



The “LOOMING DISASTER” for higher education: how commercial rankers use social media to amplify and foster affect

Riyad A. Shahjahan¹ · Adam Grimm¹ · Ryan M. Allen²

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Abstract

Despite the ubiquity of global university rankings coverage in media and academia, a concerted attempt to investigate the role of social media in ranking entrepreneurship remains absent. By drawing on an affect lens, we critically examine the social media activities of two commercial rankers: Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds Ltd (QS). Based on an analysis of THE’s Twitter feed and QS’ Facebook page between January and June 2020, we illuminate how rankers use social media for affective storytelling to frame and sell their expertise within global HE. First, we demonstrate how THE uses Twitter to engage an audience of institutions, governments, and administrators, reinforcing universities’ increasingly aggressive behavior as market competitors. Next, we show how QS engages a student-oriented audience on Facebook, furthering the role of students as consumers. Before and during the COVID pandemic, we observed that both rankers amplified and mobilized precarity associated with performance and participation, selling hope to targeted audiences to market their expertise as solutions—a strategy that remained amidst the global pandemic. Based on our observation of the front stage of rankers’ social media activities, we argue that rankers’ deployment of social media as a form of affective infrastructure is conducive to further sustaining, diffusing, and normalizing rankings in HE globally.

Keywords Affect · University rankings · Social media · *Times Higher Education* · *Quacquarelli Symonds*


✉ Riyad A. Shahjahan
shahja95@msu.edu

¹ Department of Educational Administration, Michigan State University, 428 Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Lane Road, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

² Donna Ford Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University, Orange, CA, USA

Introduction

RT @CabellsPublish : LOOMING DISASTER: International student hit ‘core financial problem’ for UK sector <https://t.co/qUntB3i7CI> via @timeshighered #highered #Coronavirus #COVID19 (THE, April 7, 2020)

Stuck inside and running out of Netflix shows to watch? Make sure you're looking after your mental health as much as your physical health  <https://hubs.ly/H0p3KL60> #mentalhealth #mentalhealthmatters #selfisolation #selfisolationtips #initttogether #covid19 #coronavirus #stayhome (QS, April 6, 2020)

Amid the COVID pandemic, while Times Higher Education (THE) retweets about a looming disaster in the UK sector, Quacquarelli Symonds’ (QS) Facebook page posts about how students need to look after their mental health. Given that we are all inundated with social media in global¹ higher education (HE), whether university advertisements, academic achievements, rankings, and so on (Bamberger et al., 2020; Stack, 2016), you may wonder: when the world is grappling with arguably the biggest pandemic in recent history, who cares what THE and QS do on social media?

What is significant about these posts, and the focus of this article, is how they interconnect ranking entrepreneurship and social media with affect. These posts come from two commercial university rankers who have a significant following on social media, offering new and direct gateways to their profit-making services. These above posts act as affective baits to visit commercial university rankers’ (rankers hereafter) websites. These social media posts offer windows to an indeterminate reality (e.g., coronavirus or HE), but also make amorphous reality more legible (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). By invoking a “looming disaster” or feeling “stuck inside,” they pull us together around shared sentiments, demanding us to do something! They infringe on our bodies through invoking various sensations, whether through the language used, the images attached, or the embedded tags. In short, they exemplify the political value of rankers’ social media as a structure of feeling (Papacharissi, 2016).

Given the utter ubiquity of global university rankings (GURs) coverage on media (Barats, 2020; David, 2016; Shahjahan et al., 2021; Shields, 2016; Stack, 2016), “you would think that the affective register” (Thrift, 2004, p. 57) common on social media, as shown above, would be central to GURs literature²—but, you would be mistaken. *Why is the absence of such studies in the rankings literature problematic?* Without examining the social media platforms of rankers, we are missing an important piece of the puzzle in ranking entrepreneurship in HE. In general, *ranking entrepreneurship* or how rankers sustain, diffuse, and normalize rankings has received very little attention (Rindova et al., 2018). A small but growing body of scholarship on probing the role of ranking entrepreneurship in HE has emerged recently (see Brankovic et al., 2018; Chirikov, 2021; Jacqmin, 2021; Lim, 2018; Shahjahan et al., 2020a; Stack, 2016). As rankings have mushroomed in ubiquity, rankers face greater pressures to generate and grow profits in an increasingly competitive field (Brankovic et al., 2018;

¹ We use the signifier “global” or “globally” attached to phrases like HE, or pandemic, or competition, to signify worldwide phenomena.

² Hereafter, we simply refer to GURs as rankings, to denote rankings that are transnational in nature and produced and disseminated by THE or QS (see Shahjahan et al., 2020a,b, 2021). As such, when we’re referring to the rankings literature in this paper, we’re exclusively referring to the literature about university rankings produced by such commercial rankers, but also including Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). Our denotation of rankings does not include national rankings in this paper.

Jacqmin, 2021; Lim, 2018; Ringel et al., 2020; Shahjahan et al., 2020a). While their rankings are free to access, rankers garner revenue mostly from advertising, selling ranking data and analytics, consulting, and access to events or workshops (Chirikov, 2021; Jacqmin, 2021; Shahjahan et al., 2020a). While the above literature notes the importance of social media, rankers' activities in engaging and/or promoting their services in social media remain empirically unexamined.

Such an omission is important to address for several reasons. First, as studies of marketing attest, social media has altered the “marketing ecosystem of influence” among businesses (Hanna et al., 2011, pp. 265–266). With “the rise in interactive digital media,” the social media ecosystem has changed the nature of marketing from passive consumers, to now focusing on interaction and engagement with the active consumer, thus fostering “influential and meaningful firm-customer exchanges” (Hanna et al., 2011, p. 266). Given that users utilize social media platforms in pursuit of social and informational needs, these platforms have become central for marketing strategies to shift from solely capturing attention by reach, but *also continuing consumer attention via engagement* (Hanna et al., 2011 p. 267). Indeed, with users spending an average of over 2.5 hours on social media platforms each day, companies are able to connect with potential customers where they are already interacting with each other (Tankovska, 2021). Such media thus allows businesses to “humanise the firm,” by engaging daily with consumers and fostering a sense of community among companies and consumers, by interfacing with consumers in a more casual, direct and open manner (Mamic & Almaraz, 2013, p. 852).

Second, HE stakeholders are deeply immersed in social media platforms that rankers can engage and capitalize upon. As recent HE scholarship suggests, universities utilize social media in their branding, recruitment, and student/community engagement efforts (Bamberger et al., 2020; Zhu, 2019). Furthermore, students and faculty engage with such platforms for various purposes, such as in selecting colleges or sharing sector information (Neier & Zayer, 2015; Shields & Peruta, 2019; Allen, 2021). Social media also plays a vital role in shaping HE stakeholders' imaginaries of people, institutions, and/or HE phenomena (e.g., rankings) (Bamberger et al., 2020). Yet, this HE literature rarely explores the role of social media among commercial players operating in the sector. This is surprising given rankers, not only advocate for their clients (i.e., HEIs) to use social media as part of the latter's branding efforts, but also advertise their social media outreach in their “Media Pack” to attract future clients who seek branding assistance (see QS 2018; THE 2017). Following these marketing and HE literatures on the centrality of social media, we examine the way two rankers (THE and QS) use these platforms. More specifically, we tease out how social media allows rankers to be in daily engagement with their HE consumers, by making their rankings stay ever-present, constantly reminding users of rank positioning and consulting services.

Given the various emotional intensities involved in the continual engagement between rankers and their HE audiences in interactive digital media, we believe an affect lens is pertinent in examining the interrelationship between social media and ranking entrepreneurship. By *affect*, as a noun, we are broadly referring to collective emotions, desires, and moods that are “on the move” (i.e., contagious) and act like invisible forces manifesting and mobilizing collective emotional states or actions within public spaces (Boler & Davis, 2018, p. 81; Massumi, 1995). As such, rankings are associated with “intense expressivity” (Thrift, 2004, p. 58) or “sticky objects” (Shahjahan et al., 2021, p. 1) that “buzz” among HE stakeholders as various players brand their performances to attract attention, such as governments, policymakers, parents, students, institutions, and programs (Bamberger et al., 2020; Brankovic et al., 2018; Ringel et al., 2020; Shields, 2016; Shahjahan et al., 2020a,b, 2021). As

Shahjahan et al. (2020a, 2021) noted, amid a data-fetish HE policy world, affect plays a significant role in policy mobilities in global HE, but are rarely examined in the rankings' literature. Shahjahan et al. (2020a) demonstrated how precarity and trust were mobilized by THE and QS to sell or promote their services using their sponsored conferences, websites, and/or marketing brochures. Yet, previous research has not accounted for a significant affective infrastructure like social media, and the interactions they enable. Unlike previous outlets, which assume passive consumption or one-time engagements, social media is a unique form of affective infrastructure for the quantity of people it can reach quickly, its cost-effectiveness, ease of consumption, and its highly interactive nature and daily engagement (Mamic and Almarez, 2013). As we will demonstrate, social media allows rankers to connect with target audiences like never before. Drawing on affect theory, we tease out the dynamic emotional processes by which commercial rankers using social media work with their audiences to make their rankings and technical expertise "attractive and meaningful" (Adhikary et al., 2018, p. 633).

We begin by providing a brief overview of affect theory (e.g., *affective infrastructure*) and Appadurai (1996) *social imaginary* that provide the framework of our analysis. In the latter, we differentiate key terms and concepts and delineate the workings of affective registers. Next, we briefly describe the origins, purpose, and social media activities of THE and QS, followed by an account of our data collection and analysis. We then offer our analysis of these rankers' Twitter and Facebook feeds (between January and June 2020), respectively. More specifically, we illuminate how rankers utilize social media for affective storytelling³ to frame and sell their expertise within global HE. First, we demonstrate how THE uses Twitter to engage an audience of institutions, governments, and administrators, reinforcing universities' increasingly aggressive behavior as market competitors. Second, we show how QS engages a student-oriented audience on Facebook, furthering the role of students as consumers. Before and during the COVID pandemic⁴, we observed that both rankers amplified and mobilized precarity associated with performance and participation, selling hope to targeted audiences to market their expertise as solutions—a strategy that remained amidst the global pandemic. Based on our observation of the front stage of rankers' social media activities, we argue that rankers' deployment of social media as a form of affective infrastructure is conducive to further sustaining, diffusing, and normalizing rankings in HE globally.

Social media, affective infrastructure, and social imaginary

This article draws on affect theory (e.g., *affective infrastructure*) and Appadurai's (1996) *social imaginary* to examine publicly available relevant rankers' social media posts. While there is no

³ By storytelling, we're referring to brief narrative-based accounts of slices of reality (Appadurai, 1996). Here we are more interested in the content, rather than the progression, of these brief-narrative-based accounts found in social media posts tied to certain social imaginaries. Furthermore, while a comparative analysis between QS and THE would be illuminating and important to consider for future research, here our focus is on the similar mechanisms used by these two commercial rankers to deepen our understanding of the interrelationships between affect, rankers, and various social media platforms.

⁴ COVID was reported to have begun in the city of Wuhan, China, and was initially reported by the WHO in January 2020. At that time, we observed that both rankers began to mention the disease, focusing on localized effects for China and ramifications for global HE. Only after March, when the WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, did we observe the rankers' bolstered coverage of COVID-19 as a global threat, and its impact on higher education stakeholders (i.e., institutions, governments, staff, and students).

fixed definition of affect, we view affect (i.e., noun) as broader than individual psychological inside-out feelings. Affect is a form of relational feeling-thinking or intelligence interconnected with bodily states and processes, that are collectively expressed or felt, and contextually situated (Thrift, 2004). Affect is *always present* during any social interaction—intelligible when an object leaves an embodied impression on the subject (Ahmed, 2014). Conversely, by the adjective *affective*, we are denoting anything that is evocative, or generate an embodied reaction. Part of the challenge of making affect intelligible is that it breaks the traditional boundaries between the individual/social, mind/body, or process/product (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Throughout this article, for instance, we explore affect particularly in how precarity circulates among HE stakeholders through rankers' social media platforms. Precarity as a state (i.e., uncertainty, insecurity, and/or competition) acts as a relational force or intensity influencing many HE stakeholders to individually feel fear, uncertainty, or anxiety over one's futurity. However, given the "not yet" element of precarity, it can also contain anticipation, promise, hope, and potential. Affect then urges people to engage in certain behaviors or actions, as it is a driver or sense of movement, but it is not fully formed nature gives it potentiality (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). As such, precarity, as a noun, is an existing (or potential) feeling, condition, or force of insecurity, uncertainty, or competition that has the capacity to influence or be affected. Precarity, as an adjective, influences anything connected to these emotional states or forces.

Drawing on affect theory, we advance the idea of affective infrastructure to examine rankers as information intermediaries in global HE. Given that we see rankers as policy actors, we draw upon McKenzie's (2017) concept of affective infrastructures (i.e., apparatuses of power) that help form and circulate affect. Affective infrastructures could include social media platforms, which provide ripe conditions "for sharing information, learning, and persuasion, in ways that engage affective registers through bodily encounters of policy actors" (McKenzie, 2017, p. 196). As a form of affective infrastructure, social media can "invite and transmit affect, and also sustain affective feedback loops that in turn generate and reproduce affective patterns of relating to others" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 23). Affective feedback loops could happen on platforms through retweets, tags, likes, or hashtags, to name a few. Affective infrastructures can also include textual and visual artifacts of models, best practices, and evaluation tools (e.g., data tables), constituting the policy process as "merely" technical solutions (McKenzie, 2017, pp. 194–195). As affect flows and circulates through these affective infrastructures, it accumulates value, furthering its power to shape and move policy. As we will demonstrate later, drawing upon their social media platforms as forms of affective infrastructure, rankers wield precarity and hope by reinforcing the scarcity story embedded in global competition, suggesting limited spaces in the rankings and/or competitive enrollment in elite institutions. The concept of affective infrastructure helps us highlight the means (i.e., storytelling tools) by which rankers construct and mobilize affect to garner audiences and bolster their expertise (i.e., advice on rankings, policy agendas, and/or where to go for a degree).

Aligning with past research on rankings (Estera & Shahjahan, 2019; Shahjahan et al., 2020b), we also draw upon Appadurai's (1996) "social imaginary." The concept of social imaginary means people co-construct their imagined worlds and imagined selves aiming to belong in social groups. The social imaginary is the shared property of collectives, constituted by images, stories, myths, and legends (Appadurai, 1996). Derivative of mediascapes, social imaginaries "tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer is...a series of elements...out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 35). In this study,

we highlight two features of social imaginary in the context of rankers' usage of social media platforms. First, a social imaginary is a basis for action (i.e., scripts of action) for imagined selves. In the context of global HE, electronic media provides ongoing opportunities for imagined selves within particular spaces (e.g., studying in a particular institution, or being higher ranked), prompting action in the form of mobility and/or consumption. But, hope plays an important role here, by lying in between the present and future, and acknowledging that the future is open to difference and the present is not indeterminate (Anderson, 2006). Imagined selves and scripts of action are embedded and driven by hope affect (see Caluya et al., 2011). Secondly, the social imaginary is not neutral, but rather the product of "the politics of global cultural flows" meant for consumption (Appadurai, 1996, p. 30), and serving particular, hegemonic actors' needs and agendas. Thus, we critically ask what the imaginary reflects. Our analysis relies upon the exploration of social media platforms from two of the most influential rankers (THE on Twitter; QS on Facebook) to illustrate these mechanisms across rankers' social media platforms. We next delineate why and how.

Methodology

To begin, we briefly describe the origins, purpose, and social media activities of THE and QS, to provide context for our subsequent data collection and analysis. Our first step was to explore the multiple social media platforms utilized by these rankers to get a sense of the messages being broadcast before determining to focus our inquiry on THE's Twitter and QS's Facebook activities because of the greater number of followers and activity of those rankers on those platforms.

THE

Engaged in the for-profit production and dissemination of university rankings with the mission of "helping the world's universities to achieve excellence" (THE, 2020), THE uses Twitter among other social media platforms, including Facebook and YouTube, to engage the HE audience. THE has been on Twitter since March 2009, and currently maintains multiple Twitter feeds, its main handle @TimesHigherEd with (308,930 followers)⁵, World Uni Rankings @THEworldunirank (40,295 followers), and Time Higher Student @THEUniAdvice (6,899 followers). While the main @TimesHigherEd page shares content related to HE issues, @THEworldunirank provided specific rankings news and data from its World University Rankings team, while @THEUniAdvice provides university student advice, lifestyle, and rankings mainly by their THE Student Content Editor Seeta Bhardwa. The bulk of our analysis here is based on its @THEworldunirank feed because of its focus on ranking content. Our initial observations revealed that THE worked on a rhythm of tweeting at a certain frequency per day, or week, and/or month, which were instant messages, and they often take the role of amplifying uncertainty, but at the same time offering a nod or nudge towards various stakeholders by citing them or mentioning them, but overall they "clap" for institutions who do well in their rankings. We also observed how tweets were repeated throughout these cycles. What's more, THE's tweets were not simply the text, but most of them were multimodal texts consisting of hyperlinks, hashtags, photos, and sometimes videos. All hyperlinks led to THE's main webpage.

⁵ The number of followers and/or likes on rankers' social media outlets is based on the numbers we retrieved on July 15, 2021.

QS

Unlike THE, QS has since its founding focused on students, with its mission “to enable motivated people anywhere in the world to fulfill their potential through educational achievement, international mobility, and career development” (QS, 2020). Like THE, QS engages its audiences across social media platforms, but we noticed it had more followers on its Facebook page compared to Twitter. Active since on the platform since 2011, QS maintains two Facebook Pages for the promotion of its rankings and resources: its “Top Universities” page with (319,274 followers/315,817 likes), and its “World University Rankings” page with (135,084 followers/164,264 likes). The more popular “Top Universities” account was also more active, typically posting twice to three times daily. Although the content shared on both accounts is virtually identical, we focus our analysis on the more popular, more active *Top Universities* page. We found that on this page, QS shares content primarily directed at a student audience, framing HE issues from student perspectives, most notably, university admissions. Each post included text as well as an accompanying image. Nearly every post also includes a hyperlink to content (rankings, advice columns, etc.) on the QS webpage.

Data collection and analysis

Narrowing our focus on these above two social media platforms (THE’s Twitter and QS’ Facebook) allowed us to probe the mobilization of affect by both rankers across two platforms without getting overwhelmed by the immensity of data generated by ranker activity across all their social media platforms. Following our above initial observations, we set parameters for our study: observing QS’ Facebook and THE’s Twitter activities based on their visibility and availability from January 1 through June 30, 2020.⁶ These included all posts that were made by the rankers. These documents not only served as a rich source of qualitative data for understanding the nature of affective infrastructures (Merriam, 1998), but also highlighted rankers’ desires to promote themselves, rankings, and services. During this period, the QS Facebook feed consistently posted four to five times daily—543 times total during the period of our analysis—while THE Twitter was more active, authoring upwards of 20 tweets daily and readily engaging in re-tweeting of other handles—generating over 10,000 tweets total. Given the extent of these data, we utilized the NCapture feature of NVivo to collect and process the social media content posted. Due to Twitter’s data extraction limitations, we were unable to export more than 3,200 tweets from the account, a number that THE tweets roughly every 2 months. To aim our inquiry at a manageable dataset, we primarily focused on 3,200 tweets that covered the period from mid-March to mid-June, returning to previous tweets to support our analysis.

⁶ Given copyright and publication limitations, visualizations of each feeds from roughly the study timeframe can be viewed at the Internet Archive (THE: https://web.archive.org/web/20200419143309if_/https://www.facebook.com/topuniversities/; QS: https://web.archive.org/web/20200314155015if_/https://twitter.com/timeshighered

We focused on this 6-month period, because it gave us a purposeful sample of social media posts before and during the COVID period to critically examine similarities and differences in affective storytelling. Based on our observation, the pandemic became a significant opportunity for rankers to continue messages of precarity and hope to expand or maintain audiences to sell their services. Following the onset of the pandemic, the pattern of affective storytelling (mobilizing precarity and offering hope) remained the same, but the content shifted to address the elevated and existing COVID-related anxieties.

Subsequently, the first and second authors organized the data (3,200 THE tweets and 543 QS Facebook posts) and selectively coded (Murthy, 2016) for emerging themes around particular timelines (e.g., announcements of rankings, issues around COVID, etc.) while also coding for topics of content (i.e., examined their titles), and the formats used (e.g., videos, visuals, and quotes). We sought out similarities and differences across the rankers and social media platforms (see Bamberger et al., 2020), identifying many overlaps, and consistent with previous rankings literature (Shahjahan et al., 2020a). Initial analyses revealed that affects such as precarity and hope were predominant themes, leading us to engage in thematic integration (Murthy, 2016) to further analyze their role within the rankers' affective storytelling.

We take the view as researchers that we generate data rather than find them and that data representation is a form of analysis. We applied a "retroduction approach," emphasizing "openness" and "asking why" questions, to focus our analysis on the posts most representative of our affective themes (Murthy, 2016, p. 563). Taking a sample of 20–30 exemplars from each platform representing precarity (e.g., "looming disaster," and "worried?") and hope ("You've got this," #dailyinspiration) (120 posts total), we wrote memos between rounds of thematic engagement and integration coding (Murthy, 2016). We used "writing as a method of inquiry" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005)—a mode of inquiry that centers the very act of writing up data as an analytical tool to make sense of data—to engage in a discursive and affective analysis of selective data. We exchanged drafts exploring various ways to thematize, reduce, and (re)present the data and then through the writing process unpacked the discursive and affective registers of exemplars, such as their assumptions, implications, representation of social agents, and rhetorical and persuasive discourse (Fairclough, 2003). With each iteration, we further honed our theorizing of the data using and refining our conceptual framework through the writing process itself. In short, we allowed the writing process to constitute the meanings and theorizing of our affective laden data.

THE Twitter: mobilizing precarity and hope among institutions

In this section, we illuminate how THE uses Twitter to draw and engage various audiences by bolstering an existing social imaginary of precarity felt by various HE stakeholders. More specifically, we demonstrate how THE utilizes affective storytelling about future imagined selves and provide scripts of action by mobilizing (a) various social media tactics (such as language, hyperlinks, quotes, tags, images, and video), and (b) the COVID pandemic, to place itself and its rankings as attractive and meaningful.

By appropriating collective precarity, THE strives to engage audiences consisting of institutions, governments, and administrators. THE tweets affectively amplify HE precarity by emphasizing constraints and uncertainty with the sector's inputs and performance, such as unemployment of graduates, funding issues, college fees, and/or recruitment issues. For instance, during this period, THE's tweets warned us of European funding "failing" (February 28), "major winners and losers" in a "looming battle" to recruiting international students (April 30), and/or English universities at "risk of financial collapse" (May 12). By using affective language to amplify a social imaginary of HE sector as entities facing either uncertainty and/or competition (e.g., enrollment), THE sensationalizes precarity to engage and influence an audience. Using short narrative-based accounts of HE reality, the futurity of the sector comes under scrutiny (i.e., funding failure, looming battle with recruitment, or financial collapse) in THE's constructed precarity imaginary. Such short scripts elevate the angst among HE actors

about their future selves (how will we survive amidst such uncertainty?). THE confronts the HE sector to imagine themselves with the “not yet” of global uncertainty and competition, promising the sector important information (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 14) and attracting a HE audience through its Twitter platform. In so doing, THE appropriates precarity associated with HE to consolidate and legitimize its role as a key information intermediary.

Amidst THE’s tweets, one can find quotes, hyperlinks, imagery, and tags. These twitter tactics help to engage an audience by constructing a sense of shared belonging, serving THE’s commercial interests. THE quotes HE leaders, or reports, to not only legitimize their information quality, but sentimentalizes their information to construct a collective kinship. Such exemplars, include: “In Africa, university proliferation is not an unqualified good, says Eric Fredua-Kwarteng <https://bit.ly/2xdFuXi>” (April 28); “Sir Keith Burnett, former vice-chancellor of the University of Sheffield, argues that student debt should be cancelled to give students a chance at a post-coronavirus future <https://bit.ly/3bCnd4q>” (March 30). By quoting noted leaders on HE performance and/or policy issues, THE tweets offer brief scripts of HE reality, and also scripts of action with hyperlinks. The tweets always connect back to the ranker’s website. Most tweets contain images bolstering their affective impact. These images range from tables of THE rankings, shots of campuses and urbanscapes, close up-to medium shots of people, abstract images of viruses, nature, and/or student tropes, to name a few. Such visual imagery plays an “affective role by constructing the desires or aspirations” of rankings consumers (Esteria & Shahjahan, 2019, p. 942), but also offers scripts of action and imagined selves (Shahjahan et al., 2020b). Through such Twitter strategies, THE directs audiences to increase their main website traffic (which act as virtual advertising platforms) and monopolize the coverage of HE issues (Shahjahan et al., 2020b).

THE also engages in affective feedback loops with institutions that do well in their rankings by tagging them in their ranking result announcements. For instance, in March 24, THE tweeted: “We’ve published our Japan University Rankings 2020, which are led by @tohoku_univ for the first time <https://bit.ly/2UXTbbm> #JapanRankings #THEUniRankings.” By tagging Tohoku University, and using hashtags, THE not only acknowledges a concrete player in their Japan rankings, but by using the phrase “for the first time,” they offer a clap to Tohoku University’s significant accomplishment. Such a post also suggests that anyone can make it to the top in THE’s rankings. We observed how HEIs engage in affective feedback loops by retweeting their THE rankings results, which subsequently THE retweets on its Twitter feed, thus allowing THE to further engage with its HE institutional stakeholders. For instance:

We’ve been placed 2nd in the world and 1st in Australia for impact by the latest @timeshighered #THEglobalimpact rankings.Learn more: <https://bit.ly/3cDHZkN> (University of Sidney, April 22)

By publicly announcing their accomplishment by linking with @timeshighered and using the hashtag “THEglobalimpactranking,” the University of Sidney further boosts the THE ranking brand. Both THE and HEIs seek celebrity status by capitalizing on each other’s fame (Stack, 2020). These examples of affective feedback loop highlight how THE uses Twitter to capitalize upon and enforce universities’ increasingly aggressive behavior as market competitors.

Tweets about the recent “impact rankings” demonstrated how rankers mobilize the COVID pandemic to engage audiences by marketing their own ranking measures. We noticed throughout April and onwards that THE frequently tweeted about the pandemic ranging from,

“What might Covid-19 mean for the future of Harvard and Stanford?” (April 27), to the “The four questions facing university leaders during the Covid-19 crisis” (April 25). Here THE zones into and amplifies the pandemic’s consequences on university leadership, governance, and elite institutions. Affective rhetorical questions are used here to confront elite institutions or leadership to imagine their future selves (“What might Covid-19 mean for the future of” or “The four questions facing”) amidst a pandemic. Such questions invite the HE sector to frame and cultivate scripts of their imagined lives. By clicking the links tied to these tweets, visitors can find some answers on THE’s main website.

THE’s storytelling through its tweets also contains hope for stakeholders, thus fostering collective belonging as a sector. More specifically, THE appropriated the heightened anxiety about the pandemic to offer some scripts of action related to its commercial interests. To this end, amid the COVID pandemic, we observed a whole series of tweets containing the hashtag #THEglobal impact. Using such impact ranking tweets, THE affectively assembled a particular understanding about the nature of HE and its outcomes (see Decuypre & Landri (2020) for a parallel phenomenon with U-Multirank website). The impact rankings, we learn, according to a tweet are a product of “more than 850 universities from 89 countries assessed for their contribution to the UN #GlobalGoals across 18 separate league tables” (April 26). For instance, throughout the last week of April, THE tweeted issues (using the #THEglobalimpact) related to university impact amid the COVID virus. For example:

“During this global pandemic – a unique moment for humankind – universities ought to be even closer to society and demonstrating their role in mitigating public suffering.” – Vahan Agopyan, rector of @usponline <https://bit.ly/2RXrEPQ> #THEglobalimpact (April 23)

Thus, THE constructed a coherent stream of thought suggesting that their impact rankings are now more than ever important in demonstrating the difference universities can make. In so doing, THE makes its information—and thus themselves—timely and relevant. Highlighting the uncertainty that HE is facing, THE mobilizes and exploits both precarity and hope during the pandemic in its Twitter platform. However, by simultaneously noting the importance of HE as saviors in solving this global crisis, THE asserts the relevance of its new “impact” rankings. In short, THE appropriates COVID-19 precarity to market its new “impact ranking” by positioning it as a script of action that may alleviate HEIs’ sense of relevance amidst precarity to offer hope.

A video shared by THE’s chief knowledge officer, Phil Baty, on April 23 in THE’s Twitter platform epitomized how a commercial ranker seeks to attract an audience and mobilize hope and care amid precarity to market their rankings. In this tweeted video, Baty is shown in a close-range shot while on the top right corner of the video it has the tag “THE Impact Rankings.” In this short close-captioned video, Baty starts with, “Despite the unsettling gloom descending on our sector and our world,” he is “supremely optimistic.” He answers “why” by noting the “the profound good” of the “world’s universities.” He then goes on to mention that HEIs produce and offer the frontline “healthcare workers,” “data,” “army of skilled student volunteers,” “the learning material and resources,” and finally offering medical equipment or expertise. The affective language of gloom, optimism, and power highlighted how this video was meant to engage an audience collectively facing precarity, but also should feel hope given the “world’s universities” are coming to the rescue. Such affective storytelling epitomizes how rankers present universities “as multifarious yet vulnerable institutions that are in need of appropriate treatment” (Decuypre & Landri, 2020, p. 8). Here Baty’s “care for” and hope for

HE sector are a reflection of recent ranking evolutions, whereby rankers seek “to care for the HE sector, which is allegedly being treated unrightfully” by the larger global community (Decuypre & Landri, 2020, p. 8). Here Baty deploys care for HE by publicly acknowledging its profound relevance amid a pandemic. Baty’s care and hope for the HE sector are amplified through his video circulating in THE’s Twitter platform. When we watched the Baty video at the end of April it already had 9.5 K views, 12 retweets, and 25 likes. Yet, Baty’s talk ended with “THE Impact Rankings” emblem, thus marketing THE’s ranking measure while bolstering the imaginary of HEIs contributions to society in its various capacities. Furthermore, Baty’s continual reference to elite “world’s universities” exemplifies how rankers are concerned about the survival and thriving of elite sectors that their rankings privilege. Through this video, Phil Baty becomes HE sector’s champion and cheerleader, while at the same time humanizing and branding THE’s efforts in global HE.

In short, through these various social media tactics of quotes, hyperlinks, imagery, tags, and videos, THE’s Twitter feed strives to orchestrate a HE audience geared towards HE. Twitter offers rankers, like THE, a form of affective infrastructure to draw and engage an audience for their commercial purpose, thereby legitimizing its expertise as a significant HE sector information intermediary.

QS Facebook: Messaging students with precarity and hope

Similar to how THE utilizes Twitter to emit affective messages of precarity to concerned HE audiences, QS aims its Facebook content primarily at a student audience. Students are a crucial segment of the potential market addressed by rankers. Often framing global HE precarity from a student perspective, rankers craft engaging content targeting student concerns (Lim, 2018). Despite some institutional “pats on the back” like we saw in THE (e.g., “A hearty congrats to Harvard University!” (March 6)), QS’ Facebook primarily directs its affective messaging at a student-oriented audience. Given the specific student audience, while the tone and content of most of QS Facebook posts differ from its THE Twitter counterpart (i.e., more paternalistic (Decuyperre & Landri, 2020), the broader affective storytelling remains the same. In this section, we demonstrate how QS mobilizes affect in their Top Universities Facebook page to (1) tap into and amplify an existing social imaginary of precarity felt by students, and (2) position its resources and rankings within a script of action for imagined selves whereby precarity might be ameliorated. We then show how QS’ mobilization of affect addressed anxieties related to the COVID-19 pandemic.


Through affective storytelling, the QS Facebook feed amplifies existing precarity by engaging students’ desires and anxieties about personal social mobility in a competitive global HE field, implicating their imaginaries of future selves within that landscape. Many of the Facebook posts frame HE access as an arena embedded in competition, ranging from institutional selection (e.g., “Choose a university that impresses employers, as well as your parents” (April 16); “Finding the right MBA for you doesn’t have to be as stressful as it sounds” (January 10)) to test prep (e.g., “Are you a nervous test-taker?” (February 20)), and to navigating the complexities of study abroad (“visas and paperwork ... there’s a lot to do” (March 2)). These types of posts do not always directly reference QS rankings, but they do center/sell QS’ broader expertise within the HE social imaginary.

In addition to the precarity implicated in applying to a “top university,” QS’ Facebook posts (re) tell the student experience, signifying uncertainty and competition. For instance, many QS

posts affectively narrate student concerns related to economic uncertainty: “Tired of scrimping and saving?” (January 11) or “Is your degree going to guarantee you a high-paying job later this year?” (January 1). Other posts echo a social imaginary of HE as a space where students navigate uncertainty in their social lives (“How to Survive a Night Out in Dry January” (January 13)), or their mental health (“Today is University Mental Health Day - what can you be doing to look after your mental health better?” (March 5)). Evident in its Facebook affective narrations, QS composes a HE social imaginary in which students face a myriad of uncertainties and difficulties. This storytelling provides scripts of action informing students’ imaginaries of what HE is like.

QS engages its student-oriented audience by framing its rankings and expertise as a potential script of action for relieving precarity and imagining future selves. Given that QS is a commercial ranker, it is no surprise that its Facebook publicizes its various rankings. The page’s most common posts include the QS league table with a lion, signifying strength and power (Stack, 2016). When presented, however, the accompanying text often frames the rankings directly for the student audience: “If you’ve got *big dreams* to study in America, these are the top ranked universities to get your degree” (June 22, emphasis added); “These are the law schools that academics rate as the best in the world – don’t study anywhere else” (March 29). In these storytellings, QS directly positions their rankings and resources as tools through which students might interpret their “big dreams” or identify which top university or program is “right for” them. The affective storytelling from the feed is intended to inspire hope of gaining entry into scarce spaces alongside the best and brightest through the guidance of QS. In other words, through engaging QS Facebook content, students might imagine their future selves among the world’s most talented. The hyperlinks to the ranker’s website (included in most posts) provide scripts for action guiding prospective student audiences to make decisions regarding their future studies using QS’ guidelines (rankings) and “expert” advice (e.g., blogs, forums, and student guides).

QS uses similar framing to rhetorically position other QS expertise or advice as scripts of action for resolving student uncertainty or insecurity. The ranker utilized affective storytelling (often rhetorical questions) to introduce, frame, and cultivate a persistent problem. The problem is often, but not always, a version of precarity manifesting in HE student experiences. For example, QS posted: “Are you a nervous test-taker? Not to worry, we’ve got you covered. Here’s our insider tips to score high on the GMAT” (February 20), or “Thinking about pursuing a postgraduate degree but you’re not sure where to start? We’ve got just what you need to help you choose the right specialization, in three easy steps” (March 6). QS first establishes a problem by posing a rhetorical question—tapping into and amplifying insecurity—and immediately thereafter provides reassurance by connecting (hyperlinking) students to “everything they need to know,” by having “all” their questions “answered by experts.” By framing precarity using questions based on their rankings and expertise, QS invites and continually engages their student-oriented audience. Given that rankers construct the global higher hierarchy through their own rankings (Lim, 2018), students, then, might regard QS as a trustworthy information intermediary capable of providing them with the tools necessary to overcome precarity.

Amid precarity, QS also mobilizes hope and care on its Facebook page to attract and maintain a student audience by offering inspiration and support to these students. Affective messages of hope and care can be found throughout the feed, such as: “Need help shutting out the outside world? These podcasts should help you take a breather from all the stress and anxiety  #selfcare #podcasts #destress” (June 22); “Take a break from revision this weekend and

reach for a good book instead 📖 #readinglist #bestbooks #shortstories #booklist” (April 12). This hopeful language signals to students that QS is a caring and inspiring trustworthy actor capable of supplying compassionate advice. Taken together, through the affective storytelling and framing their rankings in Facebook, QS strives to provide direction for their student audience by offering scripts of action (i.e., making decisions using QS advice). By emphasizing the *not yet* inherent in the search and application process (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010), QS dangles hope in front of students. As such, QS suggests that following their prescribed scripts will allow students to join elite institutions of their dreams. In this way, messages of hope complement other scripts of action (rankings and advice) by connecting the present with an imagined future.

While QS engages affect through the familiar stories of global HE precarity, we observed how QS exploited the elevated anxieties tied to the COVID pandemic. Given the unprecedented nature of the global pandemic, QS used similar storytelling tactics to continue selling its own expertise to its student audience. On March 10, the QS account shared the following post, beginning a thematic trend on precarity that would soon dominate the lives of students worldwide and, in tandem, the Facebook feed of this account.

Worried about Coronavirus? We’ve got you covered. Stay up to date on COVID 19:
#coronavirus #covid19 #coronavirusoutbreak *Coronavirus Information for Current and Prospective Students*

With this post, QS uses affective language (“worried?”) to directly address the uncertainty caused by the coronavirus outbreak, positioning themselves as a knowledgeable player capable of providing critical information for students at an uncertain time. Initially, COVID related content was shared slowly, peppered amongst other posts, such as: “How to achieve your career ambitions with an executive MBA” (March 13) or even, “Think you know everything there is to know about the Easter Bunny?” (April 12). Later, however, as the coronavirus continued to spread and caused disruption around the globe, the frequency of related content increased, each addressing how the uncertain situation was impacting students. For example:


What’s it like to live under quarantine? 🇮🇹 We spoke with students in Italy to find out how they are coping with their studies under the national lockdown in Italy, due to Coronavirus. (March 14)

Now more than ever, it’s important to live healthily, stay safe and look out for each other <https://hubs.ly/H0nGvPB0> #healthandsafety #studentsafety #healthapp #safetyapp (March 22)

During the month of March, COVID-related content reflects the uncertain realities of many students around the world as on-campus courses were canceled and students moved to online learning. As April began, QS’s Facebook content continued to echo the pressing concerns of students, again posing rhetorical questions to the students, such as: “Stuck inside and running out of Netflix shows to watch?” (April 6), or “How exactly can you apply to university on lockdown?” (April 28). QS then responds to these concerns by framing their advice in care and hope, such as: “We’ve got you covered 🍀 (April 8)” or “We’ve got the experts and the answers to help you ace the uni application process during the pandemic” (April 28).

Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also witnessed QS using images of students and student voices in their Facebook postings. QS blog posts shared via Facebook attempted to co-opt concerns from students, illustrating their shared concern for what will happen to students in the sector and providing them with a visual complement to the scripts of

actions that might allow students to envision their future selves, a strategy commonly used by rankers (Esterá & Shahjahan, 2019). These posts showed images of a wide range of students of different races in various localities—a smiling Black student with a calculator (June 14), a multiracial group of students touching a globe (May 4), and a white woman painting a stone sculpture (April 30). They also directly quoted peers, including students in the storytelling narrative. This sharing of the narrative is exemplified by a post on April 7:

“I don’t think we should be entitled to a refund, as Covid-19 is not the fault of the university,” says Ben. “As long as they are providing work and tutorials in an online system, I don’t see what the problem is – this is a tricky time!” What do you think? 
#coronavirus #covid19 #tuesdaythoughts <https://hubs.ly/H0pf5sH0>

In sum, QS uses affective messaging to engage and direct a student-oriented audience, by providing scripts for action through its rhythm of multiple daily posts directed at student anxieties and aspirations, while individual posts provide explicit cues (hyperlinks) for these students to follow.

Concluding remarks

We aimed to illuminate the role of social media in ranking entrepreneurship by highlighting how rankers engage audiences using affective storytelling. Past research on rankings has rarely empirically analyzed rankers’ social media activities and behaviors. We demonstrated how two different rankers on different social media platforms utilize affective storytelling to foster a social imaginary embedded in precarity to establish and maintain HE audiences, while offering scripts of action embedded in hope that bolster their own authority. While direct comparison of the two cases was not the aim of this study, a parallel analysis of two major commercially oriented university rankers has helped us expose important characteristics of their strategies towards social media audiences. We demonstrated how various types of precarity associated with HE performance and participation are appropriated by for-profit companies to frame and sell their expertise within global HE, using social media. Regardless of audiences, both QS and THE use similar tactics to foster a broader HE market with the constant message that league tables are fundamental and their expertise is vital, even, or especially, during a global pandemic. Moreover, despite being on different platforms and oriented towards different audiences, these two rankers’ social media activities are strikingly similar in how they engage audiences. We speculate that such similarities may have to do with their commercial nature. A comparison between the nature of these two rankers’ social media platforms (e.g., their dynamics as a social space) and how this relates to other ranking platforms (especially non-profit rankers like U-Multirank) (see Decuypre & Landri, 2020) would be worthy of future research attention.

Illuminating this relationship with social media helps us move beyond the doxa, *global university rankings are here to stay or are inevitable*. Constructing and perpetuating this ranking reality in global HE helps serve these rankers’ ends. As we demonstrated, the message to the sector is of a constant “LOOMING DISASTER,” but the elevated precarity with COVID-19 provided another opportunity for rankers to center themselves as the champions HE needs. Further, through their social media outlets, rankers now have access and *continually engage* potential audiences like never before. Rankers are increasingly focusing on continuous engagement with audiences (including those on social media) (Ringel et al., 2020). While

rankers have been known to mobilize affect to promote their expertise through sponsored conferences, websites, marketing brochures, and/or national media outlets (Shahjahan et al., 2020a, b, 2021), our analysis highlights the particular characteristics of social media in terms of *fostering continual affective engagement* with audiences *already there*. Social media, through its daily posts, consisting of quotes, hashtags, texts, hyperlinks, videos, visuals, and/or sharing functions, serve as a powerful form of affective infrastructure that cannot be ignored in ranking entrepreneurship. We argue that rankers engage audiences through social media for framing and selling their expertise within global HE. An affect lens helps us highlight the affective mechanisms rankers deploy on social media platforms to persevere in the face of the apparent deficiency in legitimacy.

Our analysis raises questions that could be explored through future research on social media and ranking entrepreneurship. For instance, we are left wondering, how do data-driven businesses like rankers help accrue political and economic capital through engaging digital audiences? Looking “backstage” to examine the algorithmic governance and the “grammar of action” embedded in social media platforms is beyond the scope of this paper. However, this research is needed given our analysis of mobilization of affect and the various ways social media platforms are connected with rankers’ websites, HEIs’ social media platforms, and news media platforms, thus diffusing affect along with rankers’ expertise. Furthermore, our analysis raises more questions like: How are social imaginaries implicated in the process (e.g., students dreaming of attending elite universities, or HEIs desiring being elite) of ranking diffusion and normalization? How do various HE stakeholders interact with and respond to rankers’ social media, and why do they follow rankers on Twitter or Facebook, or other platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok? What is the actual significance of a “like” or “retweet” by the audience, and to what extent do these actions reveal complicity with an affective infrastructure? How do champions of rankers mobilize affect to promote, diffuse and normalize new or existing rankings? In short, we are also left wondering how these rankers’ social media strategies impact their “success” as rankers? Based on our front stage observation of rankers’ social media activities where affect is vital, we conclude that social media activity matters in the grand scheme of university rankings and requires more attention in future research on sustaining, diffusing, and normalizing rankings in HE globally.

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Data Availability Data used in this study is publicly available via the rankers (THE and QS) social media platforms.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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