

Institutional Messaging Meets Algorithm Culture: A Content Analysis of U.S. University TikTok Accounts

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Abstract: Over the past few decades, colleges and universities have increasingly turned to social media to connect with diverse audiences, from prospective students to alumni. As platforms rise and fall in popularity, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must continually adjust their social media strategies to stay relevant. TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular and influential social media platforms, especially among younger users. Many prospective students now use TikTok not just for entertainment, but also as a source of information to help shape their college choices. This trend signals a shift in how students interact with institutions and how schools must present themselves online. Previous work outlined strategies for established platforms like Facebook, including recommendations about posting frequency, medium, and content type. While valuable, these insights don't fully translate to TikTok's fast-paced, video-driven environment. Its unique algorithm, creative trends, and emphasis on authenticity distinguish it from legacy platforms, and HEIs are still learning to navigate this space effectively. In this study, researchers conduct an in-depth content analysis of 752 TikTok posts from 37 highly-ranked U.S. HEIs, drawing from the *U.S. News & World Report's* top-ranked public, private, and liberal arts institutions. We examined content posted between August 2023 and July 2024, selecting accounts based on platform presence and institutional ranking. Content was coded for type (e.g. student life, academics, entertainment) and media format (video, slideshow, user generated) to identify what generates the most engagement and how leading institutions communicate their brand. Findings suggest that while entertainment content dominates, content activating institutional pride such as student achievements and school spirit generates the highest engagement. Beyond contributing to ongoing discussions about digital engagement in higher education, this research offers practical recommendations to help higher education professionals strengthen their social media presence and build more meaningful connections with students through TikTok.

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

1. Introduction

TikTok now reaches over 135 million U.S. users, with the 18–24 age group representing its largest demographic segment (Barnhart, 2025). Recognizing this, U.S. colleges and universities have increasingly adopted the platform as part of their marketing and communications strategies, drawn by the platform's short-form video format and unusually high levels of organic engagement relative to legacy platforms such as Facebook (Feehan, 2024). Unlike earlier social media environments that emphasized static posts or follower-based distribution, TikTok operates through algorithmic discovery that can surface content to users regardless of whether they follow an account. This means institutional messages can reach prospective students and other constituents who have never encountered the school's brand, making organic visibility possible in ways legacy platforms no longer support. TikTok has become an increasingly prominent channel for institutional storytelling, yet remains poorly understood in terms of what content strategies actually drive engagement.

This growing institutional investment makes the current state of research all the more consequential. Scholarly work on TikTok use by higher education institutions (HEIs) remains limited in number and scope, with much of the literature focusing on international contexts, single-institution cases, or specialized units such as academic libraries (Berdiieva & Goroshko, 2021; Akbari et al., 2022; Alley & Hanshew, 2022). While these studies suggest that TikTok can support brand awareness, community building, and student engagement, they provide limited insight into how institutions are using the platform at scale or which content strategies are most strongly associated with engagement outcomes for U.S. four-year HEIs. Consequently, institutional TikTok strategy is often guided more by industry benchmarks, practitioner anecdotes, or rapidly evolving platform trends than by cumulative academic evidence.

Prior research on higher education social media provides a foundation for understanding HEI use of TikTok. Content analyses of Facebook and other legacy platforms have demonstrated that certain content categories, including athletics, admissions, school spirit, and promotion, consistently generate higher levels of engagement, while informational or administrative content tends to perform less well (Peruta & Shields, 2018). However, TikTok's platform affordances differ substantially from those of Facebook, particularly in its emphasis on short-form video, multimodal storytelling, trend participation, and algorithmic distribution independent of follower

networks. These differences raise questions about whether established content categories and engagement metrics apply to TikTok or require adaptation.

In response to these gaps, this study conducts a systematic content analysis of TikTok posts from highly-ranked U.S. higher education institutions. Building on the methodological approach established by Peruta and Shields (2018) while adapting it for TikTok's distinctive platform features, this research offers both practical and theoretical contributions. Specifically, this study examines what types of content U.S. colleges and universities post on TikTok, which content types generate the highest engagement, and how platform-specific format features influence audience interaction. For scholars, it extends uses and gratifications theory and identity salience frameworks to short-form video platforms, while establishing a replicable methodological foundation for future research on TikTok HEI marketing. For practitioners, it identifies specific content strategies associated with higher engagement, providing evidence-based guidance for institutional social media managers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Higher Education Social Media Marketing: Established Foundations

HEIs have embraced social media as a strategic communication tool across multiple institutional objectives. Research documents that universities leverage these platforms for student recruitments, retention efforts, brand visibility, alumni community building, and fundraising initiatives (Nevzat et al., 2016; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Unlike traditional marketing channels mediated by advertising gatekeepers, social media enables direct institutional communication with their diverse constituents, fundamentally altering the higher education marketing landscape (Rutter et al., 2016).

Platform selection carries strategic significance, as different platforms reach distinct audiences operating under varying expectations and norms. Early research predominantly focused on Facebook given its market dominance during the early 2010s, establishing foundational knowledge about content effectiveness in higher education (Peruta & Shields, 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2018). Studies of Instagram use for HEI found that visual content quality and aesthetic consistency influences engagement (Stuart, Stuart & Thelwall, 2017), while Snapchat research highlighted the appeal of ephemeral content to younger audiences (Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017). Each platform is shown to have distinct affordances requiring adapted strategies rather than simple replication across all platforms.

The methodological foundation for the present study draws from Peruta and Shields' (2018) content analysis of 5,932 Facebook posts from 66 top-ranked U.S. HEIs. Their study identified 17 distinct content categories and introduced "proportional engagement"—total engagement divided by follower count—to enable meaningful cross-institutional comparison (Peruta & Shields, 2016). Key findings demonstrated that content activating institutional identity consistently outperformed informational content: athletics and school spirit posts generated higher engagement, while campus events, academic programming, and administrative content underperformed. Their format-level analysis revealed that user-submitted content outperformed institution-produced content, while posts containing calls to action counterintuitively generated lower engagement. These findings established that emotional connection to institutional identity, rather than informational utility, motivated audience engagement on Facebook.

TikTok represents the most significant platform shift since this foundational research. Its algorithm-driven content discovery, short-form video format, and authenticity-driven culture operate under fundamentally different logics than Facebook. While Peruta and Shields' methodology and content categorization approach remain applicable, their specific findings cannot be assumed to transfer directly. This motivates the present study's examination of how established higher education marketing principles may apply, or require revision, in TikTok's distinct platform context.

2.2 TikTok as a Marketing Platform

TikTok surpassed one billion monthly active users in 2021, with its core demographic skewing heavily toward Gen Z, the primary target for HEI recruitment (Barnhart, 2025). Unlike Facebook where users primarily see content from accounts they follow, TikTok's "For You Page" algorithm surfaces content based on predicted interest regardless of follower relationships, enabling even new accounts to achieve substantial reach (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). For HEIs, this algorithmic distribution presents both opportunity and challenge as visibility depends on opaque platform systems rather than cultivated audience relationships.

Several platform characteristics distinguish TikTok from legacy social media. The format centers on short-form vertical video, and the platform's participatory culture emphasizes trending sounds, hashtag challenges, and content remixing through duet and stitch features. Perhaps most distinctively, TikTok rewards perceived authenticity over production polish—what Abidin (2017) terms "calibrated amateurism," where casual, smartphone-shot content outperforms polished institutional productions. The prevalence of sound-off viewing has also made text overlays and captions functionally essential rather than optional (Hadad, 2024). These characteristics have given rise to content types with limited precedent on legacy platforms, including "day-in-the-life" videos where students narrate daily campus experiences and informal virtual campus tours emphasizing quick cuts over comprehensive coverage.

Academic research on HEI TikTok use remains sparse. Akbari et al. (2022) analyzed one Indonesian university's account, finding TikTok effective for low-cost recruitment. Berdiieva and Goroshko (2021) observed that Ukrainian universities used TikTok primarily for external communication to attract applicants, though usage remained limited. Alley and Hanshew (2022) analyzed 15 U.S. academic library TikTok accounts, finding that humanizing and entertainment-oriented content generated higher engagement. Dali (2023) reviewed the literature and concluded TikTok can engage prospective students through authentic depictions of campus culture. Absent from this emerging literature is a systematic content analysis of U.S. university TikTok accounts spanning institution types, a gap the present study addresses.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives to explain why certain content types generate higher engagement on HEI TikTok accounts: uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and social identity theory, with particular attention to identity salience.

2.3.1 *Uses and Gratifications Theory*

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) posits that media audiences are active consumers who select and engage with content to fulfill specific psychological and social needs (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Rather than viewing audiences as passive recipients of media messages, UGT emphasizes individual agency in media selection and consumption. The theory asks not what media do to people, but what people do with media; a perspective particularly relevant for algorithm-driven platforms where user engagement signals directly shape content distribution.

UGT has emerged as a theoretical framework in TikTok research (Du, Hashim & Kamarudin, 2024). Studies consistently identify entertainment as the primary gratification sought by TikTok users, followed by social interaction, self-expression, information seeking, escapism, and convenience (Falgoust et al., 2022; Omar and Dequan, 2020; Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023). Falgoust et al. (2022) interviewed 32 U.S. college students and found that TikTok use is motivated by desire for entertainment, widespread communication, social interaction, social support, information seeking, and escape from everyday life. Cross-cultural research suggests these motivational patterns vary by cultural context, with U.S. users placing greater emphasis on self-expression and personal entertainment compared to users in more collectivistic societies (Deng, Vargas-Bianchi, & Mensa, 2023). These findings align with broader research establishing entertainment and escapism as core gratifications across short-form video platforms (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

For HEI marketing, UGT suggests that institutional content must compete for attention within an entertainment-oriented environment. Content that fulfills entertainment gratifications such as humor, emotional resonance, and novelty should outperform content designed primarily for informational utility. This prediction aligns with Alley and Hanshew's (2022) finding that "humanizing" and entertainment-oriented content from academic library TikTok accounts generated the highest engagement. Prior work on other platforms has shown that content featuring peer voices or enabling community participation may better satisfy audience needs than institutional messaging delivered from a formal organizational perspective (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

2.3.2 *Social Identity Theory and Identity Salience*

Social identity theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), provides a complementary lens for understanding engagement with HEI social media content. SIT posits that individuals derive part of their identity from memberships in social groups and are motivated to maintain positive evaluations of groups to which they belong. When group membership is psychologically important, that is, when a particular social identity is salient, individuals engage in behaviors that affirm and enhance that identity (Tajfel, 1978; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Mael

and Ashforth (1992) demonstrated that organizational identification, characterized by a sense of belonging and attachment to an institution, shapes supportive behaviors among organizational members. In higher education contexts, students, alumni, and prospective students may all hold university-related identities that vary in salience depending on context. Casidy (2014) found that students with stronger university brand identification were more likely to engage in university-supportive behaviors, including advocacy and positive word-of-mouth.

The concept of identity salience is particularly relevant for explaining engagement with social media content. Peruta and Shields (2018) applied identity salience reasoning to explain their finding that athletics and school spirit content drove higher engagement on university Facebook pages. They argued that this content activates institutionally-linked identities, prompting audiences to engage as a form of identity expression. Clopton (2009) similarly found that pride in university sports teams heightened personal identification with the HEI. These findings suggest that content evoking institutional pride, whether through athletic achievements, campus traditions, or expressions of school spirit, should trigger higher engagement than content lacking identity-relevant cues.

2.3.3 Integrating Uses and Gratifications & Social Identity Theory for TikTok

Together, these theories generate expectations for HEI TikTok content. UGT explains why audiences engage: to fulfill needs for entertainment and social connection. Social identity theory explains what content triggers engagement: content activating salient institutional identities. Content that both entertains and evokes institutional pride should therefore outperform purely promotional or informative content. TikTok's algorithmic distribution amplifies these dynamics by surfacing content to non-followers, meaning institutional content may function to cultivate new identities among prospective students rather than merely activating existing ones—a key distinction from Facebook's follower-based distribution.

2.4 Research Questions

RQ1: What types of content are U.S. colleges and universities posting on TikTok?

RQ2: How do content types relate to engagement levels on TikTok posts published by colleges and universities?

RQ3: Which TikTok format features yield higher engagement on posts for HEIs?

3. Methodology

This study conducted a content analysis of 752 TikTok posts from 37 U.S. colleges and universities, collected over one year (August 15, 2023 to August 14, 2024). Institutions were selected based on the 2025 *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, a widely-used source in academic research representing diverse higher education institutions. Our initial sampling frame included the top 20 institutions from three categories: public universities, private universities, and liberal arts colleges but was reduced to 37 institutions when schools without active TikTok accounts were eliminated from the pool. Our final sample contained 13 public universities, 11 private universities, and 13 liberal arts colleges.]

Data were collected using Apify, a web-based platform for extracting social media data, and exported to Microsoft Excel for cleaning. Posts no longer accessible were removed, and key engagement metrics (diggings a.k.a likes, comments, shares, saves, views) and format indicators were retained for analysis.

Content analysis was conducted by the first author and one trained coder who evaluated each post for primary content category, presence of TikTok-specific formats (remixes and duets), and the presence of user-generated-content (UGC), memes, and text overlays. The coding scheme adapted the 17 content categories established by Peruta and Shields (2018), with two additional categories (Campus Life and Academics) added based on preliminary coding observations, yielding 19 mutually exclusive categories. Following development of training materials, both coders independently coded an overlapping subset of 50 posts to assess interrater reliability, which returned high agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .842$, $p < .001$) (Landis & Koch, 1977). The complete dataset was then uploaded to SPSS for statistical analysis.

4. Results

4.1 RQ1 Results

To understand the current TikTok posting habits for analysis a simple frequency analysis was conducted, based on the school type (liberal arts, private, public). Of the 752 posts analyzed 198 were from liberal arts schools, 157 were from private schools, and 397 were from public schools. Of the 19 categories identified for analysis, each category was identified in at least one post, but seven of the categories were identified in five or fewer posts and one was identified only once. Of the remaining categories there was a wide disparity in the number of times each category was identified with Entertainment appearing the most frequently, with 352, or 46.8% of posts. The second most frequently identified category, Campus Life, was identified 130 times, or 17.3% of posts. Campus Events returned the third highest number of posts with 51, or 6.8% of posts falling into this category. Unlike prior work, where a social media platform was used for broad appeals, it appears that TikTok is primarily used for a very specific type of commentary with 70.9% of posts falling into one of three categories, each primarily focused on entertainment or content appealing to current and prospective students.

Prior work by Peruta and Shields (2016, 2018) identified different posting strategies across liberal arts, private, and public schools when using Facebook and other legacy forms of social media. A Chi Square analysis returned no statistically significant difference between the three types of schools and the frequency with which they post different types of content, suggesting similar strategies $\chi^2(2, N = 752) = 0.895, p = 0.639$.

4.2 RQ2 Results

To understand how viewers engage with TikTok posts it is important to understand what differences practitioners may find in viewer engagement. Work currently under review (Authors) expands on prior work by Peruta and Shields (2016) and looks at proportional view engagement (PVE), which uses the following equation to arrive at a more accurate proxy for viewer engagement.

$$\frac{\text{Diggs} + \text{Shares} + \text{Comments} + \text{Collects}}{\text{\# of Views at the end of the data collection window}}$$

Following this methodology, a new variable was created to measure proportional view engagement and a 3 (school type) by one (PVE) One Way Anova was conducted and returned a statistically significant finding ($F = 76.26, df = 2, p < 0.001$). A post hoc Bonferroni test indicated statistically significant differences between proportional view engagement for liberal arts schools ($M = 0.043, SD = 0.023$) and public schools ($M = 0.0735, SD = 0.037$) where $p < 0.001$, and public and private schools ($M = 0.49, SD = 0.025$) where $p < 0.001$, but not between liberal arts and private schools.

Similarly, in order to determine if the content category affects PVE a second ANOVA was conducted after removing the entry for Development since only a single example of this category was identified. The 18 (content category) by one (PVE) ANOVA returned a statistically significant finding ($F = 6.25, df = 17, p < 0.001$) with PVE scores ranging from a low of 0.0273 to a high of 0.0912. A Bonferroni post hoc test indicated several statistically significant differences between categories and their PVE scores. The categories with the highest average PVE are Student Achievements with a score of 0.0912, Promotion (PVE = 0.0892), School Spirit (PVE = 0.0797), and Academic Events (PVE = 0.0762).

The most commonly posted categories, identified in RQ1 as Entertainment, Campus Life, and Campus Events, fell towards the center range, in terms of engagement, with Entertainment returning a 0.0665, Campus Life a 0.0620, and Campus Events returning a PVE score of 0.0488. It is possible that the number of times each of the categories were posted diluted the impact of the views, resulting in lower engagement per post.

4.3 RQ3 Results

Finally, to develop an understanding of how schools can encourage engagement through TikTok tools and trends such as the use of popular memes, user generated content, using text overlay, and using captions, each variable was analyzed using an independent sample t-test to test whether the presence of the manipulation affected the PVE. No statistically significant difference in PVE was found when schools posted meme-related content, user generated content, or when adding text overlays to the TikTok. A statistically significant difference $t(746) = -8.235, p < 0.001$, was found when captions were used with a higher PVE for posts that did not contain captions ($M = 0.0658, SD = 0.035$), compared to those that did ($M = 0.0424, SD = 0.026$). These null findings across the

remaining three of the four manipulable factors suggest that a platform that relies heavily on the sense of informality and authenticity may not benefit from overly manufactured posts.

5. Discussion

Our findings reveal both continuities with and departures from prior research, reflecting how dramatically the social media landscape has shifted since Peruta and Shields' (2018) foundational work. The most striking finding is the overwhelming amount of content in entertainment-oriented categories. Nearly half (46.8%) of posts fell into Entertainment, with Campus Life adding another 17.3%, meaning approximately two-thirds of institutional TikTok content prioritizes entertainment or experiential content over traditional institutional messaging. This concentration aligns with uses and gratifications theory: research consistently identified entertainment as the primary gratification TikTok users seek (Falgoust et al., 2022), and institutions have clearly calibrated their approach accordingly.

Our analysis revealed an inverse relationship between posting frequency and engagement. The most commonly posted categories generated moderate engagement, while less frequent categories like Student Achievements, Promotion, and School Spirit yielded the highest PVE. These high-engagement categories align with identity salience theory predictions: content activating institutional pride drives engagement as a form of identity expression, consistent with findings on legacy platforms (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Content scarcity may also enhance perceived value, as each instance benefits from novelty.

Unexpectedly, TikTok-specific format features showed limited impact on engagement. Meme-related content, user-generated content, and text overlays demonstrated no statistically significant relationship with PVE, suggesting these features have become baseline expectations rather than differentiators. Audiences now anticipate casual, authentic content on TikTok, so its presence no longer elevates engagement. Notably, we observed no duets or remixes in our sample, indicating institutions have not yet embraced these collaborative features despite their prominence in platform culture.

While we did not formally code for student presence, qualitative observation revealed that students were featured in nearly every video, with faculty, staff, or alumni appearing only occasionally. This pattern, combined with the dominance of entertainment and campus life content, suggests HEIs are positioning students as content creators and protagonists. The prevalence of casual, smartphone-shot aesthetics over polished production reflects what Abidin (2017) terms "calibrated amateurism"—institutions have recognized that authenticity outperforms polish on TikTok.

For practitioners, these findings suggest that while entertainment content should form the backbone of TikTok presence, strategically deployed identity-activating content drives peak engagement. The lack of format feature effects indicates that content quality and authentic student voice matter more than tactical platform features.

6. Limitations and Future Works

This study has several limitations that should inform interpretation and point toward future research directions. Our sample focused exclusively on top-ranked U.S. institutions according to *U.S. News & World Report*, potentially limiting generalizability. Strategies effective for prestigious institutions with established brands and substantial resources may not translate to regional universities, community colleges, or international institutions due to differences in target audiences, available resources for content production, existing brand recognition, and institutional goals. The absence of TikTok accounts among some top-ranked institutions further suggests our findings represent early adopters rather than the full higher education spectrum. Additionally, our one-year data collection period captures only a single academic cycle, and TikTok's frequent algorithm updates mean these findings may have limited shelf life as the platform evolves. Finally, while we measured engagement metrics, our content analysis methodology does not capture audience perspective—these metrics may not reflect actual influence on enrollment decisions, brand perception, or community building. Future research should expand sampling to include diverse institution types and international contexts, employ longitudinal designs spanning multiple academic cycles, and incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews with prospective students and social media managers to understand how TikTok content actually influences college decision-making.

Ethics Declaration

This research received ethical clearance through the lead author's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which determined the study to be exempt as it analyzed only publicly available social media content.

AI Declaration

Artificial intelligence tools were used to: (1) to assist with finding and summarizing relevant academic sources (Google Scholar AI and Claude, Anthropic), and (2) to assist with editing and reducing word count to meet submission requirements (Claude, Anthropic). The authors reviewed and verified all AI-generated outputs and retain full responsibility for the content, analysis, and conclusions presented in this paper.

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