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Want to Learn How the World Sees Your College? Look on YouTube

By Terry Nguyen JANUARY 22, 2019

Nicolas Chae, a Princeton U. sophomore, gives a tour of his dorm room on YouTube. The video has been viewed nearly 50,000 times.

Nicolas Chae has a typical morning routine: He wakes up early, heads to the gym, and then changes clothes for class.

But one thing about Chae's morning routine sets him apart from his fellow sophomores at Princeton University: He carries a camera wherever he goes, gathering footage of his everyday interactions, which he broadcasts to thousands of people many times a month.

Chae is a YouTube influencer, a video creator who has gained recognition via his vlogs, or video blogs, about everyday life. His channel is part of a niche digital community on YouTube where students upload videos documenting the college experience — about their dorms, study habits, exams.

Student influencers own a pretty piece of digital real estate, one that their colleges probably envy. Search any college's name and you're likely to see a student-produced dorm-room tour or move-in day video among the top hits. Chae, for instance, has produced three of the top five results on a search of "Princeton University." Those three videos together have been viewed more than a million times.

High-school students are a key audience for YouTubers like Chae. A 2019 [Pew Research study](#) found that 85 percent of American teenagers use YouTube, which is the second-most-visited online platform for teens, behind Snapchat. Having grown up surrounded by digital tools, these students go online to embark on informal searches for prospective colleges.

Informal platforms like YouTube or Reddit help students demystify the application and admissions process, said Kevin Martin, a former admissions counselor at the University of Texas at Austin who runs an admissions-consulting business.

Videos uploaded by college students offer an authentic lens into student life and campus culture, which are helpful for high schoolers looking to visualize themselves on a specific campus.

"I'm honestly surprised at the amount of not only students but also parents who would go to YouTube to find information," said Martin, who also runs a YouTube channel titled "UT Admissions Guy." "Students who would often fall through the cracks or don't have access to traditional counseling resources are turning to social media for information."

Keri Nguyen, a Florida high-school senior, even applied to a few colleges she felt were a reach for her academic record because of the YouTube videos she watched.

"YouTubers, like [Rowan Born](#) [from the University of Southern California], made me feel better about the college-application process, because as someone who doesn't have the best test scores or grades compared to some of my peers, I felt very discouraged," Nguyen said.

Unofficial Ambassadors

Chae has around 43,000 subscribers and received 400,000 total video views in the past month, according to his video statistics. That's not out of the ordinary. The most popular influencers have audiences of 800,000 or more.

The most common way to attract a devoted and consistent viewership is to upload weekly episodic recaps of college life, akin to a reality television show.

Chae's video timeline and those of others on YouTube loosely follow the landmark stages of student life, the admissions process, move-in day, and exams.

Olivia Pongsrida, a junior majoring in sociology at the University of Washington, started [her channel](#) in her sophomore year as a creative hobby.

"I always carried a camera in the side pocket of my backpack," she said. "At first implementing [vlogging] into my everyday life was interesting and weird, but it was something I got used to and made vlogging [and producing content] easier.

"Last year I had the time to do weekly vlogs and post every Friday," she said. "From Sunday forward, I would just vlog my week." Pongsrida estimates that it takes about 30 minutes daily to film and frame specific shots and an hour to edit that day's footage before she goes to bed. Now she is looking to switch majors, which has shifted her focus on YouTube more toward her academic life.

Balancing college and content creation is a struggle with the course load at Princeton, Chae said. "At certain times I've had to prioritize studying for a test over going out to shoot, and I'm putting videos on the back burner, but I am trying to take more time for myself and prioritize my mental health," he said.

Chae spends time almost every day either producing or uploading content on YouTube, which he says is "pretty crazy" for the cinematic quality he puts into editing. But he has no plan to stop — he's working to build a brand through his photography and filmography that he can continue after he graduates.

Many of these college Youtubers see themselves as unofficial academic ambassadors, well aware of the influence they have on anxious high schoolers applying to college. Pongsrida and [May Gao](#), an influencer from Brown University, have offered to read applicants' college essays. They interact with the online communities they've developed, answering questions and comments on social media.

"I want to provide college advice and counseling to people who might not have the resources to access that help," Gao said. "YouTube is just a creative and informative [platform] to tell high schoolers that they can go to college if that's their goal, and that they can succeed, no matter what their background is."

Honesty is key to these videos, but some students are reluctant to post opinions that could leave viewers with a bad impression of the college. It's a constant struggle, Gao said, to balance idealized notions of college while admitting that the experience can be difficult.

The New Generation of Students

"I kind of hold back on making any opinionated videos, like 'Pros and Cons of UW' or 'Should You Attend This College?,' because I feel that [my] opinion can really shape another person's decision," Pongsrida said. "I thought about it, because a lot of my viewers asked, but it's not a topic that's on my top priority list right now."

Whether the depictions are positive or negative, they highlight aspects of college life in a format that, because viewers can relate so easily to it, has tremendous influence, said Matt McFadden, vice president for strategy and account planning at Simpson Scarborough, a higher-education marketing firm.

"[Videos are] done in a very authentic way, and I think this generation of upcoming prospective students really appreciate that," he said. "They're OK with not everything being 100 percent positive — they rather that it be authentic."

Staying Authentic

The authenticity of a dorm-room video is hard to replicate, but colleges are picking up on the digital tactics used in popular YouTube videos produced by students. West Virginia University uploads content on YouTube and Facebook curated into topical playlists, such as "My WVU Life," "Welcome to WVU," and "Meet President Gee."

The videos showcase smiling students paired with uppercase text, enthusiastic punctuation, and emojis.

The key to generating interest, especially among prospective students, is to remain approachable and authentic to the student experience, said Charles Melichar, a senior consultant and principal at Marts & Lundy, a fund-raising consultant for nonprofit organizations.

In an effort to create such authentic content, marketing professionals say, colleges are becoming open to using students to produce official content. At Princeton, Chae was brought on as a videographer for Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Students after some campus officials came across his content on YouTube.

Initially, some colleges worry about the lack of control that would come with student-produced content, McFadden said. But what many colleges don't realize at first — and what helps them change their mind — is that students are already creating material that has become immensely popular.

Vlogs about move-in day or campus tours are examples of videos produced by colleges to appear more informal. At West Virginia, students in a video titled "[The Most Honest WVU Campus Tour Ever](#)" entertainingly exaggerate how great the campus is. The University of Oregon featured random students walking around campus in a "[Duck Advice for Freshman](#)" video.

"If [a video] gets overly manufactured, it starts to feel that way and feels more 'brochure storytelling,'" Melichar said. "[Successful marketing] takes a lot of different formats, and not all students are immediately aware or ready to take on the responsibility of being an influencer."

But what is most appealing to a high-school audience is rarely found in college-produced content — personal detail and a sense of trust between YouTuber and viewer.

College influencers offer up their high-school GPAs, test scores, extracurriculars, even the essay that got them into college. This level of transparency is invaluable to viewers, especially those applying to college.

When Gao, a sophomore studying public health, put up her "[A Day in My Life at Brown University](#)" video, she didn't expect it to perform so well. It's one of her most watched posts, with almost 300,000 views.

"It speaks to the idea that high schoolers are in the dark about what college life is like, and that people are interested in seeing a realistic perspective of [college]," Gao said.

"I just try my best to reflect my realistic daily life in my channel and not brand it to the point where appears extremely professional and well edited. That's one thing I keep in mind when I'm making my videos — to accurately reflect what my experience has been at Brown, even if it's just one experience."

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