

An Analysis of Content Marketing on Social Media by Five Top Global Universities

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Abstract

Social media are used increasingly by higher education institutions (HEIs) to promote brands and connect to stakeholders. The authors analyzed post type and post content on Facebook posted by five selective universities of Top 20 QS World Ranking University 2022: Massachusetts Institute of Technology from USA, University of Oxford from UK, ETH Zurich-Swiss Federal Institute of Technology from Switzerland, National University of Singapore from Singapore, and Tsinghua University from China. This study followed the 12 post types: alumni, announcement, campus, curriculum, events, faculty, image and reputation, industry, others, products, research, and students to segment post types, and expressions such as likes and comments are used to evaluate engagement. The study found that from 2,232 posts by the selective institutions, the top five most frequently posted are research, faculty, students, events and announcements. Compared to engagement, beautiful spots on campus, and curriculum gained the most engagement, students' life also gained high engagement as found in previous papers together while research is still in the top five. Interestingly, the "others" post type, which contained content from external outsources, was also found with high engagement in this study. From findings, the authors suggested HEIs may pay attention to updated content or stories that matter from external sources or promote other topics not related to the university but that have an impact at the national or international level as useful content to make users or followers engaged.

Keywords: Higher Education, Marketing, Facebook, Social Media, Content Analysis

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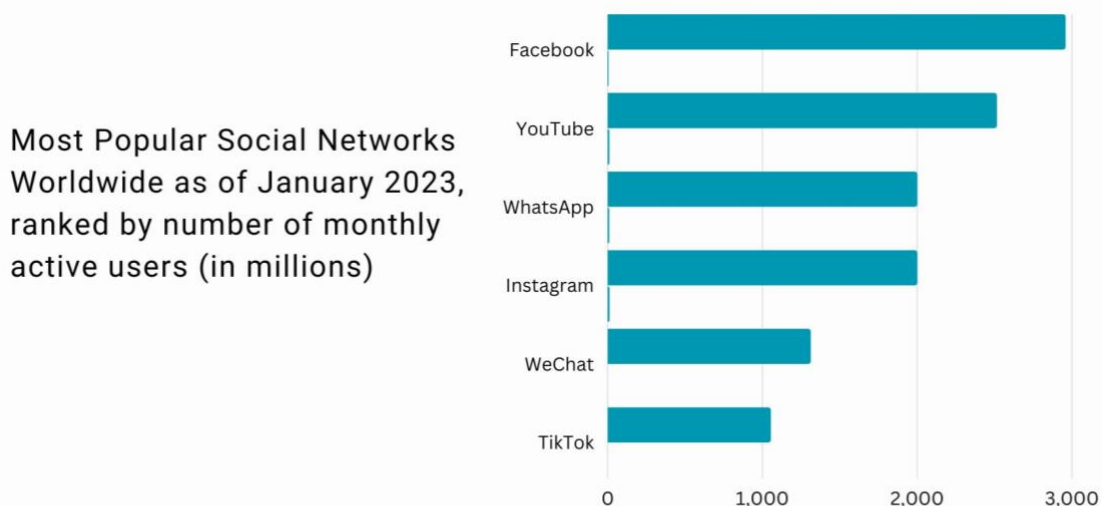
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Introduction

Digital marketing changed the world with no exception, and universities will not be able to sustain themselves without enrollment growth. Universities have the challenge of maintaining relevance among students who are more reliant on technology as a communication source (Martin, 2015). Even though traditional strategies and processes to reach out potential applicants via campus visits, letters and viewbooks still exist, but at the same time reaching out to prospective schools using social media have shown a distinct preference by students for more than a decade (Hayes, Ruschman & Walker, 2009). It was confirmed by Barnes and Mattson (2009, 2010, as cited in Peruta & Shields, 2018) that more than 90% of college admission office viewed social media as being of great importance to their recruiting initiatives.

Universities in the United States typically use multiple web and social media platforms in marketing brands to increase applications and engagement to their institutions (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Overall, social media are used increasingly by higher education institutions (HEIs) to promote brands and connect to stakeholders.

Social media platforms have become a popular tool for digital marketing as a medium of communication to reach out to customers and the public. As of January 2023, Statista.com (2023) presents that there were 5.15 billion internet users worldwide or 64.4 percent of the global population, and of this total, 4.76 billion, or 59.4 percent of the world population were social media users. Figure 1 presented popular social media platform and number of active users in January 2023. Impact of digital marketing in all industries and a growing number of social media users creating opportunities for businesses to build their image and branding and connect with present and potential customers.



Source: www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/

Figure 1 Social Network Worldwide by Statista.com

University students who are social media users typically used social media in searching information about education institutions before choosing university. Kumar and Nanda's research (2019) presented that higher education institutions across the world used social media in reaching out prospective students and interacting with current students and alumni because social media is not only improving communication but also helps in promoting and

developing activities. The UK, as the top destination for international students, University College of London (UCL) has several strategies in international students' recruitment and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are used to create marketing campaigns for each country or region which are listed as top international students' senders to UK such as China, India, Middle East and European Union (Helmi & Puis, 2018). In the case of Indonesia, the number of public and private higher education has increased in the last decade, so it is important for universities to stand out. Thus, universities increasingly adopted digital marketing channels that are generally recognized to market prospective and qualified students compared to traditional marketing (Kusumawati, 2019).

However, there is a lack of studies on how higher institutions use social media for marketing purposes such as strengthening customer relationships, building trust, and broadcasting information. Simultaneously, incorporating social media into recruitment is not simple. (Taecharungroj, 2017; Peruta & Shields, 2018). It is even more difficult recently for social media practitioners and managers to choose the right social media platforms for their institutions as there are more than 10 platforms; Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, TikTok, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Snapchat, QQ, Pinterest, etc. Even though TikTok keeps growing, Facebook is still the most popular platform by number of active users at 2.96 billion users and has been used by top higher education institutions in the USA such as MIT (Taecharungroj, 2017; Statista, 2023).

This study focuses on 1) how the top universities in the world use Facebook to promote brands and connect to stakeholders, and 2) analyze content marketing on Facebook pages of the top global universities.

Literature review

Current marketing trends in higher education

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the world are struggling with the number of applicants and high competition. In the past, traditional roles of HEIs were to serve the community, research, and teach students, thus marketing and generating profit were not common. With this new challenge, the managers in higher education have to be more market-oriented to be competitive in an international environment (Ramachandran, 2010, cited in Taecharungroj, 2017; Stukalina, 2019). A study by Rafdinal, Mulyawan, and Kusdibyo (2021) found that social media content provided by HEIs has significant impact on students' desire to attend college or university. Social med marketing in HEIs, thus, generate content which encourage students to follow their social media to increase the enrollment in their programs.

Content marketing

Content marketing has been found to be more effective than Traditional marketing which shifts from advertising and selling approach to providing information that creates value for consumer (Forrest, 2019). According to Plessis (2015), the concept of content marketing is being descriptive on sharing brand content through its owned media in an attempt to encourage and create conversation among others for brand awareness both business to consumers (B2C), and business to business (B2B). In short, the definition of content marketing proposed by Du Plessis is as follows: "Content marketing is a strategic brand storytelling technique aimed at changing consumers' inactive behavior through unobtrusive,

engaging brand conversations in earned media”. Regularly, brand content comes in forms of brand stories strategy that links company brand to consumer’s interest based on relevancy of their own lives. The brand stories are shared via social media, blog posts, videos, podcasts, webinar, interviews, testimonials and so on. These activities are mostly done to encourage electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), engagement on its social media or even convert target audience into customers (Pulizzi, 2010 & 2012, cited by Du Plessi, 2015). The information provides on content marketing are various; helpful, informative, problem solving or even entertaining. Content marketing also provides intangible benefit to business which includes brand awareness, new customers at the same time it increases site traffic, improve Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and consumer conversion (MOZ, 2018 cited in Forrest, 2019).

Content marketing for higher education

Ramadanty, Safitri, and Suhendra (2020) studied social media content strategy for higher education in Indonesia and found that social media changed the process recruitment in higher education, and content strategies are part of social media strategies for HEIs to communicate information to current student, alumni, and prospects. Various contents strategies such as branding, extending reach, and establishing emotion ties (Girard, 2017 as cited in Ramadanty, Safitri, & Suhendra (2020) are needed by HEIs, and should be able to increase on going engagement. Content contains campus life, student activities events, and accommodations is important and helps prospect students get an impression to choose the campus (Zhu, 2019). Peruta and Shields (2017, 2018) presented that volume of social media content is exploded in the recent year, brand and users share more content and compete their share in a social media platform timeline to reach and engage followers. In their researches, post type and content were studied and analyzed engagement. Content analysis was used to examine topics and formats of Facebook posts on top U.S. colleges and universities, the results found that content about athletics increased engagement significantly and format that included users generated also contributed engagement. Taecharungroj (2017) studied higher education social media marketing: 12 content types universities post on Facebook of three universities from the USA; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University, and Stanford University, and three universities from Thailand; Mahidol University, Chulalongkorn University, and Thammasat University with 12 post type created. The study found that common post type from universities from USA was research while other three universities from Thailand were events and announcements. Researchers suggested HEIs must be proactive together with strategy on social media.

Methodology

Population

In this study, purposive sampling was used and the top 20 of QS World Rankings University 2022 were targeted (Topuniversities, 2021). From rankings listed, nine universities found from the USA followed by five universities from the UK, and two universities from each country which are Switzerland, Singapore, and China (mainland). Thus, the authors sourced and filtered for universities that gain the highest ranking in its county as representative for this research which are Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), University of Oxford, ETH Zurich-Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), National University of Singapore, and Tsinghua University. The official Facebook pages for these five universities were used for content post analysis. Population used in this study presented in Table 1.

QS World Ranking 2022	Link to Official Facebook Page	Number of posts	Followers/ Likes (Million)
#1 Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	facebook.com/MITnews	229	1.4/ 1.3
#2 University of Oxford	facebook.com/the.university.of.oxford	602	4.7/ 4.5
#8 ETH Zurich-Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH)	facebook.com/eth	253	0.085/ 0.08
#11 National University of Singapore (NUS)	facebook.com/nus.singapore	278	0.52/ 0.51
#17 Tsinghua University	facebook.com/Tsinghua	870	4.3/ N/A

Table 1
List of universities in the study and the number of samples from official Facebook Page

Post type content

The authors employed 12 content types and like index from Taecharungroj's study in 2017 to analyze content as it is modernized to covers content post on Facebook which are alumni, announcements, campus, curriculum, events, faculty, image & reputation, industry, products, research, students, and others as shown in Table 2. Expressions such as likes, comments, and shares are used to evaluate engagement using median number of likes to compared the frequency post and post with engagement.

Alumni	Promotes university alumni, alumni achievement, and alumni activities
Announcements	Announces official university statement, university's official program, a message from the page admin team Promote university surveys, external scholarship opportunities, advertises student recruitment
Campus	Shows pictures picture(s) of the campus, the facility, or the physical environment, pictures of physical environment around and near the university
Curriculum	Promotes curriculum, courses, or program offered by the university shows in-class activity, promote MOOCs, promotes university's standardize testing
Events	Promotes events held by or at the university: sports events, art events, commencement events, academic events or conferences, seminars
Faculty	Promotes university faculty members, contains the picture and name of the faculty member, faculty activities, contains faculty's quote
Image & reputation	Promotes the history or reputation of the university, university's mascots, university's role in the society, university's identity, such as a theme song
Industry	Promote employers or companies related to the university, relationships between famous/ influential people and the university
Products	Promotes products made by the university, university's digital download content
Research	Contains novel research and/ or innovations of the university, Promotes studies conducted by the university
Students	Promotes students or their activities, achievements, student life, student affairs activities, students' quotes, charity or philanthropy, students' financial aid
Others	Promotes other matters not related to the university, contains knowledge from external sources

Table 2 Content post type with description (Taucharungroj, 2017)

Reliability

Authors studied 12 post type content type criteria and practiced together on Facebook post type then inter-coder reliability was tested on 15% of the sample (329 Facebook posts) The result using Krippendorff's alpha and the average pairwise was at 0.872, and 91.0% which is an acceptable level of agreement.

Findings

Facebook posts and statistic description of 12 post types

From selective universities, the total of 2,232 posts; 229 posts by MIT, 602 posts by the University of Oxford, 253 posts by ETH, 278 posts by NUS, and 870 posts by Tsinghua were analyzed as shown in Figure 2.

	Sum	Alumni	Announcements	campus	Curriculum	Events	Faculty	Image & Reputation	Industry	Products	Research	Students	Others
MIT	229	9	13	12	12	12	40	18	2	0	76	34	1
	%	3.9	5.7	5.2	5.2	5.2	17.5	7.9	0.9	0	33.2	14.8	0.4
University of Oxford	602	3	76	74	5	55	128	45	5	1	161	20	29
	%	0.5	12.6	12.3	0.8	9.1	21.3	7.5	0.9	0.2	26.7	3.3	4.8
ETH	253	4	21	2	7	61	73	8	4	1	51	14	7
	%	1.6	8.3	0.8	2.8	24.1	28.9	3.2	1.6	0.4	20.2	5.5	2.8
NUS	278	65	4	0	17	30	37	30	15	2	34	44	0
	%	23.4	1.4	0	6.1	10.8	13.3	10.8	5.4	0.7	12.2	15.8	0
Tsinghua	870	35	41	66	114	163	90	81	18	134	4	114	10
	%	4.0	4.7	7.6	13.1	18.7	10.3	9.3	2.1	15.4	0.5	13.1	1.2
Total	2232	116	155	154	155	321	368	182	44	8	456	226	47
	%	5.2	6.9	6.9	6.9	14.4	16.5	8.2	2.0	0.4	20.4	10.1	2.1

Figure 2 Facebook post by each university with descriptive statistic

Common posts on selective universities Facebook page

This study found that from the average score the highest common posts were research (20.4%) followed by faculty (16.5%), events (14.4%), students (10.1%), and image & reputation (8.2%) accordingly. Other post types were often posted such as announcements, campus, curriculum remained on the same amount (6.9%), alumni (5.2%), while content as others (2.1%), industry (2.0%) were rarely found before ended with products (0.4%). Figure 3 shown percentage of 12 content post type in general.

Figure 4 presented like index calculating by dividing the number of likes on the post by the median number of like of the university (Taecharunroj, 2017). Study found that the content post with the highest engagement were others (4.9%) followed by campus (2.8%), alumni (2.4%), curriculum (2.3%), students (2.0%), industry (1.9%), image & reputation (1.8), research (1.7%), Faculty, and products (1.6%), announcements (1.5%), and events (1.4%).

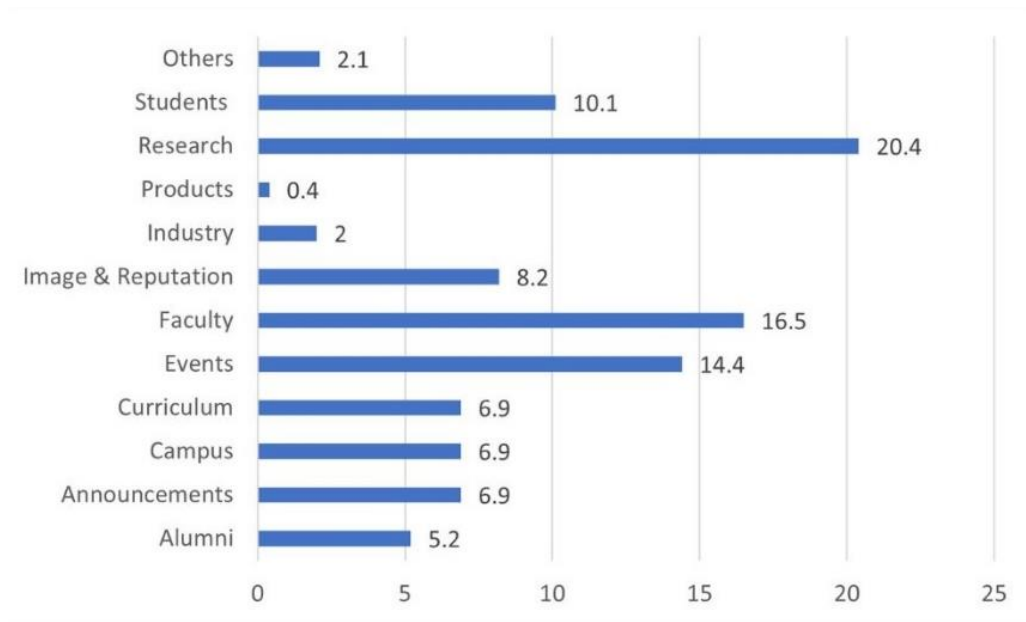


Figure 3 Common post by selective universities

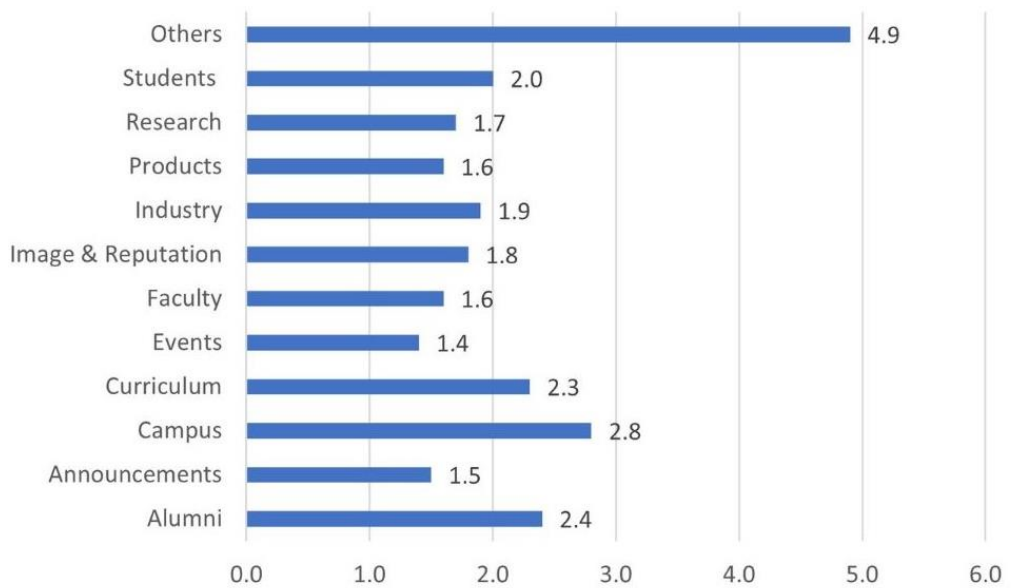


Figure 4 Like index by content post

Comparison between top five posts and top five with engagement post

From the general findings of common content posts and content post with engagement, authors used color coding, rating scale, and percentage to compare the top five post and top five post with engagement. In Figure 5 study found that from the top five posts, research was on the top 1 and gained 76% as it was posted by all five universities, and was also on top 1 of MIT and University of Oxford. The top 2 frequency post was faculty (72%) which also found in all selective institutions while students and events shared top 3 (44%). Announcement found in top 4 (24%) as it was in Top 5 of MIT, University of Oxford and ETH. The last one was alumni on top 5 (20%), and found on NUS.

	Top 1	Top 2	Top 3	Top 4	Top 5	
MIT	Research (33.2%)	Faculty (17.5%)	Students (14.8%)	Image/ Reputation (7.9%)	Announcements (5.7%)	Top Five posted in percentage
University of Oxford	Research (26.7%)	Faculty (21.3%)	Announcements (12.6%)	Campus (12.3%)	Events (9.1%)	
ETH	Faculty (28.9%)	Events (24.1%)	Research (20.2%)	Announcements (8.3%)	Students (5.5%)	
NUS	Alumni (23.4%)	Students (15.8%)	Faculty (13.3%)	Research (12.2%)	Events/ Image and Reputation (10.8%)	
TSING HUA	Events (18.7%)	Research (15.4%)	Curriculum/ Students (13.1%)	Faculty (10.3%)	Image/ Reputation (9.3%)	
						Research 76% Faculty 72% Students, Events 44% Announcements 24% Alumni 20% Image & Reputation 16% Curriculum 12% Campus 8% Industry, Products, Others 0%

Figure 5 Top Five posted by selective universities

Comparing with top five post with engaged, the most engagement was campus, and curriculum (44%), followed by top 2, students, and others (36%), research, and products (32%), and alumni 28%. Study found that “others” content type which is not related to university gained high engagement at top 2 together with students’ content. Post on products which was not founded in top 5 posted by selective universities was in the top 3 as well as research type that was found at all universities’ frequently post. Alumni was in the top 4 while “industry found in top 5. Announcement, faculty, image & reputation and events was on the 20% left of all post types. Figure 6 presented top five post with engagement in percentage.

	Top 1	Top 2	Top 3	Top 4	Top 5	
MIT	Campus (2.1)	Research (1.83)	Curriculum (1.71)	Announcement (1.64)	Students (1.40)	Top Five posted with Engagement in percentage
University of Oxford	Campus (5.87)	Curriculum (3.94)	Research (1.92)	Students (1.86)	Announcement (1.82)	
ETH	Others (17.86)	Curriculum (2.95)	Products (2.73)	Alumni (2.58)	Campus (2.43)	
NUS	Industry/ Products (2.64)	Students (2.07)	Faculty (1.86)	Events (1.64)	Research (1.54)	
TSING HUA	Alumni (6.13)	Others (5.34)	Image/ Reputation (3.33)	Students (3.20)	Industry (3.16)	
						Campus, Curriculum 44% Students, Others 36% Research, Products 32% Alumni 28% Industry 24% Announcement, Faculty, Image & reputation 12% Events 8%

Figure 6 Top Five posted with engagement by selective universities

Discussion

Top five content posted by selective universities

From findings, the top five that selective universities posted are research, faculty, events, students, and announcements. According to previous study by Taecharungroj (2017), content post about research, and faculty found on all universities in this study. Research represented universities’ intellectual achievement, advancements, and innovations while faculty post can strengthen the academic status of its university. MIT and ETH created short explanation of

research with captions, photos and link to their news and often with links to research paper. For example, a research post by ETH on December 14, 2021 summarized the topic of research paper from “Iron Deficiency Anemia at Time of Vaccination Predicts Decreased Vaccine Response and Iron Supplementation at Time of Vaccination Increase Humoral Vaccine Response: A Birth Cohort Study and Randomized Trial Follow-up Study in Kenya Infants” into a short sentence “Saving infants’ lives with iron” can be a good example of good content that captures readers on Facebook their post. MIT had the way to promote top posts at the end of the year by selecting 21 top posts of the year. The top 2 post from MIT was research post from July 25, 2021 that was reposted again on December 30, 2021 “New face mask prototype can detect Covid-19 infection”. These two posts were very well engaged.

According to Peruta and Helm (in press as cited in Peruta & Shields, 2018), social media managers at different schools in higher education implemented a wide range of posting strategies on Facebook. many schools reported timely. Naturally, content reflected current events on campus and in the news were posted thus “events” content type listed in the top 3 (44%) out of 5 in the research accordingly, and may be posted more than one time as a reminder or get more attention.

Post of students also found on top 3 as the most important stakeholder thus post focused on current students, activities, achievements, etc. were usually found on universities’ Facebook. Picture of students celebrated Diwati event found on Oxford’s Facebook dated November 7, 2021. Tsinghua congratulated student’s achievement, “Congratulations! Chinese shooter Yang Qian:” on July 24, 2021. MIT announced MIT’s intercollegiate athletics programs are resuming competition for the fall on September 3, 2021. Those posts received high engagement from their followers.

Announcements post was at top 4 or officially top 5 and were used often on getting attention and providing information. ETH announced Trust in science! Get vaccinated to promote awareness to their community as shown on December 10, 2021. It also used as a channel for page admin team to connect with followers by occasions such as “Today is Winter Solstice! Dumplings or Tangyuan: which did you have today?” by Tsinghua on December 21, 2021.

Top five content posted with engagement by selective universities

From findings, the top five with high engagement are campus, and curriculum at top 1, students, and others at top 2, and research and products at top 3 or officially top 5. From previous research, “the information provides on content marketing are various; helpful, informative, problem solving or even entertaining” (MOZ, 2018 cited in Forrest, 2019). These information on campus life, curriculum, and students are very important and help prospect students get impression (Zhu, 2019). Simple photo with short phrase posted by Oxford “Today is #InternationalCatDay!, August 9, 2021”, shown cats hiding, sitting at the corner of campus buildings, this post confirming that content marketing are various and the post with entertaining purpose can gained high engagement. A post of “A cloudy day in Oxford” posted on August 26 easily represented atmosphere of the university to prospected students and stakeholder (Peruta & Shields, 2017). In term of promoting curriculum, MIT announced its achievement being no. 1 in 12 subjects for 2021 ranked by QS World University Ranking by reposting the original post in March again on December 24, 2021.

For top 2, students post remained in top 5 both frequency post and post with engagement. Interestingly that content post “others” that contained content from external source and was not related to universities, but touched audience’s common interest showed significant impact on engagement at top 2. The sample can be found on ETH’s Facebook “celebrates the 130 years of Switzerland “Switzerland National Day, August 1 gained 372 like & love with 18 shares. Posts promote idea that has impact to the community and establish emotion ties can increase engagement (Peruta & Shields, 2018; Ramadanty, Safitri, & Suhendra, 2020). This content type posted by Tsinghua “The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games will represent a breakout phase for the Chinese digital renminbi, also known as the e-CNY on August 7, 2021” also found with high engagement.

Research and research finding or innovation by the university (Taecharungroj, 2017) remained in top 5 of both frequency post and post with engagement as it presents HEIs’ achievement, sample found on NUS’s FB post “PASPORT: Breakthrough saliva-based COVID-19 rapid test” on December 9, 2021. Another sample found on Oxford’s FB “Today saw the first vaccination in a Phase I clinical trial of a novel #HIVvaccine candidate in Lusaka, Zambia” on August 3, 2021. These type of contents increase high engagement as creating emotional ties (Girard, 2017 as cited in Ramadanty, Safitri, & Suhendra (2020). Together with research, products which was not found in top 5 of the frequency post was up to top 3 of engagement. from the definition, products referred to university’s digital downloadable content made Albert Einstein's doctoral dissertation thesis from ETH Library more popular with both use as research itself and university’s product.

Another finding which was useful is alumni post, even it was not in the top 5 with high engagement but in case of Tsinghua University, post with alumni content was only 4.0% out of the whole posts but was in the top 5 of the its engagement. A post about alumni “Meet Mugisha who turned down job offers abroad to pursue his dream in agriculture” by Tsinghua on September 26, 2021 gained more than 4K liked. It confirmed a strong and a positive relationship with their alumni can benefit the institutes, academically and professionally found in Kumar and Nanda (2019), thus, post about alumni and success of alumni gained engagement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study used 12 post type from previous research to analyse content marketing on social media by top five global universities using purposive sampling from Top 20 QS World University Ranking 2022. The study of 2,232 Facebook posts found similar findings that the top five global universities mostly promote research, and faculty which related to universities’ intellectual achievements and advancements and strengthen their academic status. Student content type is still in line as student is the most important stakeholder. Events and announcements regular posted naturally by most of universities in this research as found in previous research papers.

However, the significant finding from this research found on Facebook post with engagement part. It presents that content type as others which is not related to university but create emotional ties highly gained engagement from stakeholder as well as products of universities.

Thus, HEIs shall consider these types of content from external sources that benefit all stakeholders’ common interest to encourage conversation among others, and to increase own social media followers and engagement rate which are the main purpose of using content

marketing. Finding how the young universities earn reputation and what marketing strategies implemented will be an interesting topic to be explored in the further study.

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