct the hierarchical subject positions of applicant, student and supervisor, and they employ discursive techniques to make the viewer feel at ease whilst also reinscribing the need for more advice. Transmitting pre-application advice on YouTube specifically has particular implications: much of the advice glides along the surface of the process, as the inherent character of the advice video is short, casual and generic. The media genre therefore dictates the capabilities of the advice (McLuhan, 2003).

As noted in the introduction, a group that is likely to be a key audience of these videos is applicants with comparatively few pre-existing networks or reliable knowledge sources,

such as applicants who are from the Global South, working class, or first in family to university, amongst other minoritised identities. Research has shown that doctoral admissions in contexts such as the US is not a fair process and that many minoritised applicants are at a disadvantage (Milkman et al., 2015; Posselt, 2016). YouTube advice therefore harbours the potential to close the information gap as it is freely accessible. As Gillespie (2010) observes, YouTube 'is designed as an open-armed, egalitarian facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative and technical restrictions' (p. 352). However, the openness of YouTube also produces a context where responsibility for the content lies with creators themselves, not the host (Gillespie, 2010), and could result in misinformation about PADC. This is a phenomenon that has been observed by social media researchers in other fields (Basch et al., 2021; Fode et al., 2020). Indeed, we noted that some advice was laced with suggestions that could be potentially damaging for applicants battling disadvantage, such as thinking primarily about 'the professor and what they are gonna want, and not what you want' (R3ciprocity Team, 2018) and finding a less involved supervisor who leaves you 'alone', if that is what you prefer (Graduate Research School Western Sydney University, 2015).

Furthermore, the realities of being a minoritised doctoral applicant and subsequently a student are at most implicit in these advice videos, even though some of the presenters may speak from minoritised positions. The title of the video from WeDesified asks 'Does my background matter?', but this refers to disciplinary background not social identity or material conditions. Another compelling example of this tension is the video by Kingsford Onyina (2022). Onyina interviews a successful peer who managed to gain admission to programmes in the UK and Canada. Although he engages his interlocutor in a celebratory fashion, the underlying narrative is one of striving to *comply with* institutional norms. For instance, an anecdote is shared about someone who contacted a graduate coordinator with a question that was answered on the website. Onyina goes on to agree with the coordinator's reply, implying the message: if you are not able to read the website, how can you expect to complete a PhD? This approach does not consider the complex, affective process that constitutes information seeking and applying for a doctorate, much of which is fraught with anxiety, and it does not consider culturally inflected approaches to finding and consolidating information in an increasingly internationalised doctoral education context (Kim & Spencer-Oatey, 2021a, 2021b).

## Conclusion

The large number of advice videos about searching for and contacting a supervisor suggests that PADC is an area of ongoing confusion for applicants, as well as a potentially lucrative and fruitful topic for creators to address. This dual function made this content ripe for rhetorical analysis to probe not only video topics but whether they can be aligned with the doctoral advice genre (Kamler & Thomson, 2008). This article based its enquiry on two central questions: what advice is given, and what rhetorical strategies are utilised to consolidate and transmit this advice? The findings confirm that these videos do more than transfer knowledge to applicants: they function as typical advice texts by positioning the viewer and author in power positions and contribute to an advice market that benefits advice givers as much as consumers. Our findings regarding the reproduction of academic hierarchies in YouTube videos may not be surprising to

readers, as academia is a teaching, learning and research context inherently and obstinately structured by order and rank. It is important that potential applicants are to some degree made aware of these realities. However, our analysis demonstrates the extent to which hierarchy is noted in passing as a norm and not approached critically as something that might be acknowledged, challenged, or at least imagined differently.

Indeed, this article has also connected the field of PADC advice to debates about access and inclusion in doctoral admissions by demonstrating how the lack of regulation surrounding this freely available advice potentially counterbalances its positive function. This, in turn, points to the need for further institutional reflection on (and support for) applicants in the pre-application stage. The study therefore makes an integrated contribution to research on doctoral writing advice (Kamler & Thomson, 2008), equity in doctoral admissions (Posselt, 2016) and doctoral students' use of YouTube and other digital practices (Gouseti, 2017). Further research in this area could explore in more depth the audio-visual features of doctoral advice YouTube videos, advice provided in other languages, the nature of other advice texts (e.g. blog posts, websites or social media platforms such as Twitter), in addition to exploring applicants' experiences with using such texts and why they choose to consult certain formats.

## Disclosure statement

## Funding

## Notes on contributors

*Sophia Kier-Byfield* is a postdoctoral researcher based within the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling, University of South Wales. Previously, she was Research Fellow at the Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. Sophia's research interests include inequalities in higher education, feminist pedagogies, and the power of storytelling for marginalised communities.

*James Burford* is Associate Professor in Global Education and International Development at the Department of Education Studies, and Deputy Director of Doctoral Education and Academia Research Centre (DEAR), University of Warwick. James' research interests include doctoral education, the academic profession, higher education internationalisation and academic mobilities.

*Emily F. Henderson* is Reader in Gender and International Higher Education in the Department of Education, and Director of Doctoral Education and Academia Research Centre (DEAR), University of Warwick. Emily's research interests include inequalities in international higher education, particularly in relation to the academic profession and doctoral education.

## ORCID

Sophia Kier-Byfield 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4444-3156
James Burford 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0707-7401
Emily F. Henderson 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5723-9560

## Data statement

Data available on request from the authors.

## Ethical approval

The study received ethics approval from HSSREC.

## References

The Academic Designer. (2020, 27 November). *Jennifer Adams talks being an Instagram influencer and PhD life*. https://theacademicdesigner.com/2020/jennifer-adams-talks-being-an-instagram-influencer-and-phd-life/

AdvanceHE. (2022). *Equality and higher education: Students statistical report 2022*. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-reports-2022

Basch, C. E., Basch, C. H., Hillyer, G. C., Meleo-Erwin, Z. C., & Zagnit, E. A. (2021). YouTube videos and informed decision-making about COVID-19 vaccination: Successive sampling study. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*, 7(5), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.2196/28352

Bhatia, A. (2018). Interdiscursive performance in digital professions: The case of YouTube tutorials. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 124, 106–120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2017.11.001

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dangeni, & Kier-Byfield, S. (2023). *Pre-application doctoral communications: A missing dimension in research on doctoral admissions*. Under Peer-Review.

Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Kier-Byfield, S., Dangeni, & Akkad, A. (2023). *Pre-application Doctoral Communications (PADC) Projects: Final Report*. https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/178943/

Chiu, Y.-L. T. (2019). 'It's a match, but is it a good fit?': Admissions tutors' evaluation of personal statements for PhD study. *Oxford Review of Education*, 45(1), 136–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2018.1502168

Clark, S. (2016, November 21). *How to get a PhD in 5 easy steps (UK)*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcSjZrIYUe4

Fode, M., Nolsøe, A. B., Jacobsen, F. M., Russo, G. I., Østergren, P. B., Jensen, C. F. S., Albersen, M., Capogrosso, P., Sønksen, J., & EAU YAU Men's Health Working Group. (2020). Quality of information in YouTube videos on erectile dysfunction. *Sexual Medicine*, 8(3), 408–413.

Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of 'platforms'. *New Media & Society*, 12(3), 347–524. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738

Gouseti, A. (2017). Exploring doctoral students' use of digital technologies: What do they use them for and why? *Educational Review*, 69(5), 638–654. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1291492

Graduate Research School Western Sydney University. (2015, December 14). *What to consider when choosing a PhD supervisor*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5lse0F6htQ

Infosessionswithkingsley. (2020, September 24). *How to ace your first email to a potential academic supervisor*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F98LqWPJf6Y

Johnson, K. (2017). Writing by the book, writing beyond the book. *Composition Studies*, 45(2), 55–72. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26402783

Jung, I., & Lee, Y. (2015). YouTube acceptance by university educators and students: A cross-cultural perspective. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(3), 243–253. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2013.805986

Jung, J., Li, H., & Horta, H. (2023). Procedures, criteria and decision-making in doctoral admissions: The case of China's leading research universities. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2023.2179595

Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2008). The failure of dissertation advice books: Toward alternative pedagogies for doctoral writing. *Educational Researcher*, *37*(8), 507–514. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08327390

Kim, K. H., & Spencer-Oatey, H. (2021a). Enhancing the recruitment of postgraduate researchers from diverse countries: Managing the application process. *Higher Education*, *82*(5), 917–935. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00681-z

Kim, K. H., & Spencer-Oatey, H. (2021b). Metapragmatic comments on relating across cultures: Korean students' uncertainties over relating to UK academics. *Pragmatics Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*, *31*(2), 198–224. https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.20004.kim

King, L., MacKenzie, L., Tadaki, M., Cannon, S., McFarlane, K., Reid, D., Koppes, M., & Kellett, D. (2018). Diversity in geoscience: Participation, behaviour, and the division of scientific labour at a Canadian geoscience conference. *FACETS*, *3*(1), 415–440. https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2017-0111

Lindner, R. (2020). *Barriers to Doctoral Education: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion for Postgraduate Research Students at UCL*. https://www.grad.ucl.ac.uk/strategy/barriers-to-doctoral-education.pdf

Littleford, L. N., Buxton, K., Bucher, M. A., Simon-Dack, S. L., & Yang, K. L. (2018). Psychology doctoral program admissions: What master's and undergraduate-level students need to know. *Teaching of Psychology*, *45*(1), 75–83. https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628317745453

Maggin, D. M., Collins, T. A., Foster, J. A., Scott, M. N., Mossing, K. W., & Dorsey, C. M. (2022). Faculty perspectives on the recruitment, retention, and preparation of special education doctoral students of color. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, *45*(3), 227–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064211046230

Marsh, J. (2016). 'Unboxing' videos: Co-construction of the child as cyberflâneur. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *37*(3), 369–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1041457

McKenna, S. (2017). Crossing conceptual thresholds in doctoral communities. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *54*(5), 458–466. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2016.1155471

McLuhan, M. (2003). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Gingko Press.

Mellors-Bourne, R., Metcalfe, J., Pearce, E., & Hooley, T. (2014). *Understanding the Recruitment and Selection of Postgraduate Researchers by English Higher Education Institutions*. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/20948/1/2014_pgrrecruitment.pdf

Memorial University. (2020, April 7). *Finding a research supervisor*. [Video] YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lWtQsJwiin4

Milkman, K. L., Akinola, M., & Chugh, D. (2015). What happens before? A field experiment exploring how pay and representation differentially shape bias on the pathway into organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *100*(6), 1678–1712. https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000022

Miller, C. W., Zwickl, B. M., Posselt, J. R., Silvestrini, R. T., & Hodapp, T. (2019). Typical physics Ph.D. admissions criteria limit access to underrepresented groups but fail to predict doctoral completion. *Science Advances*, *5*(1), eaat7550. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aat7550

NEON Postgraduate Diversity Working Group. (2022). *Postgraduate Diversity Strategy Blueprint*. https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Blueprint-Strategy.pdf

Nerad, M. (2020). Governmental innovation policies, globalization, and change in doctoral education worldwide: Are doctoral programmes converging? Trends and tensions. In S. Cardoso, O. Tavares, C. Sin, & T. Carvalho (Eds.), *Structural and institutional transformations in doctoral education: Social, political and student expectations* (pp. 43–84). Palgrave.

O'Neill, G. (2021, September 13). *Cells and Selfies: The PhD students sharing their research online*. University Times. https://universitytimes.ie/2021/09/cells-and-selfies-the-phd-students-sharing-their-research-online/

Onyina, K. (2022, January 23). *How to contact grad coordinators/professors, potential supervisors|cold email professors for funding*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuIXQGE7EHs

Posselt, J. R. (2016). *Inside graduate admissions: Merit, diversity, and faculty gatekeeping*. Harvard University Press.

R3ciprocity Team. (2018, February 2). *How to Write an Email to a Professor for Graduate School Admission? (Contacting Professors)*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atk7bXPu8o4

Sefton-Green, J. (2022). Towards platform pedagogies: Why thinking about digital platforms as pedagogic devices might be useful. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *43*(6), 899–911. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2021.1919999

Squire, D. D. (2020). "It's pretty essential": A critical race counter-narrative of faculty of color understandings of diversity and equity in doctoral admissions. *The Urban Review*, *52*(1), 173–197. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-019-00523-4

Stapleton, A. (2020, October 27). *How to choose your PhD supervisor | 5 secrets they won't tell you*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cDsq7ZzWvI

University of Kent. (2016, October 21). *Considering a PhD? | Tips on selecting a supervisor, writing a proposal and applying*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3Jroq-QotQ

WeDesified. (2020, December 14). *Ph.D. in USA as an international student | How to approach professors | Does your background matter?* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-SK4zsUS7k

WiseUp Communications. (2022, April 10). *Best format to write research emails 💧 | For MS, PhD & internships*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmff7V5326U

Young, I. P. (2005). Predictive validity of applicants' reference information for admission to a doctoral program in educational leadership. *Educational Research Quarterly*, *29*(1), 16–25. https://www.proquest.com/docview/216183235/abstract/549F4AB93E0B40F6PQ/1