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From content to engagement: a systematic review of social media marketing in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: to map the development and distribution of social media research in higher education marketing, identify the content strategies employed by higher education institutions, and examine the engagement indicators and factors influencing audience engagement, while identifying existing research gaps and directions for future studies.
Method: this study employed a PRISMA 2020-based Systematic Literature Review (SLR), combining bibliometric analysis of 3,795 Scopus documents using VOSviewer and thematic synthesis of 20 selected articles.
Findings: social media research in higher education marketing remains limited despite the growing volume of publications. Key content strategies include content type, format, theme, posting frequency, timing, and institutional branding. Engagement is measured through likes, comments, shares, and reach, as well as broader outcomes such as brand trust, institutional reputation, and e-WOM. Geographical gaps, particularly in Southeast Asia, highlight opportunities for further research.
Implications: provide theoretical insights into social media content strategies and engagement in higher education marketing, while offering practical guidance for universities to develop more effective, consistent, and audience-oriented social media communication strategies.
Originality: uniquely integrates bibliometric mapping and thematic synthesis to provide a comprehensive understanding of social media content strategies and engagement in higher education marketing.

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Introduction

Social media has become an increasingly important strategic communication and marketing instrument for higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly in response

to intensifying competition, changing stakeholder expectations, and the growing digitalization of the higher education sector (Li et al., 2023; Sahu & Kumar, 2026). Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) conceptualize social media as internet-based applications founded on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Within higher education, these platforms extend beyond conventional promotional activities by enabling universities to establish brand identity, strengthen institutional reputation, attract prospective students, maintain relationships with current students and alumni, and engage with broader communities (Amorós et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2021; Shukla & Bhasin, 2022). The growing academic attention to this phenomenon is reflected in studies conducted across diverse geographical contexts, including Southeast Asia (Herli & Tjahjadi, 2022; Hoang et al., 2025; Ramos, 2025), East Asia (Li et al., 2023), South Asia (Gautam & Bahl, 2020), the Middle East (Bonaventura et al., 2025; Gharbi et al., 2025; Yavetz et al., 2026), Europe (Albergo et al., 2026; Faraoni et al., 2026; Kisiołek et al., 2021; Sörensen et al., 2026; Spoaller & Ursache, 2025), and North America (Mai To et al., 2024). This geographical diversity demonstrates that social media marketing has become a relevant concern for HEIs worldwide, making its strategic implementation an important component of contemporary university marketing and stakeholder communication.

Despite the widespread adoption of social media, the effectiveness of university marketing communication cannot be determined solely by institutional presence, the number of followers, or publication frequency. Rather, it increasingly depends on how institutions develop, communicate, and distribute content that resonates with different stakeholder groups and stimulates meaningful audience engagement. Previous research has identified considerable variations in engagement across content categories, communication formats, visual characteristics, language, and publication timing. For example, Gharbi et al. (2025) found that student-oriented posts generated higher engagement than institutional announcements and research-related content, whereas Shukla & Bhasin (2022) reported that event-related and announcement posts attracted the highest engagement among Indian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Hoang et al. (2025) identified differences in engagement across university identity, functional identity, and student-role identity content, while Fähnrich et al. (2020) demonstrated that the timing and characteristics of Facebook posts were associated with stakeholder responses. However, these findings are not entirely consistent across institutional and geographical contexts. Moreover, the effectiveness of visual content, communication styles, and publication frequency appears to vary across platforms (Gharbi et al., 2025; Sörensen et al., 2026). These variations reveal a fundamental research problem: although HEIs increasingly invest in social media communication, there is still no sufficiently integrated understanding of which content strategies generate engagement, under what circumstances they are effective, and how engagement should be evaluated across different institutional and platform contexts.

Existing literature has examined social media marketing in higher education from several complementary perspectives. One stream investigates institutional communication strategies and digital presence, emphasizing platform selection, publication frequency, and content characteristics (Bonilla et al., 2020; Capriotti et al., 2024; Eger & Gangur, 2024). Another stream focuses on content characteristics and audience engagement, including branding positions, identity-oriented messages, post formats, visual communication, and language preferences (Gharbi et al., 2025; Hoang et al., 2025; Mai To et al., 2024; Sörensen et al., 2026). A further stream examines the relationship between social media activities and broader institutional or stakeholder

outcomes, such as university brand equity (Nguyen et al., 2021), student identification and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Lee et al., 2020; Ramos, 2025), institutional performance (Herli & Tjahjadi, 2022), and economic sustainability (Gelashvili et al., 2024). Research has also expanded to include influencer credibility and higher education brand trust (Griset et al., 2025), student perceptions of social media advertising (Huebner, 2021), and the communication of institutional sustainability initiatives (Us et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that social media engagement is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by content-related, platform-related, audience-related, and institutional factors. Nevertheless, the evidence remains dispersed across different research objectives, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, platforms, and geographical settings, limiting the development of a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between university-generated content strategies and audience engagement.

Although previous reviews and empirical investigations have contributed valuable insights, several limitations remain. First, much of the empirical literature concentrates on individual platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram, X, and Bilibili, rather than systematically comparing content strategies and engagement patterns across platforms (Fähnrich et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Mai To et al., 2024; Taghanli & Koob, 2026). Second, many studies are geographically or institutionally restricted, making it difficult to determine whether particular content strategies produce consistent engagement outcomes across different higher education environments. Third, existing studies employ heterogeneous engagement indicators, ranging from reactions, likes, comments, and shares to follower-based engagement rates, student identification, and e-WOM behavior (Lee et al., 2020; Ramos, 2025; Sörensen et al., 2026). Consequently, the findings concerning the effectiveness of particular content categories, formats, and communication approaches remain fragmented and sometimes contradictory. Although Capriotti et al. (2024) mapped the active social media presence of universities across different geographical regions, their emphasis was primarily on institutional presence and communication activities. Similarly, Abbas (2026) provided a broader synthesis of social media marketing in higher education through five thematic areas: student engagement, university branding, enrollment decision-making, relationship management, and strategic marketing. The present study extends this body of knowledge by adopting a more focused analytical perspective that connects the content strategies employed on official institutional social media accounts with the engagement indicators and contextual factors examined in empirical research. Its novelty therefore lies not merely in updating the literature, but in integrating three interconnected dimensions; content strategies, engagement measurement, and contextual determinants, within a single systematic analytical framework.

Against this background, this study aims to systematically review and synthesize empirical research on social media content strategies and audience engagement in higher education marketing. Specifically, it seeks to identify publication trends and the geographical, institutional, and platform distributions of the literature; examine the types of content strategies employed by HEIs and the methodological approaches used to investigate them; and identify the factors and indicators associated with social media engagement, including variations in findings across different contexts. To achieve these objectives, the study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021), complemented by quantitative literature mapping to provide a structured overview of the research landscape. The review focuses on English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus within the

Business, Management, and Accounting subject areas and published between 2020 and 2027, with the literature search conducted on October 26, 2026. Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions: (RQ1) What are the trends and distribution of publications concerning content strategies and social media engagement in higher education marketing? (RQ2) What content strategies do HEIs employ on social media, and how have these strategies been investigated in the literature? and (RQ3) What factors and indicators of engagement have been reported, and how do these findings inform future research? This approach enables the review to move beyond descriptive publication statistics toward an integrated synthesis of the mechanisms and conditions associated with audience engagement.

The importance of this research is further reinforced by the distinctive characteristics of higher education marketing compared with conventional commercial marketing. Unlike commercial organizations, universities simultaneously communicate with multiple stakeholder groups, including prospective students, enrolled students, alumni, academic staff, industry partners, and the wider community. Consequently, institutional social media communication must accommodate diverse informational needs, expectations, and relationship-building objectives rather than focusing exclusively on product promotion or immediate purchasing decisions (Albergo et al., 2026; Shukla & Bhasin, 2022). Furthermore, the effectiveness of university communication is influenced by institutional characteristics, including public or private ownership, organizational resources, and reputational positioning (Bonaventura & Ahmad, 2026; Nguyen et al., 2021; Spoaller & Ursache, 2025). External circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and security crises, also demonstrate how social media strategies may shift according to changing institutional and societal conditions (Shukla & Bhasin, 2022; Yavetz et al., 2026). In this environment, understanding the relationship between content strategies and engagement is important because engagement represents more than immediate audience reactions; it can also reflect stakeholder interest, institutional identification, relationship development, and the potential for positive e-WOM (Lee et al., 2020; Ramos, 2025). A systematic synthesis is therefore necessary to help HEIs make more evidence-informed decisions regarding content development, platform management, communication priorities, and engagement evaluation. It is equally important for researchers because the identification of consistent patterns, contradictory findings, and underexplored contextual factors can strengthen the conceptual and methodological foundations of future investigations.

Conceptually, this study draws on the understanding of social media as a participatory communication environment in which content creation and exchange facilitate interactions between institutions and their stakeholders (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This perspective provides a foundation for examining university-generated content as a strategic communication instrument rather than merely promotional material. It is further informed by the strategic communication perspective, which emphasizes the alignment of institutional messages with organizational objectives and stakeholder expectations (Bonilla et al., 2020; Fähnrich et al., 2020), and by the uses and gratifications perspective, which helps explain how the characteristics and sources of social media content relate to audience interests and engagement behaviors (Eger & Gangur, 2024). In addition, the literature on dynamic capabilities offers a relevant perspective for understanding how universities develop and utilize their organizational resources to strengthen social media activities and institutional brand value (Nguyen et al., 2021). Building on these complementary perspectives, this review conceptualizes social media engagement as an outcome associated with the interaction of content

strategies, communication characteristics, platform conditions, audience responses, and institutional contexts. Rather than testing a single causal model or proposing universal effects of particular content categories, the study synthesizes how these dimensions have been operationalized and examined in previous empirical research. This integrative conceptual positioning provides a basis for interpreting differences across studies while recognizing that engagement outcomes may depend on the interaction between communication strategies and their specific institutional and platform environments.

This study is expected to make three principal contributions to the literature and practice of higher education marketing. First, it contributes theoretically by consolidating fragmented empirical evidence into an integrated understanding of the relationship between university social media content strategies and audience engagement, thereby clarifying the dimensions, indicators, and contextual factors that characterize this research domain. It also provides a foundation for refining conceptual frameworks that connect institutional communication strategies, content characteristics, audience responses, and broader stakeholder outcomes. Second, it contributes methodologically by mapping publication trends, geographical distributions, platform coverage, research designs, and engagement measurement approaches, while identifying inconsistencies and underexplored areas that warrant further empirical investigation. This synthesis is expected to support future studies in developing more comparable engagement indicators, adopting cross-platform research designs, and examining institutional and cultural differences. Third, it offers practical implications for university marketing managers, communication professionals, and institutional decision-makers by identifying evidence-based considerations for developing relevant content, selecting appropriate communication formats, managing platform-specific strategies, and evaluating engagement more effectively. Ultimately, by shifting the analytical emphasis from institutional social media presence toward the relationship between content strategies and audience engagement, this study seeks to advance a more systematic understanding of how HEIs can transform social media communication from routine content distribution into strategic stakeholder engagement.

Method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical research on social media content strategies and audience engagement in higher education marketing. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and replicability throughout the literature selection process (Page et al., 2021). The SLR approach was considered appropriate because it provides a structured procedure for consolidating existing knowledge, identifying inconsistencies in empirical findings, and establishing directions for future research (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). In addition, the methodological recommendations of Marzi et al. (2025) were adopted to integrate descriptive literature mapping with thematic analysis and synthesis. Accordingly, the research procedure consisted of four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. These stages were designed to ensure that the selected publications were relevant to the research objectives and provided sufficient empirical evidence concerning content strategies and social media engagement in higher education marketing.

The identification stage involved retrieving scientific publications from the

Scopus database on October 26, 2026. Scopus was selected because of its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed academic journals, multidisciplinary indexing, and filtering capabilities, which allow researchers to systematically refine search results according to publication year, subject area, document type, language, and keywords. The search was conducted across article titles, abstracts, and keywords using combinations of terms related to social media, education, marketing, institutional contexts, and audience engagement. The search string was formulated as follows: ("social media" OR "social network" OR "online platform" OR "digital communication") AND ("education" OR "educational" OR "learning" OR "academic") AND ("marketing" OR "promotion" OR "advertising" OR "branding") AND ("institution" OR "organization" OR "school" OR "university") AND ("engagement" OR "interaction" OR "communication" OR "outreach").

The initial search retrieved 84,934 documents. Subsequently, several filters were applied sequentially to narrow the results to publications relevant to the scope of this review. First, the publication period was restricted to 2020–2027, resulting in 61,440 documents. Second, the subject area was limited to Business, Management and Accounting, reducing the number to 14,627 documents. Third, only English-language journal articles were retained, resulting in 11,042 documents. Finally, the keyword "social media" was applied to ensure that the retrieved publications explicitly addressed social media-related topics, producing a final identification set of 3,795 records. This filtering procedure established the initial dataset for descriptive bibliometric mapping and subsequent relevance screening.

The screening stage involved examining the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the 3,795 identified records to determine their relevance to social media marketing communication in higher education. Publications were retained when they addressed universities or higher education institutions and examined aspects of content, posts, engagement, interaction, marketing, branding, recruitment, reputation, or institutional communication. Records that did not address the relationship between institutional social media communication and stakeholder responses were excluded. To ensure consistency in the selection process, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before the screening procedure. These criteria covered publication characteristics, language, publication period, subject area, keywords, research context, and the substantive focus of the study.

As summarized in Table 1, the inclusion criteria required publications to be English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus, published within the specified period and classified under Business, Management and Accounting. In terms of research scope, eligible studies had to investigate social media marketing communication conducted through official higher education institutional accounts or promotional activities managed or directed by the institution. Furthermore, studies were required to examine content or communication strategies and their associated stakeholder engagement, perceptions, or responses, including electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and brand trust. Publications were excluded when they addressed unrelated educational or commercial topics, such as corporate disclosure, student purchasing behavior, travel intentions, pedagogical approaches, and misinformation, without examining the relevant marketing communication dimension. Studies focusing exclusively on institutional characteristics, determinants, or organizational outcomes without analyzing content, communication, or stakeholder responses were also excluded. Review articles were not included in the empirical synthesis but were considered as supporting literature in establishing the research background and positioning the present study.

Table 1 eligibility criteria for study selection

Criteria	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Other document types, including review articles
Language	English	Languages other than English
Publication year	2020–2027	Publications outside the specified period
Subject area	Business, Management and Accounting	Other subject areas
Keywords	Records containing the keyword "social media"	Records not containing the keyword "social media"
Research context	Social media marketing communication in higher education institutions, through official institutional accounts or institution-directed promotional activities	Research unrelated to higher education marketing communication
Research focus	Content strategies, communication approaches, and associated stakeholder engagement, perceptions, or responses, including e-WOM and brand trust	Studies examining institutional characteristics or organizational determinants and outcomes without analyzing content, communication, or stakeholder responses

Following the screening of the 3,795 records, 3,765 were excluded because their titles, abstracts, or keywords did not sufficiently correspond to the research focus. The remaining 30 articles were subsequently subjected to an eligibility assessment based on the predefined criteria. During this stage, 10 additional articles were excluded. Six articles were considered irrelevant because they did not investigate higher education marketing communication, covering topics such as corporate disclosure, student purchasing behavior, travel intentions, pedagogical approaches, and misinformation. The other four articles were excluded because they focused on institutional characteristics or organizational-level determinants and outcomes without examining content strategies, communication practices, or stakeholder responses. Consequently, 20 articles fulfilled all eligibility requirements and were retained for the final systematic review.

The final inclusion stage consisted of 20 empirical journal articles that met all the established eligibility criteria. These studies constituted the primary dataset for the thematic synthesis of content strategies and social media engagement in higher education marketing. To facilitate systematic comparison across publications, relevant information was extracted from each article and organized into a structured data extraction matrix. The extracted information included author(s) and publication year, country or research context, journal or publication source, social media platform(s), research design and methodology, theoretical framework, content strategy, engagement indicators, and principal research findings. This procedure enabled the identification of similarities and differences among studies while maintaining consistency in the classification of research characteristics and substantive findings. The overview of the 20 included studies is presented in Table 2.

The analysis was conducted at two complementary levels to address the research questions comprehensively. First, descriptive bibliometric analysis was performed on the 3,795 records obtained after the database filtering process. This analysis examined publication trends over time, geographical distribution, institutional and publication-

source contributions, author productivity, international research collaboration, and keyword co-occurrence patterns. VOSviewer was employed to visualize and explore the relationships among frequently occurring terms and international collaboration networks. This stage primarily supported the mapping of the research landscape and addressed RQ1, while providing contextual information for the interpretation of RQ3.

Second, thematic synthesis was conducted on the 20 articles included in the final review. The extracted data were systematically coded and grouped into two principal analytical dimensions: content strategies and social media engagement. The content strategy dimension covered the types, themes, formats, sources, and timing of institutional social media publications. The engagement dimension encompassed the indicators used to measure audience responses, as well as the factors associated with variations in engagement across different platforms, institutional characteristics, geographical settings, and stakeholder groups. The coded findings were then compared across studies to identify recurring patterns, divergent empirical results, methodological differences, and underexplored research areas. Particular attention was given to the contextual conditions under which specific content strategies were associated with higher or lower engagement. This synthesis addressed RQ2 and RQ3 by providing an integrated understanding of how higher education institutions employ social media content strategies and how their effectiveness has been investigated in previous research.

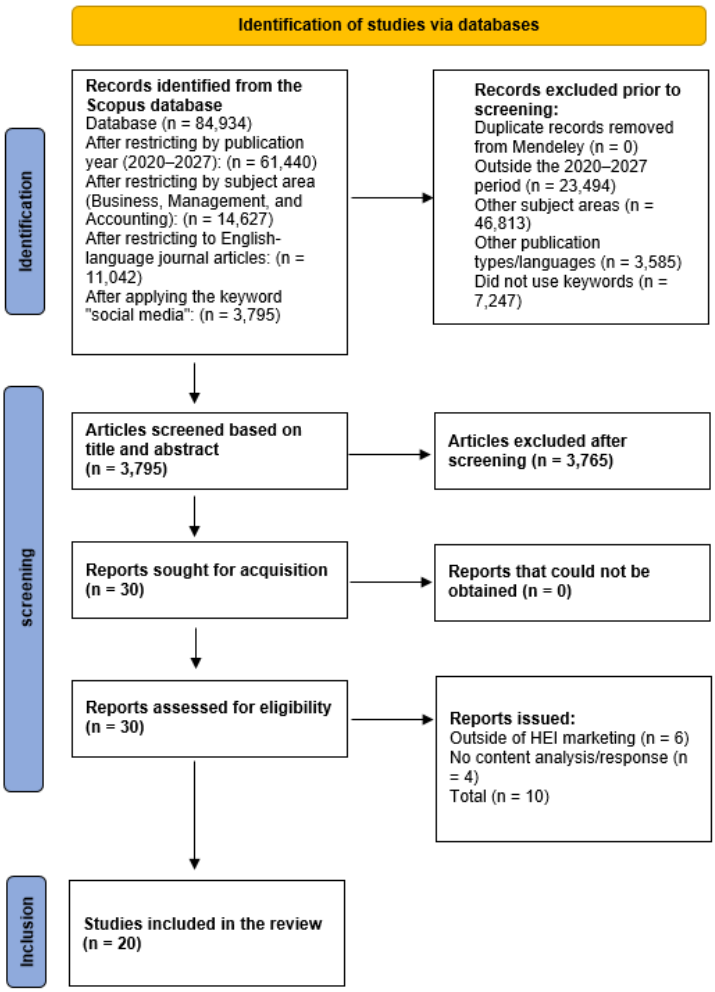

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram

The overall literature selection process is illustrated in Figure 1. The flowchart presents the progression from the initial identification of 84,934 documents to the final inclusion of 20 studies. Following the application of database filters, 3,795 records remained for relevance screening. Of these, 3,765 records were excluded, leaving 30 articles for eligibility assessment. A further 10 articles were excluded based on the predefined criteria, resulting in 20 studies being included in the final systematic review. The PRISMA flowchart provides a transparent overview of the selection procedure and documents the numerical distribution of records at each stage, thereby supporting the reproducibility and methodological transparency of the review.

Results and discussion

The descriptive analysis was conducted at two complementary levels to provide a comprehensive understanding of social media research in higher education marketing. The first level examined 3,795 Scopus-indexed documents identified through the application of the "social media" keyword filter within the Business, Management, and Accounting subject area for the period 2020–2027. This broader dataset was used to map the overall development and distribution of social media research, including publication trends, geographical contributions, institutional and author productivity, publication sources, and research collaboration patterns. The purpose of this analysis was to establish the broader intellectual and publication landscape within which research on social media marketing in higher education has developed.

The second level focused on the 20 articles that met the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria and were selected for an in-depth thematic synthesis. Unlike the broader bibliometric dataset, these articles specifically examined social media content strategies, institutional communication practices, and their relationships with audience engagement, stakeholder perceptions, and responses in higher education marketing. The distinction between these two analytical levels is important because the 20 selected articles provide the substantive evidence for examining the research questions concerning content strategies and engagement, but their limited number does not provide a sufficiently broad basis for describing the overall publication landscape or identifying meaningful bibliometric patterns. Therefore, the integration of the 3,795-document dataset and the 20-article review corpus enables this study to combine a broader mapping of the research field with a focused synthesis of its most relevant empirical contributions.

To establish the analytical foundation for the thematic synthesis, the 20 selected studies were classified according to their principal research focus and the dimensions examined. As presented in Table 2, the literature encompasses several interconnected areas, including institutional communication strategies, post characteristics, content categories, visual and textual formats, publication timing, university branding, audience engagement, and stakeholder responses. Some studies investigate engagement through observable platform interactions, such as likes, reactions, comments, and shares, whereas others extend the analysis to broader outcomes, including brand identification, brand trust, student perceptions, and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). The reviewed literature also highlights the importance of contextual factors, such as platform characteristics, institutional ownership, geographical settings, and external circumstances. This classification provides a structured basis for comparing research approaches, identifying recurring themes, and examining variations in empirical findings across different institutional and platform contexts.

Table 2 key elements of content strategy and social media engagement in higher education marketing

Nu.	Determining factor	Reference
1.	A targeted university communications strategy and the need for a more consistent strategy for building relationships with stakeholders on Instagram	Bonilla et al. (2020)
2.	Evaluate the response to strategic messaging through engagement on Facebook posts, including the impact of the day, time, and the content of the posts themselves.	Fähnrich et al. (2020)
3.	University brand identification and e-WOM behavior among active and passive social media users	Lee et al. (2020)
4.	Student perceptions regarding the quality, relevance, and frequency of social media advertisements in the higher education search process	Huebner (2021)
5.	Dynamic capabilities and social media interactions on the Facebook accounts of public and private universities in relation to university brand equity	Nguyen et al. (2021)
6.	Event and announcement categories, university type, and post format as factors influencing reach and engagement	Shukla & Bhasin (2022)
7.	Social media activities, content, and perceptions of green universities in mobilizing the university community	Us et al. (2022)
8.	Two stage brand marketing efficiency (production-operations and marketing communication) on Bilibili videos, content input quality, and fan loyalty	Li et al. (2023)
9.	Active institutional presence (selection of platforms, frequency, and types of publications)	Capriotti et al. (2024)
10.	Source of the post and 'uses and gratifications' category as determinants of engagement	Eger & Gangur (2024)
11.	Branding positions (Elite, Nurturing, Campus, Outcome, Commodity) and post characteristics	Mai To et al. (2024)
12.	The evolution of marketing communication topics on university Twitter accounts and their impact on engagement	Amorós et al. (2024)
13.	Language format and content type (student-focused, announcements, research) in relation to engagement	Gharbi rt al. (2025)
14.	Influencer characteristics (social attractiveness, attitudinal similarity, and interactivity) and trust in higher education brands	Griset et al. (2025)
15.	Identity-themed content (university, functional, student role) and upload characteristics regarding reactions, comments and shares	Hoang et al. (2025)
16.	The relationship between publications, followers, engagement, and student enrollment	Bonaventura et al. (2025)
17.	University-generated content, student identification, and e-WOM	Ramos (2025)
18.	Factors influencing engagement: cross-platform content levels, visual communication, and follower base	Sörensen et al. (2026)
19.	Informative versus entertaining content: effects on attitudes toward posts and brand personality	Taghanli & Koob (2026)
20.	Crisis communication strategies (instructional, bolstering, reputational) in relation to engagement	Yavetz et al. (2026)

Source: secondary data, processed.

RQ1: What are the trends and distribution of publications regarding content strategy and social media engagement in higher education marketing?

Based on Scopus data, publications on social media in the fields of Business, Management, and Accounting generally increased between 2020 and 2025, rising from 416 documents in 2020 to a peak of 645 in 2025. This represents an overall growth of approximately 55.0%, indicating sustained academic interest in social media as a research topic. The lower numbers recorded in 2026 (544 documents) and 2027 (13 documents) should be interpreted cautiously, as the data were extracted on October 26,

2026. Therefore, the 2026 figures remain incomplete, while the 2027 records likely represent early online publications. The annual publication trend is presented in Figure 2.

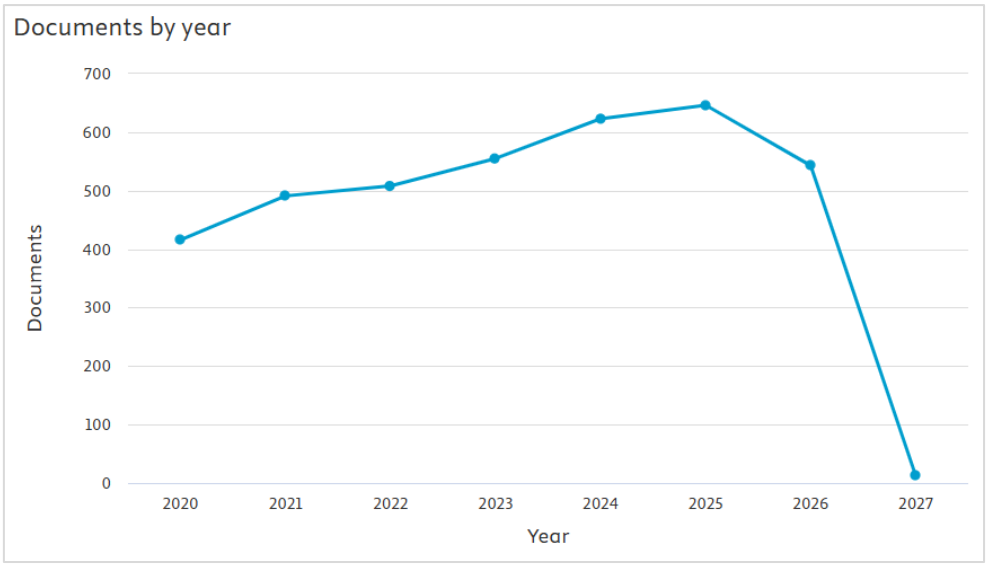

Figure 2 number of social media publications per year (2020–2027)
Source: scopus database

Despite this overall growth, research specifically addressing higher education institutions remains relatively limited. Of the 3,795 documents, only approximately 72 (1.9%) contained terms such as "university," "higher education institution," or "higher education" in their titles. Annual publications in this area also remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 7 and 14 documents during 2020–2026. This contrast suggests that the expansion of social media research has not been accompanied by comparable growth in higher education marketing research. Consequently, social media marketing in higher education remains a relatively underexplored research area, highlighting the need for more focused investigations into institutional content strategies and audience engagement.

RQ2: What content strategies do higher education institutions use on social media?

Among the 20 articles included in the systematic review, 12 (60.0%) were published during 2024–2026, indicating a growing concentration of research on social media content strategies and audience engagement in higher education. The annual distribution comprised three articles in 2020, two in 2021, two in 2022, one in 2023, four in 2024, five in 2025, and three in 2026. This pattern suggests that the topic has gained increasing academic attention in recent years, particularly through large-scale analyses of institutional social media content (Gharbi et al., 2025; Hoang et al., 2025; Mai To et al., 2024) and experimental investigations of content effectiveness (Taghanli & Koob, 2026).

Regarding geographical distribution, the broader Scopus dataset of 3,795 documents was dominated by the United States (919; 24.2%), followed by China (642; 16.9%), the United Kingdom (357), India (346), Australia (256), Spain (182), Italy (155), South Korea (150), Malaysia (148), and Canada (139), as illustrated in Figure 3. These figures are based on authors' institutional affiliations; therefore, internationally co-authored publications may be counted under multiple countries. The geographical distribution reflects contributions from four Asian, three European, two North

American, and one Oceanian country among the top ten, while Indonesia ranked outside this group with 100 documents.

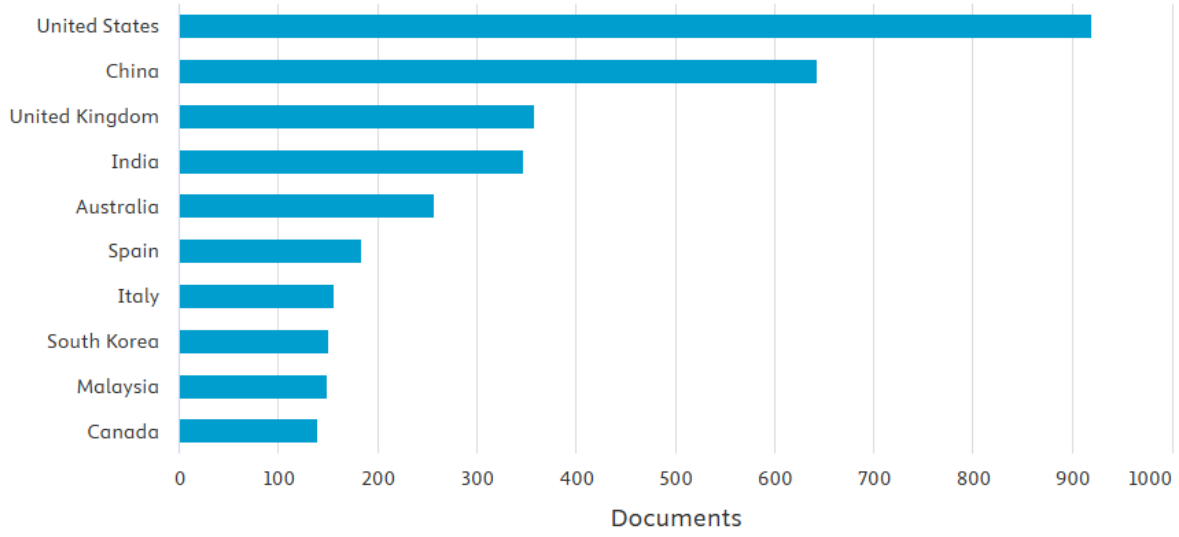

Figure 3 number of social media publications by country (top 10)
Source: scopus database

A different pattern emerges when the analysis is restricted to the higher education subgroup. The United States remained the leading contributor with 15 documents, followed by Spain (10), China (9), and India (7). Notably, Spain ranked second in this subgroup despite placing sixth in the overall dataset. This stronger representation is also reflected in research examining Spanish universities' online reputation and social media communication (Amorós et al., 2024; Faraoni et al., 2026). These findings suggest that national contributions to social media research differ considerably when the focus shifts from the broader business and management literature to higher education institutions.

International research collaboration across the 3,795 Scopus-indexed documents was mapped using VOSviewer through country-level co-authorship analysis. As illustrated in Figure 4, the resulting network visualizes the patterns of international collaboration and the connections among countries contributing to social media research. In contrast to the broader publication landscape, the 20 reviewed articles cover diverse research contexts, including Germany (Taghanli & Koob, 2026), Switzerland (Sörensen et al., 2026), the Philippines (Ramos, 2025), Vietnam (Hoang et al., 2025), the United Arab Emirates (Bonaventura et al., 2025; Gharbi et al., 2025), and Israel (Yavetz et al., 2026), alongside India, Canada, China, and Spain. Notably, several research contexts are located in countries outside the top ten contributors to overall social media publications. This indicates that national research productivity does not necessarily correspond to the geographical distribution of empirical studies on higher education marketing. Southeast Asia also remains relatively underrepresented, particularly Indonesia, despite the presence of studies from Vietnam and the Philippines. This geographical imbalance highlights opportunities for comparative and cross-platform research examining university content strategies and audience engagement in underexplored higher education contexts.

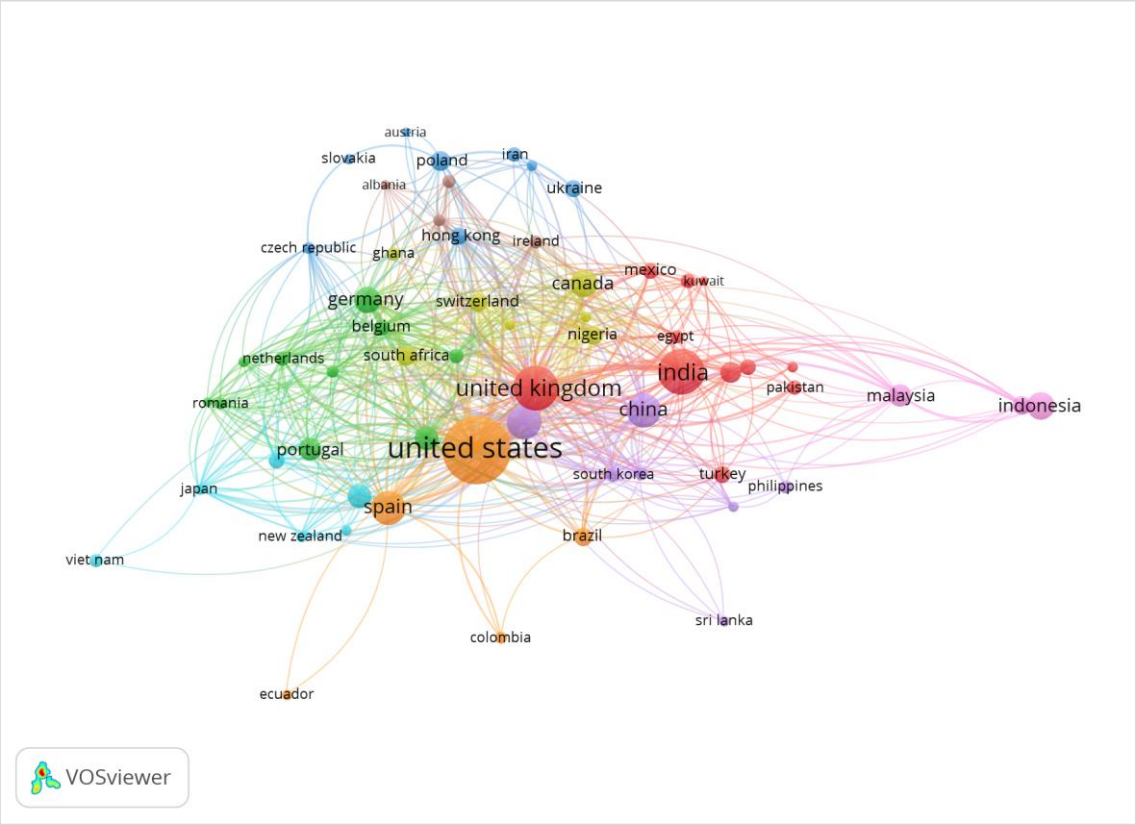

Figure 4 VOSviewer co-authorship network by country
Source: VOSviewer output

The geographical contexts of the 20 reviewed articles are more diverse than the countries dominating overall social media publications. The studies cover Germany (Taghanli & Koob, 2026), Switzerland (Sörensen et al., 2026), the Philippines (Ramos, 2025), Vietnam (Hoang et al., 2025), the United Arab Emirates (Bonaventura et al., 2025; Gharbi et al., 2025), Israel (Yavetz et al., 2026), and France (Griset et al., 2025), alongside India, Canada, China, and Spain. This distribution indicates that overall national research productivity does not necessarily reflect the geographical focus of higher education marketing studies. Notably, Southeast Asia remains underrepresented, particularly Indonesia, highlighting opportunities for comparative research on university content strategies and cross-platform engagement.

Regarding institutional affiliations, social media publications are distributed across numerous institutions rather than concentrated within a single research center (Figure 5). The Hong Kong Polytechnic University ranks first with 55 documents, followed by the University of Florida (32), the University of Johannesburg and Griffith University (28 each), and the City University of Hong Kong (27). The remaining institutions in the top ten include Kyung Hee University, the University of Central Florida, and The University of Queensland (25 each), as well as Shenzhen University and the Universitat de València (23 each). These institutions represent seven countries or regions, with Asia contributing four institutions, North America and Oceania two each, and Africa and Europe one each. Notably, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University accounts for approximately 46% of Hong Kong's 119 documents, while the University of Johannesburg demonstrates South Africa's institutional contribution despite the country's absence from the top ten national rankings.

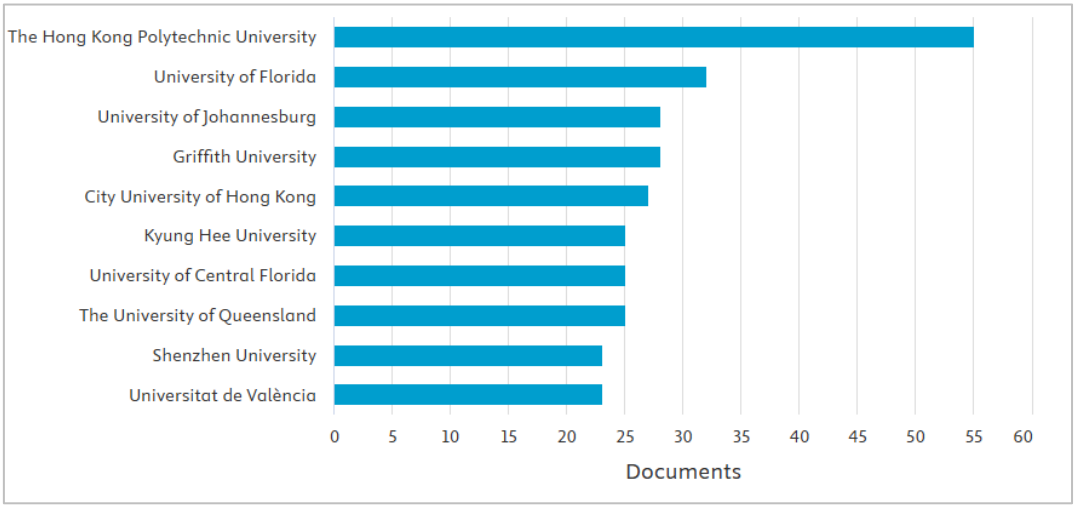

Figure 5 number of social media publications by institutional affiliation (top 10)
Source: scopus database.

Despite these contributions, the top ten institutions collectively account for only approximately 7% of the 3,795 documents, indicating a relatively dispersed research landscape. Furthermore, the institutional publication rankings do not necessarily represent expertise in higher education marketing. Approximately 19% of the overall documents relate to tourism, hospitality, or travel, with substantially higher proportions at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (57%), the University of Central Florida (67%), Kyung Hee University (58%), and the University of Johannesburg (54%). This distinction is important because only one of the 20 reviewed articles (Lee et al., 2020) involved an author affiliated with a top-ten institution, namely The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The absence of Indonesian and other Southeast Asian universities from the institutional rankings further highlights opportunities to strengthen regional research contributions to social media marketing in higher education.

The publication trends across the analyzed journals during 2020–2027 reveal considerable fluctuations (Figure 6). The Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services recorded its highest output at approximately 37 documents in 2024, while Technological Forecasting and Social Change peaked at around 31 documents in 2023. Meanwhile, Technology in Society, Information & Management, and the Journal of Business Research exhibited varying publication patterns throughout the period. These trends reflect the multidisciplinary nature of social media research, particularly its connections with marketing, consumer behavior, technological transformation, and information systems. For this review, the distribution of publications across journals provides an overview of the broader academic landscape in which social media marketing research develops. However, high publication output does not necessarily indicate a specific focus on higher education marketing. Therefore, examining article content and keyword patterns is essential to identify institutional content strategies, engagement mechanisms, and underexplored research areas. The 2027 figures should also be interpreted cautiously because the data were collected on October 26, 2026, and do not represent a complete publication year.

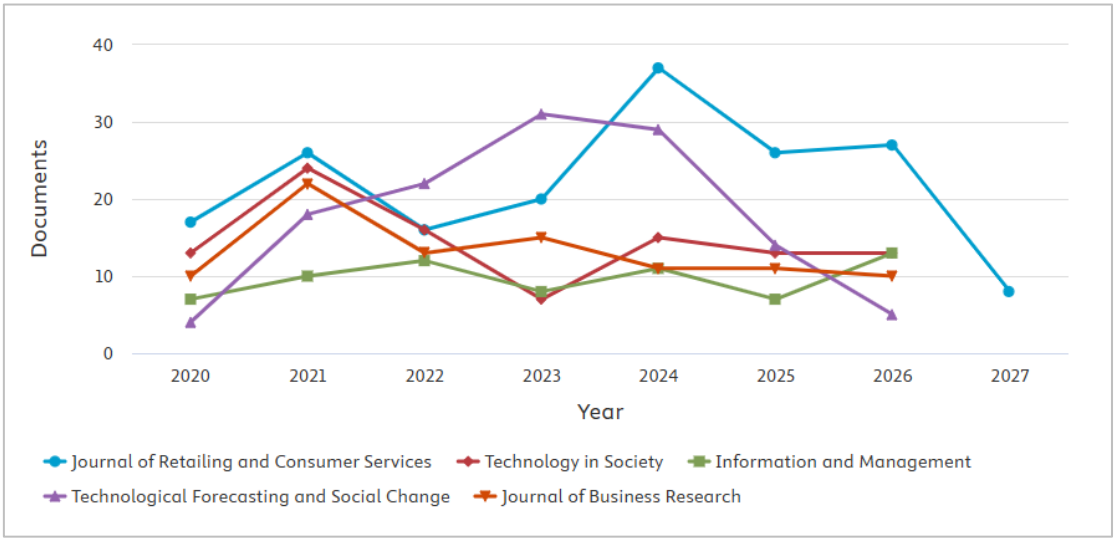

Figure 6 top 10 publication sources
Source: scopus database.

The distribution of publications by author indicates that social media research in Business, Management, and Accounting is not dominated by a small group of researchers (Figure 7). A. Dhir ranks first with 12 documents, followed by S. López-Carril and D. Vrontis (10 each), S. Chatterjee and N.P. Rana (9 each), A.K. Kar, R. Law, M. Naeem, and S. Shokouhyar (8 each), and J. Amoah (7). Collectively, these ten authors account for 89 documents, equivalent to approximately 2.3% of the total dataset. Furthermore, more than 80% of authors appear in only one document, suggesting a highly dispersed authorship structure rather than a strongly established core of recurring contributors.

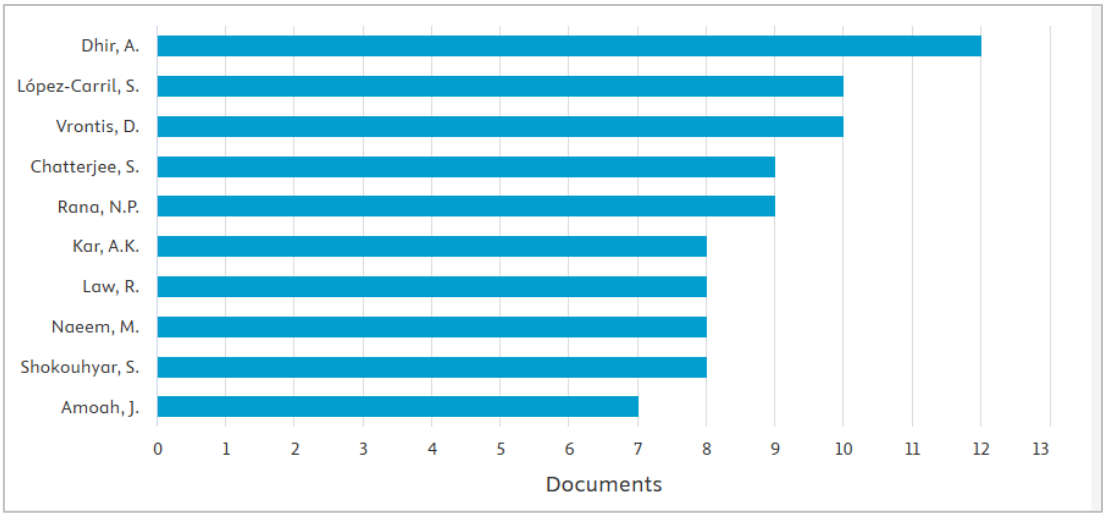

Figure 7 number of publications by author (top 10)
Source: scopus database.

An examination of article titles reveals that the research interests of these leading authors largely extend beyond higher education marketing. Their studies predominantly address consumer behavior, influencer marketing, corporate communication, tourism, hospitality, retail, and social media adoption by businesses. Among them, López-Carril has explored Pinterest and TikTok in sports management education, although the focus

is on learning applications rather than institutional marketing. Moreover, collaboration among the ten leading authors appears limited, with Vrontis and Chatterjee being the most notable collaborators, while none of these authors contributed to the 20 articles included in this review. Overall, these findings suggest that although social media research has attracted contributions from diverse scholars, specialized research on content strategies and audience engagement in higher education marketing remains relatively disconnected from the broader research landscape.

RQ3: What factors and indicators of engagement are reported, and how do these findings guide future research?

The keyword co-occurrence network in Figure 8 reveals three major themes associated with social media engagement in higher education marketing. First, the content-related cluster, represented by terms such as "content," "type," "post," "information," and "content analysis," highlights the importance of content characteristics and information delivery in shaping audience engagement. Second, the strategic cluster, in which "strategy" appears as the largest node, is closely connected to "social media engagement," "HEIs," and "educational institution." This suggests that engagement is predominantly discussed within the broader context of institutional marketing and communication strategies. Third, the managerial cluster includes terms such as "social media usage," "Twitter," "social network," "marketing management," and "marketing manager," reflecting the organizational and platform-related dimensions of social media management.

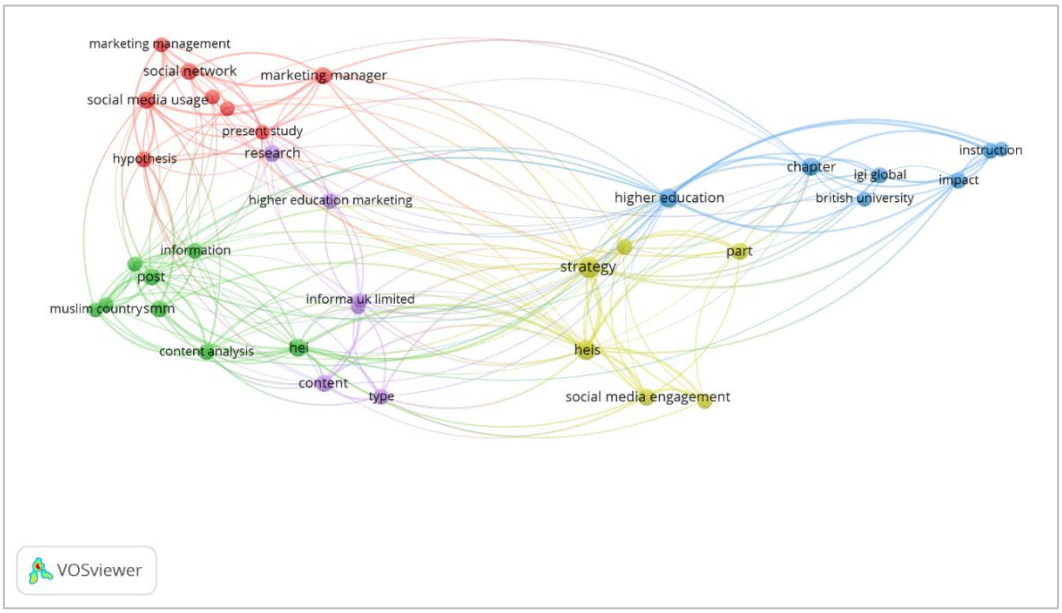

Figure 8 keyword co-occurrence network and representation of key research terms
Source: VOSviewer output.

Regarding engagement measurement, the map identifies "social media engagement" as a general concept but does not distinctly represent operational indicators such as likes, comments, shares, reach, or interaction rates. This suggests that engagement measurement may not yet be consistently represented in the broader research landscape. Accordingly, the 20 selected articles require further examination to identify how engagement is operationalized and measured across different platforms and research contexts. The relationships among these clusters also indicate

opportunities for future research. In particular, empirical studies could examine how content characteristics influence measurable engagement outcomes and contribute to institutional marketing objectives, including prospective student interest. The appearance of terms such as "Muslim country" also suggests the relevance of cultural and religious contexts in social media research, providing opportunities for cross-country comparisons. Finally, bibliometric preprocessing using a thesaurus file is necessary to remove non-substantive terms, such as "chapter," "IGI Global," and "Informa UK Limited," thereby improving the accuracy and interpretability of the thematic network.

Discussion

The findings reveal a growing academic interest in social media research, but this development has not been accompanied by proportional growth in studies specifically addressing higher education marketing. Although publications in the broader Business, Management, and Accounting field increased substantially between 2020 and 2025, research focusing on higher education institutions remains relatively limited. This indicates that the application of social media in university marketing is still an emerging and specialized research area. The increasing number of studies published between 2024 and 2026, particularly those examining institutional posts and content effectiveness, further suggests a shift from examining social media presence toward understanding how communication strategies generate audience engagement (Gharbi et al., 2025; Hoang et al., 2025; Mai To et al., 2024; Taghanli & Koob, 2026). Geographically, the concentration of publications in the United States, China, and other major research-producing countries contrasts with the more diverse empirical contexts represented in the reviewed studies. The limited representation of Southeast Asian institutions, particularly Indonesia, highlights an imbalance in geographical coverage and suggests the need for more context-sensitive and cross-national investigations. These findings extend the observations of Capriotti et al. (2024) by indicating that the global development of institutional social media research is not necessarily reflected in an equally distributed body of empirical evidence across countries.

A central finding of this review is that content strategy represents a multidimensional rather than a single-dimensional determinant of social media engagement. The reviewed studies examine content through several interconnected dimensions, including thematic categories, informational and entertaining characteristics, visual and textual formats, language, publication timing, and institutional branding objectives. However, empirical findings regarding the effectiveness of particular content types remain inconsistent across institutional and cultural contexts. For example, Gharbi et al. (2025) found that student-centered posts generated higher engagement, whereas Shukla & Bhasin (2022) identified events and announcements as the most engaging categories during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Hoang et al. (2025) reported different engagement patterns across university identity themes, while Taghanli & Koob (2026) demonstrated the effectiveness of informative Instagram videos in shaping brand-related perceptions. These differences suggest that content effectiveness cannot be generalized independently of platform characteristics, audience expectations, institutional objectives, and contextual circumstances. This interpretation is consistent with the uses and gratifications perspective discussed by Eger & Gangur (2024), which emphasizes that audience responses are associated with the value and relevance of communication content. Therefore, higher education institutions should not rely exclusively on publication frequency or platform presence, but should develop

content strategies that align informational, emotional, and identity-related messages with the needs of different stakeholder groups.

Regarding engagement, the findings demonstrate that its conceptualization extends beyond conventional platform interactions. Although likes, reactions, comments, and shares remain the most frequently examined indicators in institutional content analysis (Fähnrich et al., 2020; Gharbi et al., 2025; Hoang et al., 2025), other studies consider broader stakeholder outcomes, including brand identification, brand trust, student perceptions, and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Griset et al., 2025; Huebner, 2021; Ramos, 2025). This distinction suggests that engagement should be understood through both observable behavioral responses and deeper psychological or relational outcomes. The findings also indicate that engagement is influenced by factors beyond content characteristics, including follower base, platform selection, institutional communication capabilities, and external circumstances (Capriotti et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2021; Sörensen et al., 2026; Yavetz et al., 2026). From a theoretical perspective, these findings support an integrated understanding of social media engagement in which content characteristics represent communication stimuli, audience perceptions and identification reflect intermediate psychological responses, and interactions or e-WOM represent behavioral outcomes. Nevertheless, the diversity of measurement approaches indicates a need for greater conceptual consistency and more comprehensive measurement frameworks that distinguish immediate platform interactions from longer-term stakeholder relationships and institutional marketing outcomes.

Overall, this review contributes to the literature by connecting the broader bibliometric landscape of social media research with a focused synthesis of content strategies and engagement in higher education marketing. Unlike previous broad reviews, such as Abbas (2026), which mapped social media applications across several higher education marketing dimensions, this study places particular emphasis on the relationship between institutional content strategies, engagement indicators, and the contextual factors that shape their effectiveness. The findings provide practical implications for university marketing managers by emphasizing the importance of audience-oriented content planning, platform-specific communication, and the evaluation of both quantitative interactions and qualitative stakeholder responses. Future research should prioritize comparative studies across countries, institutional types, and social media platforms, particularly in underrepresented regions such as Southeast Asia. Longitudinal research and empirical models linking post characteristics, audience perceptions, engagement behaviors, and institutional outcomes would also strengthen understanding of the mechanisms through which social media marketing creates value for higher education institutions. In this way, the study provides an evidence-based foundation for moving university social media marketing from routine content publication toward more strategic, measurable, and stakeholder-centered engagement.

Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive overview of research on social media content strategies and audience engagement in higher education marketing through a combination of bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review. The findings reveal that social media research in Business, Management, and Accounting has increased substantially, particularly between 2020 and 2025. However, studies specifically addressing higher education marketing remain relatively limited, with only

20 articles meeting the criteria for in-depth analysis. The reviewed literature identifies several key content strategy dimensions, including content type, format, theme, publication frequency, timing, visual communication, and institutional branding. Engagement is generally measured through likes, comments, shares, reach, and interaction rates, while broader outcomes include brand identification, brand trust, student perceptions, and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Overall, the findings indicate that effective social media communication in higher education requires a strategic alignment between content characteristics, institutional objectives, platform features, and stakeholder expectations.

This study contributes to the literature by integrating the broader publication landscape with a focused synthesis of empirical research on higher education social media marketing. The findings provide a structured understanding of existing content strategies and engagement dimensions, offering practical insights for higher education institutions in developing more relevant, consistent, and engaging digital communication. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the literature search was restricted to the Scopus database, English-language journal articles, and the Business, Management, and Accounting subject area, potentially excluding relevant studies published in other databases, languages, or disciplines. Second, the review covered the 2020–2027 period, with the 2026 and 2027 publication records potentially incomplete. Third, the relatively small number of included studies and their uneven geographical distribution limit the generalizability of the findings, particularly for Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating multiple academic databases, broader disciplinary perspectives, and publications in additional languages to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the field. Further studies should also investigate underrepresented geographical contexts, particularly Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries, through comparative analyses across institutions, countries, and social media platforms. In addition, empirical research is needed to examine the relationships between specific content characteristics, such as informational, educational, entertaining, and promotional content, and measurable engagement indicators, including likes, comments, shares, reach, and engagement rates. Future investigations could also explore how these interactions translate into broader marketing outcomes, such as institutional reputation, brand trust, prospective student interest, and enrollment intentions. Such research would strengthen the theoretical understanding of social media engagement while providing practical evidence for developing more effective and context-sensitive higher education marketing strategies.

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