# Saudi private universities' social media marketing: Content types on X

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**ABSTRACT**

Twitter, recently known as "X", is one of the most prominent social media platforms globally used by universities for student recruitment. In the Saudi context, due to intensive competition and managers' ambition to align with the government's vision for 2030, private educational institutions seek to attract the largest possible number of new students and publish brand content on most social platforms to achieve their goals. However, although the use of Twitter by Saudi private universities has become widespread, the effectiveness of the content published on this platform to attract new customers has not been sufficiently studied. It's unclear whether the content published by educational institutions is focused on attracting new customers or serves other purposes. This study aims to analyze the content published by four leading Saudi universities on Twitter and examines the Twitter tactics they use. A content analysis approach was used to examine more than 1,400 tweets published between March 2021 and March 2022 and to assess their suitability and effectiveness in recruiting new students. The findings of our content analysis indicate that the published content, rather than focusing primarily on recruiting new students, is scattered across eleven different objectives, including promoting events, research results, faculty members, and others. Content emphasizing academic strengths that could motivate potential clients to enroll was less frequently published than posts focused on general communication. Our analysis highlights the importance of structured marketing content for recruiting new students and guides university administrators in Saudi Arabia on how to improve their social media marketing campaigns, specifically on "X".

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Competition in higher education has increased on a global scale due to commercialization, privatization[1] and globalization[2]. For instance, throughout the world, universities are competing to recruit students, especially from the developing regions [3].University of developed countries like Australia, the UK, and the USA as government funding cuts have forced universities in these countries to market themselves aggressively to attract international students[4] . However, a persistent trend exists: students from Asia and the Middle East, despite having strong universities in their regions, often seek education in the US and Europe owing to the excellent academic programs in their universities[5].

On the Saudi national level, the Saudi Vision 2030's aspiration to establish Saudi Arabia as a global education leader, the nation's rapidly expanding economy and vibrant young population are driving the development of its higher education sector[5]. This expansion, coupled with intensified global competition among educational institutions, necessitates innovative approaches to attract and retain both local and international students. However, several challenges including fierce competition, the emergence and growth of the digital generation, government regulations, and financial constraints represent significant barriers [7]. Universities need innovative and successful ways of withstanding such situations, which should also involve a focus on social media marketing to target as many prospective students as possible[6].

For higher education institutions, social media platforms provide an obvious opportunity to reach their potential leads, engage with current students and alumni, and display academic services [7]. A growing body of literature has investigated the benefits of social media to educational institutions. Researchers have explored how these platforms can revolutionize the communication of higher educational institutions, emphasizing their power to create a dynamic, interactive, and personalized environment of learning, [8], [9], [10], [11].

Multiple studies provided experimental evidence that social networking can foster a more collaborative educational environment by encouraging teachers to participate actively in the educational process and engage student [9], [10], [12], [13].For educators, these platforms provide a digital space to connect with students, gain insights into their understanding, and tailor their teaching approaches accordingly[14], [15].

Additionally, social media offers a versatile platform for enhancing educational experiences[8] . It can be used to distribute captivating teaching materials, and personalized content, as well as, to facilitate two-way communication among students and university[10], [11] [16].

Saudi Arabian universities, like their international counterparts, have increasingly adopted social media to enhance the learning experience, to improve their visibility, and attract a diverse student body[17]. Al Awaigat and al.[13] highlighted the popularity of social media use among Saudi students and explored the impact of social media usage on students' academic performance. Al-Kahlifa and Garcia [15] have underscored the significant role of social media in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. They mentioned that social media enables students to share their thoughts and experiences and collaborate. Such platforms can help to build communities that facilitate the art of learning and reaching out to the students[13] .

While using social media platforms for educational purposes seems promising, research consistently highlights its potential to enhance engagement, communication, and collaboration among students and educators. However, few studies have investigated the potential of social media as a marketing and communication tool for universities [11], [18]. Particularly, the potential of these platforms to reach and attract new students or customers.

Nowadays, Saudi private universities have to deal with multiple challenges, mainly fierce competition, government regulation, and financial constraints, which have made many HEIs interested in attracting more students. [1], [2]. Universities need innovative and successful ways of withstanding such situations, which should also involve a focus on social media marketing: to target as many prospective students as possible[19], [20]. The "digital generation" of students learn and consume information differently, traditional methods such as advertising, public relations, and sales promotions are losing their effectiveness. In response to this changing climate, universities are adopting social media marketing to promote their brand and attract new prospects.

Social media, with its possibilities for branding and recruitment, can be a successful and efficient tool for attracting potential leads and converting them into consumers[18], [21]. Despite increased recognition of social media's potential in higher education, Saudi universities confront problems in properly leveraging these channels for student recruitment.

There is insufficient research on the use of Twitter, which is one of the important and popular social media, as a tool for student recruitment by these schools. This study addresses the need to fill this knowledge gap and provides practical recommendations for the use of Twitter in improving students' recruitment efforts.

This study examines Twitter's content published by four leading Saudi universities to assess their suitability and effectiveness in recruiting new students. A content analysis approach was used to examine the types of posts, their goals, the post frequency, as well as the engagement levels of the targeted audience, to suggest feasible and actionable strategies that Saudi private universities can utilize in their student recruitment campaigns through the effective use of

Twitter. The results will not only add up to the literature already in existence but also offer university managers some concrete strategies so that they apply social media marketing aimed at prospective students more efficiently.

## 1. Literature review

### *1.1 Social media and Higher education marketing*

Social media was defined to include "all activities that involve socializing and networking online through words, pictures, and videos"[22]. The advent of social media has greatly changed the way institutions communicate and relate with their audiences fundamentally[20]. The likes of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have transformed communication from being top-down to an interactive and participatory model[23].

This alone indicates how important a change this is for higher education marketing: off old methodologies and on to those that speak to the digital generation of students. Traditional methods such as print ads, TV ads, billboards, and radio ads often lack the interactivity and personalization that today's generation craves; hence, more and more digital marketing through websites and social media is on the increase today[24].

On the other hand, social media marketing is about real-time engagement, while universities can reach the target groups directly, answer their questions in a much-customized way, build communities, hold conversations, and present themselves in a vibrant and interactive manner[25] . In addition to this, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter nowadays offer a wider outreach and great engagement with potential with potential students in the marketing funnel[25]. These are ideal channels for inbound marketing by showcasing user-generated content and sharing excellent reviews from happy customers to leverage social proof which means attracting more prospects[26]. This modern style of communication helps universities identify potential students, build trust, and thus enroll more and reach out to more prospects[11], [22].

Over the past years, several researchers have suggested that social media is an important recruitment tool for universities[11], [21], [24], [27], [28], [29] . By using social media as a means of brand awareness, event promotion, content sharing, gathering feedback, and conversing HEIs boost engagement and recruitment[30].

A study by Taecharungroj [31] analyzed 1,394 Facebook posts from six universities in the USA and Thailand, identifying 12 content categories used for social media marketing: research, faculty, curriculum, campus, students, alumni, industry, events, products, image and reputation, announcements, and others. Their results found that U.S. universities primarily emphasized research and faculty achievements, whereas Thai universities focused on events and announcements. The overall results provide the basis for the necessity of proactive and strategic uses of social media by universities in enhancing university branding and engagement. This study is particularly useful for higher education institutions that want to optimize their social media communication strategies[31].

In their seminal work, Barnes and Mattisson[32]surveyed 478 admissions officers at accredited four-year U.S. universities to investigate their use of social media for recruitment. Their study's findings reported that HEI is ahead in utilizing social media in prospecting and recruiting students compared to more traditional Fortune 500 companies, and the fast-rising Inc. 500 companies. Admission officers are already using several platforms, such as blogs, vlogs, and social networking sites to advertise their institutes actively [32]. For example, higher education institutes put up videos to showcase their campus, facilities, physical environment, and even samples of lecturers as a way of attracting to potential leads[32].

Empirical evidence has equally indicated that HEI may use advertisement on social media as a cheap way to annunciate their programs and engage prospective students[33]. More precisely, the advertisements on Facebook, can improve the visibility, and hence position them better online which increases student recruitment[33].

In a more recent study, Sandvig[34] surveyed 2,844 admitted freshmen to a mid-size US public university and found that over half of respondents used social media to help choose a university. With a clear dominance of Facebook as a social platform used when looking for a university, with nearly 90% of respondents checking it regularly[34]. Social media are valuable resources for freshmen and prospective students seeking practical information and building connections in their new academic environment[35].

Another recent study [35] examined the content (type of information shared), the style (How was this information presented?), the posting frequency, the fans' engagement (interaction level with posts (e.g., likes, comments, shares)) and the Post promotion content (Did they use paid advertising to promote their posts?) in the Facebook activity of the top 10 universities.

The study[35] established that the top 10 universities were found to post once to twice daily on Facebook, which helped in increasing fans. They mostly posted visually stimulating information videos, photos, and links, not text-only posts. The universities also believed in emotive content by posting stories in the form of success, famous faces as well as bright ideas. This strategy shows that they use Facebook as a platform to connect with their audience through informative and aesthetically pleasing content, not relying heavily on sponsored promotion.

However, there are some challenges to using social media marketing in higher education institutions. HEIs need to ensure that all content in social media is relevant, interesting, and authentic besides using appropriate platforms to reach the target audience effectively [36].

The guiding principles of a successful marketing strategy are personalization, extensive but not intrusive outreach, co-engagement and co-participation by customers – this includes user-generated content and high interactivity, emotional resonance (based on dreams, desires, beliefs, and experiences), and, last but not least, measurability. Actual benefits of using social media and paid advertising effectively could be in the form of enhanced customer satisfaction, increased sales, better support, and extended reach[33].

Social media sites serve HEI mainly for student recruitment, obtaining information about students, and observing online conversations about the institution[36]. Among these sites, Twitter has become am an important tool for universities in Saudi Arabia[37].

While Twitter is a very popular social media platform among Saudi Arabian universities, it does not seem to work effectively in recruiting students. By contrast, no literature has been found in the college setting providing data on the assessment of the efficacy of Twitter communication for student recruitment in Saudi Arabia. This research seeks to identify how such institutions first use Twitter to recruit new students. The following review discusses the specific benefits of Twitter for universities, relays the current research related to the use of Twitter for student recruitment, and analyzes research comparing strategies of effective Twitter.

### *2.1 Twitter and Higher Education Marketing*

Twitter is a microblogging service famous for its instant communication and short content. It has become a very crucial tool in social media marketing. As of 2021, it is the 7th most-used social media platform in the world[38]. This has remained the case since then, while other competing platforms, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, have seen a drop in their popularity[39]. Social media platform X/Twitter is extremely popular in Saudi Arabia, with an estimated audience reach of 16.28 million users in the country as of April 2024, which corresponds to approximately 47.67% of the population being active Twitter users[38].

Many campuses maintain a presence on Twitter and other popular online social media sites[34]. Universities have leveraged Twitter for the promotion of their programs, engaging with stakeholders, and also in enhancing their brand image[34], [40], [41]. This could be done through tweeting about new programs, courses, and research findings; links to articles and other resources; and so on[41], [42].

Moreover, the immediacy that defines Twitter creates the notion of a connection and thus allows universities to respond in due time to any queries. This may be responding to any tweet or messages, retweeting and engaging with user-generated content, participating in Twitter chats and other conversations, and so on[43].

Mogaji et al. [42] adopted a qualitative approach to explore how universities in the UK use Twitter to engage with stakeholders in real time. Based on the analysis of followers, tweets, and the content of tweets, this study identified three major communication strategies: the recruitment of prospective students, the retention of current students and staff, and the reporting of activities and media coverage. The research offered some empirical evidence suggesting that most of the universities are very keen on admitting prospective students. In addition, the universities create social media content that can be used to allure potential leads along with their parents[42].

Linvill and Hicks' study[41] of 113 American universities showed that institutions often use Twitter as a one-way communication platform, thus failing to harness the power of two-way dialog. This is contrary to the principles of dialogic communication and limits Twitter's full potential to market university programs. Li and Li [43] when conducting a systematic review of research on social media marketing in higher education, described Twitter as a good platform for enhancing the brand image of universities. The platform enables conversations and interactions with prospective students through various features such as hashtags, polls, and question-and-answer sessions, which in return, allows universities to gain insight into student interests and customize their marketing communications[34] .

In addition, Twitter is also a good tool to reach specific audiences by using hashtags and Twitter advertisements. Hashtags are used in the promotion of events, campaigns, and other types of initiatives, while Twitter ads help in reaching a larger audience and increasing engagement. Ohio State University is one example of an institution of higher education that uses Twitter to effectively engage with its audience and build relations[22].

Universities can also use Twitter to solicit feedback from their audience and improve their programs and services. By keeping Tabs on the discussions and sentiment analysis, universities can find areas for improvement and take action against issues promptly. This can help universities to better serve their stakeholders while, at the same time, helping build a better reputation.

Compared to traditional forms of advertising, Twitter is a relatively low-cost channel. Universities can establish a strong organic presence on Twitter by sharing quality content and engaging in focused conversations [33]. Moreover, universities can showcase these different aspects using the various content types available on Twitter, which provide text, images, videos, and live-streaming capabilities[26].

Twitter was described in many academic researches as one of the most relevant online channels any higher education institution can take leverage from it to spread awareness about their academic programs and resources, improve institutional branding, and interact with their stakeholders, mainly their prospective students.

### *2.2 Twitter and Student Recruitment:*

Mogagi et al. [40] conducted a study to explore how UK universities use Twitter as a strategic communication tool to reach their stakeholders. Their research focused on the Twitter content of these universities and other factors like the size of their followers and the frequency of sending tweets to understand their communication strategies. The results showed three principal communication strategies used by UK universities:

- Recruiting Prospective Students: Through Twitter, universities try to attract potential students by sharing information about their programs, campus life, and application processes.
- Retain Current Students and Staff: Universities also use Twitter to share news and announcements, opportunities, and help build community.
- Reporting Activities and Media Coverage: It is through such channels that universities showcase their research, events, achievements, and media coverage.

Junco et al.[12] detected the following crucial tactics universities use on Twitter to attract prospective students. These tactics can be summarized into four focus areas: Event Promotion, News and Updates, Campus Culture Showcasing, and Connecting with Current Students.

Universities use Twitter to inform prospective students about the various events occurring at the campus, which include open houses, campus tours, and virtual information sessions. These events give a firsthand view of the university and the various programs offered. Furthermore, Twitter enables universities to share news and updates on academic programs, achievements of faculty, and success stories of students [7], [34], [42] .

By posting pictures and videos depicting campus life, student activities, and university facilities, universities let prospective students glimpse into the culture and atmosphere of the university [35].Engaging current students on Twitter allows universities to draw from their experience. Testimonials about the university and how a student lives his life can be quite convincing, coming from current students themselves[12].

Despite the potential benefits, research by Mogagi et al. [40], are the difficulty in reaching the target Audience, and the lack of engagement that may occur. Twitter's broad user base can be a challenge. This may entail targeted advertising campaigns universities must fund to ensure their message reaches certain demographics of future students. Second, Content Engagement: Planning and resourcing the creation of consistent and engaging content requires a focused strategy that speaks to a younger audience. Universities need to develop a compelling voice and tailor their content to be relevant and interesting to potential students.

Other challenges when prospecting via Twitter, according to some researchers [34], [35], [41] highlighted other challenges when prospecting via Twitter like the difficulty of reaching the target audience and the lack of engagement that may occur. Twitter's broad user base can be a challenge. To ensure their message reaches specific demographics of potential students, universities may need to invest in targeted advertising campaigns. Secondly, content Engagement: Creating consistent and engaging content that resonates with a younger audience requires strategic planning and resource allocation. Universities need to develop a compelling voice and tailor their content to be relevant and interesting for potential students.

Therefore, Twitter provides an interactive tool for universities to reach out to their potential students. However, it is important to realize the limitations that come with this approach. By using the identified methods of recruitment highlighted in this proposal and overcoming challenges regarding audience targeting and content engagement, the university will maximize the effectiveness of Twitter in its efforts of student recruitment.

### 2.3 *Comparative Studies of Successful Twitter Strategies in Higher Education Institutions*

While there is much research about using Twitter in higher education, there are relatively limited studies that compare, across universities, what works well. However, we can review some existing research that tries to light up best practices and identify areas for further comparative analysis.

Various studies have been conducted on the efficacy of Twitter usage as a recruitment tool in higher education institutions. Most of these studies were conducted within North American and European higher education contexts. Kelly[44]used a descriptive approach in which to collect data on Twitter usage for college admissions. While Twitter is not used extensively to receive admission information, findings indicated a positive correlation between the number of tweets per week and the number of college admission offices followed on Twitter. This suggests that increased Twitter activity may attract more prospective students. The study recommended Twitter as an effective communication tool to increase college enrollment and advised to utilize time and resources using Twitter for recruitment purposes[44].

From their side, Kimmons et al.[45] employed a data mining approach to analyze 5.7 million tweets from 2,411 U.S. higher education institutions. The results of their study showed that most institutional tweets are: 1) one-way broadcasting tweets, 2) focused on information sharing rather than prompting an action, 3) not linked to external websites or linked to social media services such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, or YouTube, and 4) express mainly neutral or positive sentiment. The study reported that while the potential for dialogue, debate, and community outreach on Twitter exists, the verified usage of the platform indicates that this potential is not fully realized.

In the Lebanese context, Vrontis et al. [6] provides insight into how international students expect universities to use social media with prospective leads. Three primary uses of social media by universities were recommended to engage with prospective international students:1) Promote the Educational Opportunities (academic programs, courses, and research opportunities offered by the university), 2) disseminate the latest University News and Activities (real-time updates on-campus events, cultural activities, and general university news) and, 3) publish visual content mainly videos to reflect a more immersive experience of university life.

Other articles underlined the requirement for focused communication[6] [4] such as targeting specific groups of students or their needs, which can be achieved by using specific hashtags or referring to specific student interests. There is also a need to create a two-way communication channel, as successful universities actively engage with their audience through responses, retweets, and polls[12]. User-generated content like testimonials and pictures of current students help to present authentic information about campus life, which strikes a chord with prospective student[5].

Although the previous research in the literature review did not provide a definitive approach or plan for using Twitter in the context of student recruitment, some of the findings suggested successful Twitter methods that can help improve the effectiveness of student recruitment via the platform. Several studies emphasized the importance of interactivity (mutual engagement)[40], [44], [45] highlighting the need for diversity in content, targeted communication, and user-generated input[6], [43] .By incorporating these elements, learning institutions can effectively use Twitter to communicate with and recruit potential applicants.

### 2.4 *Twitter's Potential in Saudi Universities: Promotion, Engagement, and Challenges*

Even though there is an increasing body of research on the impact of social media on higher education, there remains a literature gap about the use of Twitter by universities in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, some literature associated with the general use of social media within Saudi universities may be applicable and result in meaningful information[15], [18], [19], [21], [46]

Many universities in Saudi Arabia have active Twitter accounts that the institutions use for program promotion, content dissemination, audience engagement, and showcasing their achievements. This is especially evident at Al Yamamah University, King Faisal University, and Prince Sultan University, where the mentioned universities use Twitter for sharing news, advertising their programs and courses, and connecting with followers.

Notwithstanding Twitter's capabilities, there are challenges linked to its usage in the context of Saudi Arabia. Educational institutions must balance the need to adhere to the country's cultural and religious norms while creating content that resonates with its target users, particularly the youth. Existing studies by Al-Debei & Al-Hujran[19] and Al Taghafi et al. [21]are quite important; However, there is a gap in understanding the way Saudi universities, in particular, are leveraging Twitter. More research should completely examine the content types, engagement strategies, and general impacts of tweeting on Saudi universities and their audiences. For instance, the influence of social media marketing on the general higher education environment in Saudi Arabia is a problem that would be widely useful to investigate. The following study will look to add to the literature review to understand social media marketing used in higher education, mainly on Twitter (how universities use X platform), to enhance their brand image and attract students. A content analysis will be applied for the achievement of our research goal and to answer our research questions.

## 2. Methodology

### *2.1 Research design*

A content analysis approach was used to investigate Twitter’s posts published by four leading private universities in Saudi Arabia [47]. Tweets from these universities were analyzed to identify content types and evaluate their suitability for student recruitment purposes as well as their effectiveness based on audience engagement. A judgmental sampling approach was adopted to select four private universities located in different regions of Saudi Arabia (Riyadh, Jeddah, Khobar). This non-probability sampling was used mainly to guarantee a degree of variation in the sample. To maintain anonymity while facilitating potential future research replication, the universities have been designated as University A, University B, University C, and University D. A total of 1412 posts were examined from the official Twitter accounts of these universities from March 2021 to March 2022. This timeframe was selected to reflect a representative sample of Twitter’s communication practices and seasonal variations in content. Table 1

shows the number of tweets collected from each official Twitter account of the four universities during the period of the study.

*Table 1 Universities and the number of Posts studied (From March 2021 to March 2022)*

| University | Number of total posts in studied Period |
|---|---|
| University A | 320 |
| University B | 419 |
| University C | 165 |
| University D | 508 |

### *2.2 Data Analyses Strategy*

The literature lacks any studies that explore social media activities in Saudi Arabian universities, and even less so in terms of types of content. This restricts the possibility of applying or adapting categories already developed in former studies. To address this gap in the current study, a double-layered approach was taken to develop a content categorization framework.

First of all, the study carried out a comparative analysis of categories that already existed from other studies. In this regard, Chapleo et al.[48] used content analysis to examine UK university websites. Here, categories such as "research," "faculty," and "campus" were identified. In this process, the study took into consideration factors through which universities try to appear attractive to external audiences to attract more students. According to various studies, each university tends to emphasize what seems important for making student choices, instructor quality, administration quality, and curriculum quality. Universities highlight these factors in communication practices - including content marketing in social media content - to attract prospective students.

By comparing these approaches and looking at samples of content, the categories relevant to the existing literature were identified and adapted for use in the present study. These categories were: "research," "faculty," "campus," "curriculum," "students," "alumni," "industry," "events," "announcements," and "image and reputation." The categorization "products" was excluded because that may not apply directly to university social media content. This study, therefore, adopted the 11 content types from the work of Taecharungroj[31]who compared content published by universities on Facebook. These categories were then applied to the analysis of Twitter content within Saudi Arabian private universities.

## 3. RESULTS

This study examined the content categories utilized by universities on social media platforms to promote their various offerings and cultivate a positive image [31]. The analysis revealed eleven distinct categories, each serving a specific purpose in the university's social media communication strategy. These categories are detailed in Table 2.

*Table 2. Content Categories of University Social Media Posts*

| Category | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Research | Highlights novel research findings, innovations, or studies conducted by the university. | - Image of a research lab with a caption about a recent breakthrough. - Announcement of a published research paper. |
| Faculty | Showcases university faculty members and their activities. | - Photo of a professor with a quote and link to their profile. - Video of a faculty member delivering a lecture. |
| Curriculum | Promotes specific courses, programs, or educational content offered by the university. | - Video of a guest lecture in a specific program. - Post highlighting the university's online learning opportunities (MOOCs). |
| Campus | Features visuals of the university's physical environment. | - High-quality photo of a scenic location on campus. - Images showcasing university facilities or surrounding areas. |
| Students | Promotes student activities, achievements, and campus life. | - Post about a student club event with photos of participants. - Post highlighting a student's academic or extracurricular accomplishment. |
| Alumni | Shares stories and achievements of university graduates, and promotes alumni activities. | - Post highlighting an alumnus's current success with their graduation year. - Announcement of an alumni networking event. |
| Industry | Promotes the university's connections with reputable organizations or individuals. | - Announcement of a partnership with a company to provide internship opportunities. - Post featuring a prominent figure who graduated from the university. |
| Events | Promotes university-organized events, including sporting events, artistic performances, and academic conferences. | - Information about an upcoming sporting event with time and venue. - Announcement of a guest lecture or seminar. |
| Products (if applicable) | Advertises university-produced goods or services (less common). | - Not applicable (if not present in your data) |
| Image & Reputation | Promotes the university's reputation, history, mascot, or societal role. | - Post celebrating a university ranking or achievement. - Post featuring the university mascot participating in a community event. |
| Announcements | Disseminates official university information, including messages, programs, and recruitment campaigns. | - Message from the administration about a new scholarship opportunity. - Post promoting student recruitment with information about application deadlines. |

1. Research (Highlighting Intellectual Achievements): Posts in this category present new research findings or inventions made at the university; for example, a picture of a research lab captioned with news of a recent discovery. This kind of content is consistent with the role that society has traditionally come to expect from universities as hubs of knowledge creation stimulates public interest in their academic output[49]

2. Faculty (Showcasing Expertise and Credibility): Every university would use this account to highlight its faculty expertise and activities. This usually comprises a photo of the faculty, name, institution, and link to the profile, quote added to personalize the post, such as a professor's photo quote with a link to their webpage. This is a method through which the faculty credentials and achievements can be brought into view and contribute to the general academic reputation of the university[50].

3. Curriculum (Presenting Academic Content): Posts tagged as "curriculum" present the academic content taught in certain courses or programs; for example, a video of a guest lecture in a program. Images or videos of in-class activities can be published to show what happens inside the classroom. Highlighting curriculum allows universities to show the depth and breadth of their academic offerings, which may influence student choices[51].

4. Campus: This category provides a virtual tour by showing the physical university environment and campus life. It may contain photos of the beautiful spots in the university. The aesthetic campuses usually get a high level of engagement. The universities could show off their facilities and community, which may help to attract students[6].

5. Students-Enriching University Experience: This topic represents the students' activities and achievements in addition to on-campus life, such as posting any event or club activity that took place at the university and attaching pictures of participants. In this category could fall posts about volunteer possibilities or student club activities. Highlighted student life allows universities to connect with future students and show the dynamic and enriching university experience that they offer[6].

6. Alumni (Demonstrating Success Stories): Universities leverage this category to share alumni stories and achievements (e.g., posts highlighting an alumnus's current success with their graduation year). Posts typically include an alumnus's name, graduation year, relevant picture, and a link to further information, emphasizing their current positions or accomplishments. This strategy aims to connect past successes with the university, demonstrating its role in shaping graduates' futures.

7. Industry: This is equipping students for the job market. This category advocates for the university's relationships with well-established organizations and individuals; for instance, an announcement of a partnership with an organization to offer students internship opportunities. Posts usually demonstrate partnerships, agreements, and other forms of collaboration targeted at helping students acquire relevant professional skills for the job market. By showing relationships with industries, universities show career preparation and professional development for students.

8. Events: In this category, events at the university include sports-related events, artistic performances, and academic conferences or seminars. For example, information about a sportive event that is to occur with time and venue details. Commonly, the post would include details of the event and a link for more details. By promoting events, universities could involve diverse audiences in their interests and showcase campus life.

9. Products-Less Common Category: This category, although less common, is used by some universities to endorse commercial or non-commercial products, for example, advertising professional training programs for alumni and professionals.

10. Image and Reputation To Increase Brand Perception: Posts in this category aim to promote the reputation of a university regarding its history, mascot, or role within society. A typical example includes posts celebrating rankings or achievements of any form of the university. Posts may name the university with the specific reputation aspect they are trying to promote. Based on such emphasis, universities try to create an image and reinforce brand perception accordingly[44]

11. Announcements (Disseminating Official Information): Universities use this category to make official information about the university known. This can also involve messages from the administration on official programs, student recruitment campaigns, scholarship opportunities outside, and university surveys. Announcements help to keep audiences informed, promote university initiatives, and engage audiences.

Combined, these various content categories illustrate the differential communication strategy that universities have adopted for social media platforms. Through this range of categories, universities can reach and engage multiple stakeholder groups, communicate their academic and social offerings, and finally, enhance their overall brand and standing in education.

### *2.3 Descriptive Analysis of Tweets*

A total of 1412 tweets were analyzed from the four universities. This is indeed a large enough sample size to assume a representative nature of the pattern distribution of the content shared. Table 3 offers an overview of the different kinds of content each university has shared on Twitter during the period under consideration as well as their frequency. The most common post type was "Events" (21.5% of all posts), followed by "Curriculum" (12.8%), "Industry" (11.7%), and "Announcements" (11.6%). Due to their relatively low frequencies, the "Image and Reputation" and "Products" categories were combined, accounting for 7.0% of posts collectively. The least frequent post types were "Faculty" (2.6%), "Research" (1.7%), "Students" (1.1%), "Campus" (0.9%), and "Alumni" (0.6%). A comprehensive analysis of the various types of content across universities is presented in Table 3.

*Table 3. Distribution of Content Types Across Universities*

| Post Type | Total (%) | University A (%) | University B (%) | University C (%) | University D (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Research | 25 (1.7%) | 3 (7.8%) | 12 (2.8%) | 3 (1.8%) | 7 (1.3%) |
| Faculty | 38 (2.6%) | 16 (5.0%) | 7 (1.6%) | 3 (1.8%) | 12 (2.3%) |
| Curriculum | 182 (12.8%) | 61 (18.8%) | 25 (5.9%) | 12 (7.2%) | 84 (16.5%) |
| Campus | 13 (0.9%) | 6 (1.8%) | 3 (0.7%) | 0 (0.0%) | 4 (0.78%) |
| Students | 16 (1.1%) | 33 (10.3%) | 60 (14.3%) | 18 (10.9%) | 51 (10.0%) |
| Alumni | 9 (0.6%) | 7 (2.1%) | 14 (3.3%) | 21 (12.7%) | 17 (3.3%) |
| Industry | 166 (11.7%) | 28 (8.7%) | 46 (10.9%) | 22 (13.3%) | 70 (13.7%) |
| Events | 304 (21.5%) | 119 (37.2%) | 95 (22.6%) | 46 (27.8%) | 145 (28.5%) |
| Image & Reputation | 100 (7.0%) | 18 (5.6%) | 37 (8.8%) | 7 (4.2%) | 47 (9.2%) |
| Announcements | 164 (11.6%) | 20 (6.2%) | 89 (21.2%) | 27 (16.3%) | 28 (5.5%) |
| Total Posts | 1412 (100%) | 320 (100%) | 419 (100%) | 165 (100%) | 508 (100%) |

The most frequent types of content for each university are given in Table 4. "Events" became the top category in Universities B, C, and D, followed by announcements, industry-related content, and for University C, alumni content. University A differed somewhat, having "Announcements" in the leading position, followed by "Events," "Students," and notably, "Research" in the fifth place. The latter result may indicate a greater focus on communicating research compared to the other universities.

*Table 4 Most Common Post Types by Universities*

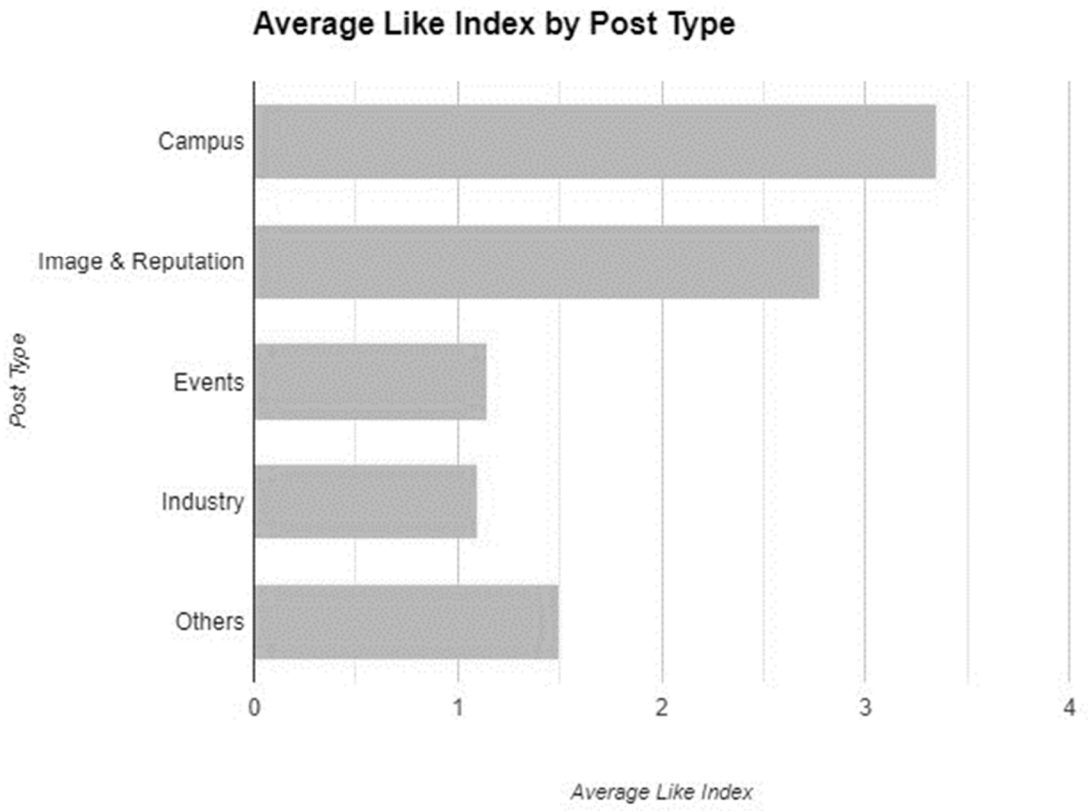
| University | 1st | 2nd | 4th | 5th |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **University A** | Announcements | Events | Students | Research |
| **University B** | Events | Announcements | Industry | Image /Reputation |
| **University C** | Events | Announcements | Industry | Alumni |
| **University D** | Events | Curriculum | Industry | Students |

### *2.4 Engagement by Content Category*

A "like index" was developed to account for the differences in follower base size among universities; an index that divides the number of likes received by a post by the median of the University. This approach would permit, in a more meaningful way, a comparison of engagement across universities. The median number of likes varied considerably; University A (Riyadh) received the highest median of 892, followed by University C in Jeddah with 374, and then University B with 287 and University D with 245.

Figure 1 shows the average like index for every post type. The "Campus" and "Image & Reputation" posts had the highest averages of likes with an index of 3.35 and 2.78, respectively. That means that contents reflecting the university's physical environment and creating identity have a better chance of being noticed. On the other hand, "Industry" and "Events" posts had the lowest average of like indices: 1.10 and 1.15, respectively. This would suggest that users are less engaged with content relating to external collaborations or general announcements than with posts that are visually interesting or related to identity.

***Figure 1. Average Like Index by Post Type***




## 3 Discussion

Results of the study of marketing content strategies employed by Saudi private universities on the X platform indicate a host of strategic approaches in eleven different categorizations of content, each for certain kinds of engagement. This thus all-around approach supports the work of Taecharungroj[31], who identified two sides of social media in higher education: one for marketing and one for building community.

In this regard, event-related topics became the most frequent category-27.5% of the total number of posts-emphasizing that displaying vivid university life is crucial for attracting and maintaining the interest of a wide range of audiences: current students, alumni, and prospective students alike. This finding supported research indicating that promoting events creates a sense of belonging, an important aspect of marketing higher education [6].

Also, in line with the events as core content strategy was to develop a vibrant campus image to enhance engagement and student involvement, as suggested by Mogagi et al. [40]. Events can be further improved by universities through real-time updates, live coverage, and even interactive elements such as polls or question-and-answer sessions, according to Azzolini et al. (2020), to enhance engagement on the X platform.

The study also highlighted the significant use of curriculum and industry-focused content, bridging education and career pathways. The presence of ‘Curriculum’ (12.2%) and ‘Industry’ (11.7%) content underscores a strategic effort to communicate educational offerings alongside career-oriented opportunities, reflecting the growing emphasis on employability-focused education in higher education marketing [51][45]. By emphasizing academic rigor and career pathways, universities position themselves as leaders in academic excellence and job market preparation. Thus, to enhance this strategy, universities could benefit from more integrated communication approaches, such as weekly curriculum highlights or alumni success stories, which could strengthen the link between academic programs and their practical applications [45]. Additionally, showcasing student achievements in internships and industry collaborations could enhance the perception of universities as providers of practical value.

Furthermore, a noteworthy finding from the study is the low engagement with ‘Research’ (3.8%) and ‘Students’ (9.3%) content categories, indicating that universities may not be fully utilizing social media to promote

research accomplishments and student life. This aligns with science communication literature, which identified challenges in making complex academic topics engaging for broader audiences [49]. Similarly, the limited visibility of student-centered content suggests a missed opportunity for enhancing student recruitment and brand identity. Prior research underscores that representing student life is crucial for attracting prospective applicants, as it offers an indication of the authentic university experience [12]To address this, universities might implement more interactive formats, such as student takeovers of social media accounts, which could provide a more relatable perspective of campus life, potentially through student club activities and day-to-day engagements.

The results further revealed that content showcasing campus visuals and elements of university identity, such as mascots and historical milestones, achieved different engagement rates, with indices of 0.83 and 6.96, respectively. These results suggested that Saudi private universities are not fully leveraging these content types, missing an opportunity to utilize the benefits of visually appealing content. Such content can effectively capture audience attention, enhance emotional engagement, and foster a sense of institutional pride. The importance of visual elements in social media strategies is well-documented in the higher education marketing literature [30]. To optimize engagement, universities could focus on aesthetic appeal and authenticity in content creation. Regularly scheduled posts featuring campus views, historical achievements, and community celebrations could reinforce institutional identity and strengthen emotional connections with followers.

The variation in content focus and engagement levels across universities reflects differing institutional priorities and communication styles. For example, universities in major cities posted higher volumes of content with superior visual quality compared to those in smaller cities, a finding consistent with Chapleo et al. [48]on institutional communication strategies. This difference may be attributed to variations in institutional culture, strategic goals, and resource availability. On this basis, to refine their strategies, universities should align their social media content with their specific institutional goals. For research-intensive universities, simplifying the presentation of research through infographics or concise threads could enhance engagement. Conversely, institutions focused on community-building and professional development could emphasize student life, industry connections, and alumni success stories, which resonate well with X platform audiences[12].

## 3.1 Implications for Higher Education Marketing on the X Platform

This provided a voice to the larger discussion of marketing strategies in higher education, emphasizing that social media strategies need refinement to balance out the traditional academic content with more visual and student-centric posts. By aligning such content with audience preferences and engagement trends, universities will be better positioned to reinforce their community-building initiatives, relationship-building processes with stakeholders, and overall engagement on the X platform.

The categories analyzed in this study are those that are most significant and will provide the best possibility for universities to rethink their presence and develop a more strategic approach to content on the X platform. Based on these findings, we have formulated various approaches and content categories to help universities effectively hone their approach and maximize their engagement.

First, curriculum and industry-focused content by highlighting employability-focused education and skills-based training can position universities as leaders in preparing students for the Saudi labor force. Thus, regular posts featuring curriculum updates, graduate success stories, and partnerships with industry leaders offering internships, co-op programs, and training opportunities can showcase the tangible pathways from education to employment. Lifelong learning and professional development are also important content in both curriculum and industry-focused content. Enhancement programs and initiatives in educational outcomes and continuous learning can certainly show that universities are committed to flexibility and accessibility. Online learning options, short courses, and professional development opportunities mentioned in the posts can attract a wide range of learners interested in skill enhancement.

Second, research and innovation-centric content; through this type of content, universities can uplift their research and innovation projects in a way that includes better and more interactive content. Simplified threads, infographics, or short videos of major research breakthroughs may attract a larger audience. This would also reflect the academic credibility of universities aside from proving their contributions to innovation.

Thirdly, it can focus on instilling an entrepreneurial attitude among students and faculty alike. The X platform can be used to highlight programs, events, and success stories related to entrepreneurship at the university. This may include startup accelerators, incubators, alumni achievements in entrepreneurship, and collaborations with venture capital firms that outline their role in nurturing a start-up ecosystem.

Fourth, captivating and real student-centered content can benefit brand identity and attract prospective students. Day-to-day student activity, club events, and personal stories highlighted through takeovers or in a question-and-answer format can enhance a more relatable understanding of life on campus. Furthermore, showcasing the achievements and accomplishments of female students and faculty bolsters this perception of universities as inclusive.

Also, visually catchy campus sceneries, historical achievements, and celebrating community can create emotional engagement and institutional pride. On-schedule visual content with reflections on the university's identity strengthens the emotional contact with followers.

Finally, to enhance their engagement and visibility on the X platform, universities should adopt strategic approaches to content development that cater to diverse audiences and align with institutional goals. One effective strategy is creating a dedicated thematic series that focuses on key areas such as curriculum, research, innovation, and entrepreneurship. These series can provide structured, engaging content that resonates with target audiences. Additionally, leveraging campaign-specific hashtags, such as #Innovation, #StudentLife, and #EducationForAll, can increase the discoverability of posts and foster participation in broader conversations. Furthermore, collaboration with key partners, including industry leaders, alumni, and media outlets, is another essential strategy. Co-created content enriched with diverse perspectives can expand reach and deepen engagement. Universities should also prioritize community interaction by hosting interactive campaigns that encourage users to share their experiences and stories, fostering a sense of belonging and building stronger community ties. Furthermore, partnering with influencers and alumni who align with the target audience can amplify the reach and impact of key campaigns.

By implementing these strategies, universities can diversify and refine their content, ensuring it aligns with audience expectations while strengthening institutional branding. This balanced approach makes universities more appealing and relevant to both current and prospective stakeholders, ultimately enhancing their overall presence on the X platform. The eleven content categories identified in this research represent a comprehensive and valuable framework for universities to build their social media strategies. Each category holds distinct potential for engaging different segments of the audience, from current students and alumni to prospective applicants and external stakeholders. While the categories identified—such as curriculum, research, industry events, and student—are strong and effective types of content, universities must maintain a strategic balance across all categories.

Saudi private universities should focus on ensuring that no content category appears underutilized or less attractive. Every piece of content should be thoughtfully connected to a broader strategic vision for the university’s communication goals. For instance, less visually appealing or seemingly less engaging content, such as research or institutional updates, can be made more compelling by presenting it within a well-thought-out strategy that ties it to larger themes, such as innovation, academic excellence, or societal contributions. By doing so, universities can ensure that even traditionally "less attractive" content echoes with the audience and aligns with their institutional identity.

### *3.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions:*

This study identifies a potential weakness in the content focus of university social media posts. The major issue seems to be a relative lack of emphasis on strategic communication in comparison with engagement-driven content. Further research is needed to explore the underlying reasons for this disparity.

Moreover, the effectiveness of different post types in fulfilling certain objectives of communication, such as brand awareness and student recruitment, would have formed a very valuable output for universities.

More in-depth exploration of these areas in future research will help establish balanced and strategic social media communication for universities in the digital era.

## 4. Conclusion

This study implemented content analysis to determine how universities in Saudi Arabia utilize X platform-the country's most popular social media platform to enhance brand image and recruit students. Our results showed that there were 11 different types of posts used by the universities, and all had a particular purpose for communication. The typology also offers some rich insights for university administrators to audit their existing social media presence and develop a strategic content plan that leverages the entire breadth of post types. On the other hand, limitations abound: the small sample size of four universities from a limited geographic scope may not give a comprehensive view representative of all HEIs or even capture regional nuances in their social media marketing strategies. Additionally, the dynamic nature of social media dictates continuous evolution in post characteristics. Future research should track these changes to gain a deeper understanding of evolving trends and HEI social media practices.

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