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QR Codes and University Access

Relevance: QR codes have become ubiquitous gateways in campus life, yet we rarely question what it feels like to use them, especially when they assume certain bodies, devices or technical skills. For many students, these "frictionless" technologies create daily moments of exclusion. Understanding this matters because it reveals how digitalisation shifts responsibility from institutions onto individuals, raising urgent questions about who bears the hidden costs of seamless technology (Latour, 2005; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Poell et al., 2019).

Research Question: What happens physically, socially and politically when a student scans a QR code to fill a form, borrow a book or join a class? While QR codes appear to be simple conveniences, this study investigates how they quietly reshape campus life, creating new barriers even as they promise seamless access. **Methodology:** Between December 2025 and January 2026, I conducted a campus ethnography at BTU Cottbus across 12 sites (classrooms, corridors, library, mensa) documenting 48 QR codes and their environment through embodied fieldwork: physically scanning each code, photographing placement, recording loading times and connectivity failures and noting where links led. Sensory experiences like battery anxiety, rain on the screen, confusion when codes failed were captured through field notes. Data was analysed using visual analysis and coding (Murchison, 2010).

Key Findings: Three patterns emerged. First, access has become procedural: doors may stand physically open but participation now requires authentication steps that may exclude those without the right device, body or moment. Second, infrastructure assumes an "ideal user" with perfect height and coordination, charged batteries and able bodies- what More (2024) calls infrastructural ableism. Third, behind each scan lie entire institutional machineries. Where students once negotiated exceptions with staff, they now encounter read-only pages that inform but do not listen, conclude but do not converse.

Follow-up Questions: Must digitalization prioritize speed over inclusivity? How can universities design "failure-friendly" systems that accommodate dead batteries, poor connectivity and diverse physical abilities? Who bears the hidden environmental and human costs of supposedly seamless technology?

Context and Supervision: This research was conducted as part of the seminar "Digital Cultures and (Im)Mobilities" within the module "Mobility and Digitalisation" during the Winter Semester 2025/26, under the supervision of Dr. phil. habil. Tetiana Havlin, within the MA Transformation Studies programme at BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg. The interim presentation and photo-essay on this research were evaluated as a part of the module and received a perfect grade (1.0).