

Revealing the Nexus between Content Strategy and Student Engagement on University Facebook Pages

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a critical marketing channel across industries. Organisations now face the challenge of developing effective engagement strategies. This study explores how content features affect online engagement on social media platforms. The research focuses on higher education and analyses how content type, media format, and posting day influence student online engagement. Engagement is measured through reactions, comments and shares. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis with statistical regression. Data come from 1,554 Facebook posts across 40 Vietnamese universities. Multilevel negative binomial regression is applied to analyse the data. The findings reveal that content type (hedonic, social or utilitarian) did not significantly affect engagement. This contrasts with previous research in commercial settings. However, media format strongly influenced engagement. Photos, videos and, unexpectedly, status updates drove higher engagement than links. These results offer valuable insights for content strategy across various sectors. They suggest that engagement drivers may depend more on context than previously thought. This work contributes to the evolving social media marketing field, offering theoretical contributions and practical implications for organisations aiming to enhance their digital presence and stakeholder relationships.

Keywords: social media marketing, online engagement, uses and gratifications theory, higher education institutions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Businesses can now interact with and reach consumers and stakeholders through a new marketing channel made possible by the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and social networks. Social media has become a key marketing channel alongside traditional

methods. Organisations have recently tested various strategies to develop effective practices, creating a need to better understand stakeholder engagement on these platforms across sectors. (Antoniadis, Assimakopoulos and Paltsoglou, 2021).

Social networks enable brands to interact with customers through specific content, which helps those brands understand the market, build emotional ties, and get people to promote them and their products (Gavilanes, Flatten and Brettel, 2018; Ulfa and Astuti, 2019; Pham and Ton, 2023). The practice of crafting engaging social media content and promoting meaningful interactions is widespread. It affects diverse organisations, from global corporations to local charities (Kumar et al., 2016). Consequently, insights from one sector often apply to others. This cross-sector applicability enhances our overall grasp of social media marketing dynamics.

Universities have increasingly been using social media to connect with their target audience, raise knowledge of their brand and build a sense of community among students, faculty and staff (Rutter, Roper and Lettice, 2016; Fujita, Harrigan and Soutar, 2017). Due to its large user base and diverse features, Facebook has emerged as one of the most effective platforms for universities to connect with their stakeholders (Brech et al., 2017; Saraite-Sariene et al., 2019). Official Facebook pages are now essential to many universities' marketing strategies, enabling them to stay connected with alumni and attract new students (Peruta and Shields, 2017; Lund, 2019; Cassar and Caruana, 2023). This trend mirrors the broader adoption of social media marketing strategies across industries, where organisations seek to leverage platforms like Facebook to engage with their audiences (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

As their online presence grows, universities have relied increasingly on online platforms to provide instructional content, support services and community engagement (Chugh and Ruhi, 2018). However, universities must go beyond Facebook and create compelling content strategies to maximise social media efforts (Nevzat et al., 2016; Peruta and Shields, 2018; Mai To et al., 2022). Posting attractive content, being consistent and connecting with followers on Facebook may help universities meet their communication goals regarding key stakeholders.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a valuable framework for understanding social media engagement across various contexts, including but not limited to higher education (Gan and Li, 2018). By examining why users engage with certain types of content, organisations can develop more effective social media strategies tailored to their audience's needs and preferences.

Social media marketing (SMM) is vital (Drossos, Coursaris and Kagiouli, 2024). Nevertheless, little is known about how it is best utilised, how it may be used to develop content and communicate, or how people interact with it (Klepek and Starzyczna, 2018; Amoah and Jibril, 2020; Rueangmanee and Wannamakok, 2024). Understanding what drives user interaction on university Facebook pages is crucial to conducting effective online communication initiatives (Manca, 2020). This paper examines how content strategy – including content type, post formats, posting day and follower size – influences online engagement on university Facebook pages, as measured by the number of reactions, comments and shares. While focused on higher education, the findings of this study have potential implications for content strategy development across various organisational contexts. By understanding these factors, universities can improve their social media strategies, allocate resources effectively, and strengthen relationships with key stakeholders (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Peruta and Shields, 2018).

This study examines social media engagement in higher education, contributing to

digital marketing research. Its findings can guide social media practices across sectors. Organisations can use these insights to better grasp and utilise factors driving online content engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social media marketing in higher education

Social media are online platforms that make it easier for people to talk to each other and work together. They also make it easier for people to make and share content that users and marketers create (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Rahman, Ramakrishnan and Ngamassi, 2020). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) use social media to progress beyond simply "pushing" messages; they go on to include monitoring stakeholder preferences and interests for evaluation purposes through engagement metrics (Sörensen et al., 2023), as well as communication with current and former students, staff, journalists and businesses (Clark, Fine and Scheuer, 2017; Peruta and Shields, 2017; Edumadze and Demuyakor, 2022). Social media significantly influences student engagement with HEIs and plays a vital role in those HEIs' branding activities on various social networking sites (Clark, Fine and Scheuer, 2017; Sörensen et al., 2023). HEIs also post on their official platforms to enhance student interactions and facilitate their social engagement with HEIs (Peruta and Shields, 2017; Chugh and Ruhi, 2018).

2.2 Student engagement on social media

Social media engagement significantly affects how organisations connect to their users. They rely on having an active and compelling online presence to promote interactions (Viglia, Pera and Bigné, 2018). These interactions, which include likes, shares and comments, are direct measures of how users engage with posts by institutions (Peruta and Shields, 2017; Fujita, Harrigan and Soutar, 2019).

Likes or reactions on social media are the lowest level of engagement. Users express their reactions or endorsement of content by clicking a "like, wow, haha, heart" button, reflecting support for the content or the message it conveys (Liu et al., 2021; Capriotti, Martínez-Gras and Zeler, 2023). Online comments facilitate direct two-way communication, allowing individuals to express detailed opinions, emotions and positions regarding specific content. As an interactive behaviour related to the transmitted context, commenting exhibits higher engagement value than merely 'liking' a post, enabling users to share positive, negative or neutral views publicly in response to organisations on social media (Chandrasekaran, Annamalai and De, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2021). Sharing content indicates that users find it significant or agreeable; sharing is the most engaged and committed form of social media engagement. Sharing increases exposure because it enables users to become advocates for an organisation's content by distributing it to their networks with the click of a button (Fähnrich, Vogelgesang and Scharkow, 2020; Capriotti, Martínez-Gras and Zeler, 2023).

2.3 Post Characteristics

2.3.1 Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and types of content

This study uses UGT to explain how people interact with certain media to meet particular demands (Katz and Foulkes, 1962). UGT clarifies how people choose media to meet

needs, including information-seeking, enjoyment, social connection and rewards (Ifinedo, 2016; Cheung *et al.*, 2022). Traditional ideas about media usage claim that people absorb it passively. UGT argues that people can choose how they connect and interact with media. The theory provides an essential framework for understanding the underlying motives that lead consumers to explore and engage with online content to achieve different objectives (Gao and Feng, 2016; Hossain, 2019).

Content on social media platforms fulfils user demands by providing them with information, entertainment, incentives and opportunities to build relationships (Tafesse, 2015; Dolan *et al.*, 2016; Kujur and Singh, 2020). Social media content based on UGT also includes opportunities for social interaction, self-identity, building self-esteem, knowledge acquisition, and remuneration (Tsai and Men, 2013; Phua, Jin and Kim, 2017; Zong, Yang and Bao, 2019; Cheung *et al.*, 2022). Another observation is that posting hedonic content on social media may indicate a good sense of humour or aesthetics (Fujita, Harrigan and Soutar, 2018).

This study classifies content into three primary categories: hedonic, utilitarian and social. These three categories of content have been identified in numerous previous studies (Gan and Li, 2018; Hossain, Kim and Jahan, 2019). Hedonic content is entertaining, and when shared by an institution on social media, it can highlight their sense of humour or aesthetic taste. Meanwhile, utilitarian content provides valuable information that meets the practical needs of online community members. This content can positively influence members' perceptions of the institution's concern for their well-being and foster a sense of identification with the community (Sharief and Elsharnouby, 2024). Furthermore, recent studies support the idea that utilitarian content increases fan engagement (Liao, Huang and Xiao, 2017). Social content fulfils social gratifications by facilitating interpersonal connections and interactions, created primarily to engage with others, maintain relationships and participate in online social networks (Liu, Cheung and Lee, 2016; Rueangmanee and Wannamakok, 2024). The hedonic, utilitarian and social gratification content also affects an individual's willingness to utilise a social network (Hossain, 2019). Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: Posts with hedonic content results in higher engagement

H1b: Posts with social content results in higher engagement

H1c: Posts with utilitarian content results in higher engagement

2.3.2 Media types

Posts may be shared using four main types of media: status updates, links, photos, and videos (Peruta and Shields, 2017). To maximise impact on social media platforms, it is necessary to understand the relationship between these media types and user engagement. Posts containing images receive more likes, comments and shares than text-only posts (Sabate *et al.*, 2014).

Research on social media formats looks at the "vibrance" of content, defined as the amount of sensory stimulation it evokes; videos, for example, are more vivid than photos (Chandrasekaran, Annamalai and De, 2019). Less vivid content, like text or links, tends to make users less engaged, while more vivid content, like photos and videos, tends to make users more engaged by increasing click intentions, click-through rates and positive attitudes (Sabate *et al.*, 2014; Khan, Dongping and Wahab, 2016; Peruta and Shields, 2017). Hence, we posit:

H2a: The vividness of content influences the number of reactions, with less vivid content (e.g., status updates) receiving fewer reactions than more vivid content (e.g., photos and

videos).

H2b: The vividness of content influences the number of comments, with less vivid content (e.g., status updates) receiving fewer comments than more vivid content (e.g., photos and videos).

H2c: The vividness of content influences the number of shares, with less vivid content (e.g., status updates) receiving fewer shares than more vivid content (e.g., photos and videos).

2.3.3 Day of post

Social media engagement varies on various posting days. However, consensus among the sources on the best day for posting has yet to reach consensus. While (Drossos, Coursaris and Kagiouli, 2024) suggest that activities on platforms like Facebook are more intense on weekdays, other studies offer mixed findings. For example, (Schultz, 2017) and Sabate et al. (2014) detected no significant differences in user engagement between weekdays and weekends. Hence, we hypothesised:

H3a: Weekday posts receive a lower number of reactions than weekend posts

H3b: Weekday posts receive a lower number of comments than weekend posts

H3c: Weekday posts receive a lower number of shares than weekend posts

2.3.4 Number of followers

Previous studies have shown that the size of a university's online presence significantly affects user engagement levels. Generally, higher total followings drive greater engagement due to the "network effect" (Fähnrich, Vogelgesang and Scharkow, 2020). However, another study found that smaller universities experience greater interactivity, while followers of more prominent universities exhibit comparatively less engagement and commitment to the institution's pages on average (Brech *et al.*, 2017).

3. METHOD

3.1 Data

We used Facebook's API and Facepager, a third-party scraping tool, to gather information on posts, comments, reactions and shares from the Facebook pages of forty Vietnamese universities. The collected data was imported into Excel and subsequently examined with SPSS and ATLAS.ti.

Over 36 days (August 15–September 20, 2022), high school students in Vietnam revised their college applications and awaited admissions decisions. The author believed that gathering information and gauging success during this period of great engagement best served the aims of this study.

The author used a university ranking from Webometrics – which has the most extensive list of HEIs, with 184 being ranked – to create a sampling frame, from which they randomly selected a sample of 40 universities. Universities without official pages or Facebook posts during the data-collecting period were removed and replaced until a final list of 40 active university pages was compiled.

3.2 Operationalisation of Variables

3.2.1 Independent variables

Types of content

Drawing from the literature review and theoretical framework discussed earlier, we defined and tested three types of content as categorical variables based on the UGT: 1 = "Hedonic content"; 2 = "Social content"; and 3 = "Utilitarian content", with utilitarian content as the reference category. Two trained coders analysed each university's Facebook posts. They coded posts containing a specific content type as 1, while posts lacking that content were coded as 0.

Media types

The media types had four formats: status updates, links, images and video, with video as the reference category.

Day of post

The day of the post was one of two types: weekdays and weekends, with weekends as the reference category.

3.2.2 Dependent variables – Student engagement

The dependent variable is the level of student engagement generated by posts. It is quantified by the count data of reactions, comments and shares for each post.

3.2.3 Control variables – Follower size

To ensure that other factors did not influence the results, we included the number of followers as a control variable.

3.3 Analysis Method

We used Negative Binomial Regression (NBR) to test our hypotheses. This is a common technique for analysing count data that is over-dispersed, meaning the variability in the data is higher than expected. In this study, the number of reactions, comments, and shares (dependent variables) showed this over-dispersion.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of student engagement.

	Mean	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
Reactions	512.22	1,498.821	9.704	156.157
Comments	39.7124	28,494.796	17.434	442.091
Shares	26.538	35,536.523	28.404	947.069

The NBR model we used is multilevel because each post belongs to a specific university. A random effect at the university page level is included in multilevel models to control for differences between the universities. These models look at the dependent variable using the fixed effects of the independent variables and a random-intercept effect at the university page level. The NBR model predicts the log of the count variable using a combination of the explanatory variables. This study uses three models to examine how types of content affect the three student engagement measures. Although user interaction is the main focus, brand and post differences are expected due to inherent preferential differences and gratifications from shared content. Because observations are interdependent across hierarchical levels, the study accounts for clustering at the post and page levels. Thus, for Model 1:

$$\begin{aligned}
 n_i[\text{Reaction counts}] &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Hedonic content} + \beta_2 \text{Social content} \\
 &+ \beta_3 \text{Utilitarian content} + \beta_4 \text{Media type} + \beta_5 \text{Day of posting} \\
 &+ \log \text{Number of followers}
 \end{aligned}$$

Model 2:

$$\begin{aligned}
 n_i[\text{Comment counts}] &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Hedonic content} + \beta_2 \text{Social content} \\
 &+ \beta_3 \text{Utilitarian content} + \beta_4 \text{Media type} + \beta_5 \text{Day of posting} \\
 &+ \log \text{Number of followers}
 \end{aligned}$$

Model 3:

$$\begin{aligned}
 n_i[\text{Share counts}] &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Hedonic content} + \beta_2 \text{Social content} \\
 &+ \beta_3 \text{Utilitarian content} + \beta_4 \text{Media type} + \beta_5 \text{Day of posting} \\
 &+ \log \text{Number of followers}
 \end{aligned}$$

The log Number of followers is the offset term used to scale the mean.

4. FINDINGS

Different types of content (hedonic, social, and utilitarian) do not have statistically significant effects on student engagement measures (reactions, comments, and shares) ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H1c are not supported.

Compared to links (reference group), status updates, photos and videos all show positive and statistically significant effects on reactions and comments. For shares, photos ($\text{Exp}(B) = 2.65$) and videos ($\text{Exp}(B) = 2.13$) show positive and statistically significant effects ($p < 0.005$), while status updates have a non-significant effect ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, hypotheses H2a, H2b and H2c are partially supported.

Regarding posting day, weekend posts show a positive and statistically significant effect on reactions ($\text{Exp}(B) = 1.2$, $p < .05$) but a negative effect on shares ($\text{Exp}(B) = 0.79$, $p < .05$). For comments, weekend posts do not have a statistically significant effect. Therefore, hypotheses H3a and H3b are supported, while H3c is not.

Table 2. Multilevel negative binomial regression model results

		Reactions		Comments		Shares	
		<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Z</i>
Content type	Hedonic	6.82	1.79	0.48	-0.39	0.77	-0.17
	Social	3.67	1.21	0.36	-0.55	0.56	-0.37
	Utilitarian	3.95	1.28	0.53	-0.33	1.16	0.09
Media type	Link	(reference group)					
	Status	2.43	6.37***	3.1	4.55***	0.84	-0.86
	Photo	1.96	7.21***	3.06	6.77***	2.65	7.01***

	Video	1.84	4.84***	2.60	4.36***	2.13	4.13***
Day of posting	Weekday (reference group)						
	Weekend	1.2	2.42*	0.93	-0.54	0.79	-2.06*
Control variables	Follower count (log)	5.22	6.42***	5.15	5.09***	3.64	5.05***
LR test (Chi ²)		228.01***		81.75***		79.86***	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

5. DISCUSSION

This study uncovered complex links between content features and student engagement on university Facebook pages. Surprisingly, content type (hedonic, social or utilitarian) did not significantly impact engagement. This contrasts with earlier research that found content type strongly influenced engagement (Dolan et al., 2019; Kujur and Singh, 2020). One potential reason for this difference is that students might interact with university content differently than commercial brand posts. Fujita, Harrigan and Soutar (2018) propose that students' existing relationship with their university may drive social media engagement more than specific content types.

Media-type findings partly support our hypotheses but reveal unexpected trends. Compared to links, photos and videos boosted all engagement measures (reactions, comments, and shares), supporting the previous research of Soares, Limongi and Cohen (2022) and Sharief and Elsharnouby (2024).

Status updates also increased reactions and comments significantly. The surprising effectiveness of status updates in university settings may stem from several factors. University communications often involve time-sensitive information like deadline reminders or event announcements. Students may view text-based updates as more urgent and actionable, boosting engagement through reactions and comments, supporting the idea of Peruta and Shields (2018). Moreover, status updates may be effective because they foster dialogue. Text posts can ask questions, seek opinions or spark thoughts more easily than visual content. This is consistent with the study by Rodríguez-Ardura and Meseguer-Artola (2016), demonstrating that interactive features in e-learning platforms foster stronger student involvement and satisfaction. On Facebook, status updates might serve a similar role, prompting more comments and reactions.

Posting day affects engagement metrics in intriguing ways. Weekend posts got more reactions but fewer shares than weekday posts. Commenting stayed the same regardless of the day. This mixed result adds depth to the debate on optimal social media posting times. Some studies found higher weekday engagement (Drossos, Coursaris and Kagiouli, 2024), while others saw no significant differences (Kim and Yang, 2017; Schultz, 2017). The findings suggest that the link between posting time and engagement may be more complex in higher education. This could reflect students' changing social media habits throughout the week.

The positive relationship between follower count and engagement metrics aligns with previous research on social media's "network effect" (Fähnrich, Vogelgesang and Scharkow, 2020).

6. CONCLUSION

This research examined what makes students interact with university Facebook pages, specifically investigating the effects of the type of content, the media format, the day of the post and the number of followers. The study suggests ways to improve universities' social media content strategies.

This study's findings extend beyond higher education, offering valuable insights for branding and social media marketing across sectors. As social platforms become primary brand communication channels, understanding user engagement dynamics is crucial for maintaining brand equity (Godey et al., 2016). Our research reveals complex links between content features and user engagement in various organisational contexts (Tafesse and Wien, 2018). It highlights the need to tailor content strategies, effectively communicate brand values and foster online stakeholder relationships. These insights contribute to broader social media marketing research, informing industry content strategies (Leung, Sun and Bai, 2019).

Moreover, this study emphasises social media's key role in information sharing. Today, online presence shapes public perception. Organisations must strategically use these platforms to share information, manage reputation and engage audiences (Etter, Ravasi and Colleoni, 2019). Our findings guide the optimisation of this information flow. They show how to ensure key messages reach and resonate with target audiences. Furthermore, this study's methodological approach, combining content analysis with multilevel regression modelling, offers a robust framework for analysing social media engagement that can be adapted for research in various industries and contexts (Kim and Yang, 2017).

This research provides nuanced insights into content preferences and optimal posting times for different customer groups. Though we focused on university students, our methods and findings can be adapted to analyse engagement patterns across demographics. This approach meets the growing need for personalised digital marketing strategies (Kumar, 2018). Organisations can use these insights to tailor their social media content and posting schedules.

However, it is essential to note that this study has some limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional data only shows how students were using social media at one point in time. The sample used in this study was also limited to colleges in Vietnam. This means that the results might be less useful in other cultures. Students from different cultures and in different countries may interact with social media material differently.

Despite these limitations, the study's findings contribute to the growing body of literature on cross-cultural differences in social media use and engagement (Kim and Yang, 2017). Future studies might usefully examine the long-term impact of content strategies on student engagement and post-scheduling, hashtags, and calls to action. Finally, comparisons across cultures and social media platforms may help institutions to better communicate with their target audiences online.

In conclusion, this study on higher education provides valuable insights into social media engagement dynamics, with findings applicable to diverse organisations. The research illuminates online engagement's complex nature, advancing social media marketing theory and practice.

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