What Are the Potential Drivers to Improve Alumni Engagement?

Case Häme University of Applied Sciences Ltd. International Business Programme

HAMK
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International Business Programme Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis is to investigate potential drivers of alumni engagement for the International Business Degree Programme at Häme University of Applied Sciences. The author focuses on student involvement, branding, and social networking in an attempt to gain insights on how to build and sustain positive alumni–university relationships by examining the drivers to improve engagement.

The European mentality may overlook the value that alumni can provide to a university through non-monetary contributions, which are frequently critical to launching and growing an active and extensive alumni network. Cultivating a relationship with alumni is essential for the strategic growth and development of higher education programs. Alumni engagement is critical to an institution's advancement and success, particularly in promoting the university's brand through social networking. Moreover, student involvement can help the university to establish a connection with students that will grow into a long-term relationship with their alma mater.

The methodology adopted in this research is qualitative, the primary data is collected through a semi-structured interview with Häme University of Applied Sciences' marketing representative, as well as a focus group interview with six participants, including three alumni and three third-year students. In addition, secondary data is represented in the theories, strategies, and patterns that can be identified through previous research. The findings of this thesis demonstrate that International Business alumni and current students are eager to be contacted and willing to participate in events that match their interest and needs. However, that is not met with the actions that the university is taking currently. HAMK IB needs to start viewing alumni as an asset that can be leveraged.

Keywords Alumni, engagement, student involvement, branding in higher education, social networking.
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1 Introduction

Customer engagement has received a lot of attention in recent years, both from practitioners and academics (Pansari & Kumar 2017). In higher education institutions (hereinafter referred to as HEIs), alumni are regarded as the university's most valuable asset because they leverage the university brand in their respective professional endeavours (Kanady, 2015). Alumni engagement is critical to an institution's advancement and success, as some alumni choose to become involved in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Universities rely on graduates to support a wide range of activities that necessitate alumni participation, particularly in promoting the university's brand. Student involvement in the university is important for many reasons, however, the main goal of the university's development should include establishing a consistent, long-term connection and relationship once they graduate and become alumni (Etzelmueller, 2014).

Cultivating a relationship with alumni is essential for the strategic growth and development of higher education programs. In fact, the relationship between universities and alumni starts far earlier than the graduation. In fact, universities have the chance to build a framework to provide students with an engaging experience starting from admissions until the graduation date, when students become alumni. (Chase. J, 2021). At first, it is the university's responsibility to help students smoothly transition through different milestones across their student lifecycle, from preparing them to campus life and their first interactions with teachers and university staff, to providing a learning experience that is relevant, interesting and meaningful to students, which leads them to successfully earning their degrees; that is when the student-university relationship continues to evolve as needs and expectations change.

From all the previously stated, alumni should be considered an asset, however, in Finland, this asset is not properly leveraged. Alumni are a valuable, yet often underutilized resource for universities in countries where there has not been a long tradition of developing and maintaining alumni relations (Moore & Kuol, 2007). Although alumni donations can be a significant source of funding for university initiatives in some places, strong alumni relations programs can be of enormous value to a university even in the absence of fundraising. As a result, there is a growing interest in developing multifaceted alumni relations programs in

countries where universities do not have a long tradition of university work in this area (Ebert. K, 2015).

The European mentality may overlook the value that alumni can provide to a university through non-monetary contributions, which are frequently critical to launching and growing an effective alumni relations program. It does not imply that European universities do not value alumni relations, but rather that they do so for different reasons (Ebert et al., 2015). To give an instance, Finnish higher education funding is based on the number of graduates per year (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). That means, universities in Finland invest more effort and resources in getting students to graduate, as opposed to after graduation when students do not have financial significance anymore, which means that in some cases, university administrators may be hesitant to put forth much effort in alumni relations due to a concern that alumni will not want to volunteer or donate to the university, and especially that they may feel awkward asking alumni for money.

In contrast, the focus and concerns about fundraising obscure the enormous value that alumni can provide to a university, and it is suggested that non-financial contributions are often critical to starting and building an effective alumni relations program (Ebert. K, 2015). Several industries have experienced rapid growth in internationalization in recent years, and HEIs are no exception. This has had an impact on the market as alumni are now more mobile and willing to relocate for work or further studies. In this increasingly competitive market, universities can use branding to differentiate themselves and gain a competitive advantage (Chapleo, 2015).

This research is commissioned by the International Business Degree Programme at Häme University of Applied Sciences, a well-recognized university in Finland. Throughout this thesis, the author will refer to the International Business Degree Programme as IB and Häme University of Applied Sciences as HAMK. Currently there are only 66 IB alumni that have registered to the Alumni Network which has been established by the university through their website where alumni can fill in a form to receive three newsletters per year, and the possibility of staying in touch with the university across different platforms, the question is, is that enough to drive engagement and build an active alumni network?

1.1 Research question

Although alumni relations are still relatively new in HEIs in the Nordic region as a whole, and Finnish ones in particular, most institutions are still attempting to develop strategies and experiment with various approaches. HAMK IB alumni may not currently support their alma mater financially, as it is customary in the United States, there are other ways that can benefit HAMK IB alumni and their alma mater, HAMK, mutually.

The goal that the author aims to achieve with this thesis is to offer perspectives and ideas that fit HAMK IB goals and cultural context. The purpose of this research is to investigate potential drivers of alumni engagement, starting student involvement, to a well-established brand identity, to social networking. Insights from this study can provide ideas on how to build and sustain positive student–university relationships by examining the drivers to improve alumni engagement.

An interview, conducted by the author with one of HAMK's marketing representative, has revealed that since April 2022, there are 66 IB alumni in the registry, and the latter is being reformed lately. Currently, marketing specialists at HAMK in general are trying to contact alumni and ask them to register. As for the social networking sites that are currently in use, email is the primary tool in keeping alumni updated. As a result, the author proposes that the university's efforts require a focused and, if possible, centralized approach that aligns with the resources within the campus, led by the institution's dean and focused on an integrated strategic plan supported by research to drive alumni engagement.

As stated before, there is currently little information available about the whereabouts of International Business Alumni of Häme University of Applied Sciences, and the interview with HAMK's marketing representative has made it apparent that there are not enough alumni registered or involved with HAMK IB at the moment. Given the above information, the research question is as follows: what are the potential drivers to improve alumni engagement?

2 Commissioning company

2.1 Häme University of Applied Sciences

Häme University of Applied Sciences (HAMK) is a Finnish public multidisciplinary higher education institution. HAMK offers 27 Bachelor's degree programmes, 10 Master's degree programmes, and professional teacher education. Ten programmes are taught entirely in English. HAMK operates in 7 campuses, the main one is located in Hämeenlinna, and other 6 are located in Valkeakoski, Evo, Forssa, Lepaa, Mustiala, and Riihimäki. (HAMK, 2021)

HAMK has approximately 8800 students and 680 employees. The university's graduate employment rate, as well as the rate of graduates starting their own businesses, is among the highest in Finland. In addition to Finnish students, HAMK has foreign students from roughly 60 different countries. HAMK is Finland's eighth-largest university of applied sciences. (HAMK, 2021)

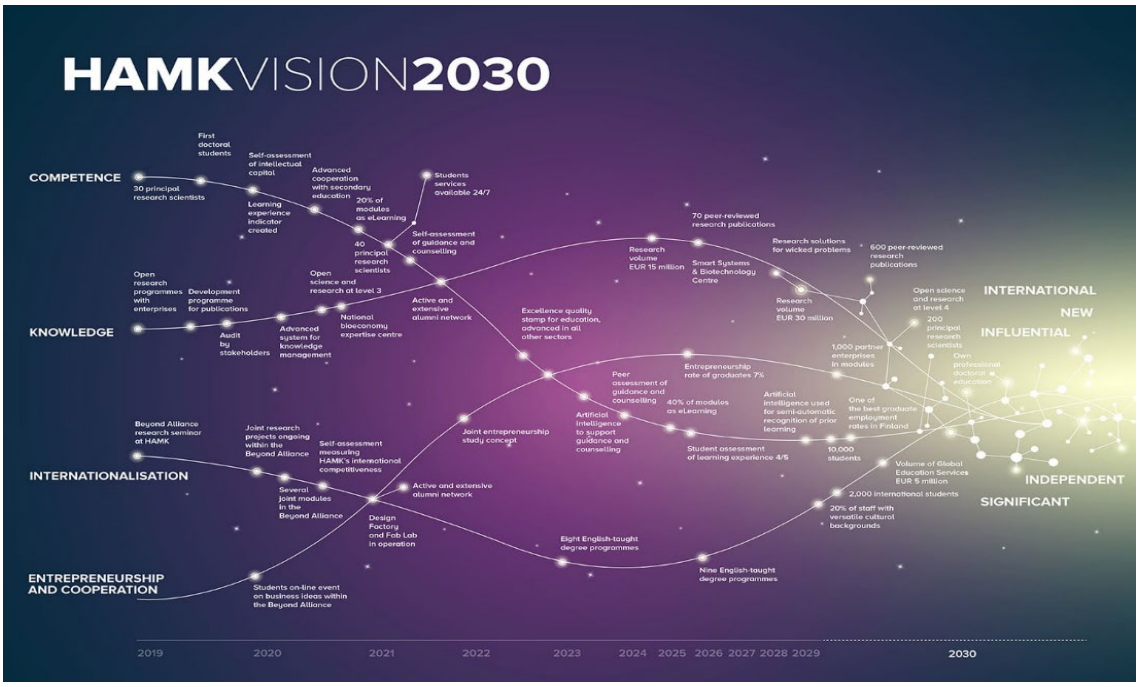

Figure.1. HAMK VISION 2030 (HAMK, 2019) illustrates the vision that HAMK is aiming to achieve in 2030. Throughout the years we can see that having an active and extensive alumni network is among those goals, more specifically during the year 2021 and 2022.

2.2 HAMK's International Business Degree Program

HAMK's IB degree programme is taught in English. The campus is located in Valkeakoksi, which is a Finnish town and municipality. It is located in the Pirkanmaa region, 35 kilometres south of Tampere, 45 kilometres north of Hämeenlinna, and 150 kilometres north of Helsinki. The municipality has a population of 20,701 people and an area of 372.03 square kilometres, and 100.06 km^2 is covered in water. The campus hosts two degrees, International Business and Electrical and Automation Engineering which are completely taught in English, as well as Electrotechnology and Automation Engineering that is taught entirely in Finnish. The campus has 800 degree students from which approximately 200 are foreign students. The International Business degree focuses on cross-cultural communication, digitalization, and real-life based projects (HAMK, 2021).

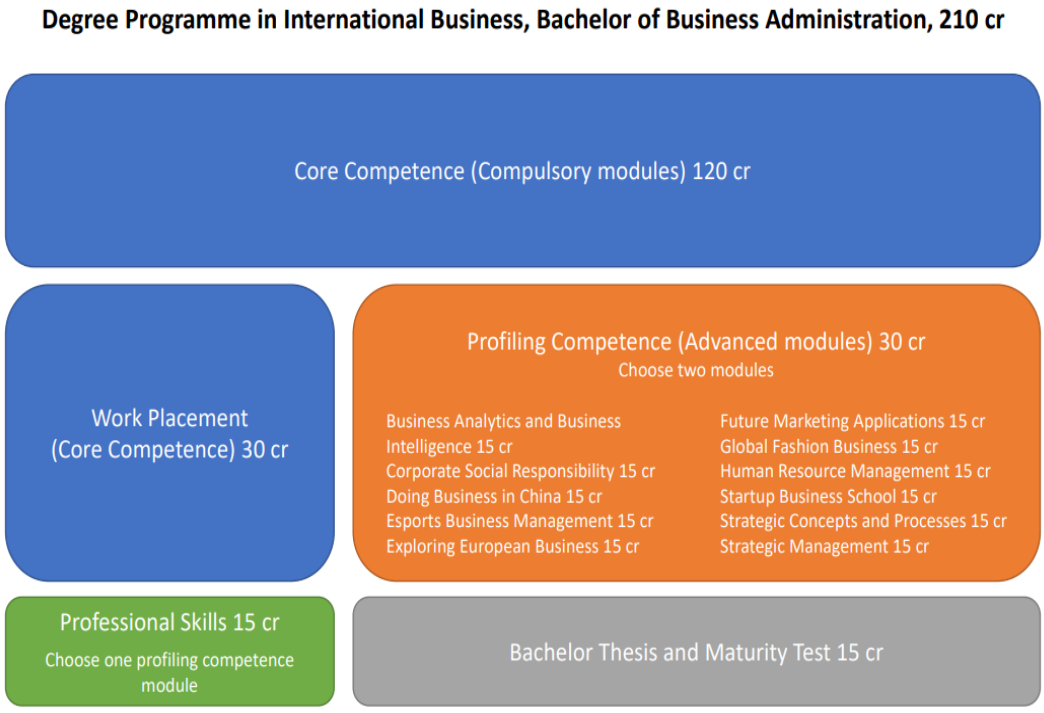

Figure 2. International Business Degree Programme Map (HAMK, 2019) demonstrates what IB degree programme consists of, from first year's modules until the thesis defense.

2.3 What HAMK currently offers to alumni

HAMK claims that the university would love to stay in contact with the students you after graduation, as an appreciated member of the university's alumni community (HAMK, 2021).

HAMK has expressed its interest in creating an active and extensive alumni community in the 2030 vision, figure1. Through HAMK's website, graduates are encouraged to sign up and fill a form to join the alumni network, free of charge, by doing so, the alumni would receive regularly information about HAMK. The alumni can also choose whether to receive the latest updates regarding the degree programme they have graduated from. In addition to that, the website offers direct links to their social media, namely, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, as well as HAMK's new blog portal and HAMK Unlimited which is a publishing platform that gathers 4 HAMK-based publications on one website. (HAMK, 2021)

As for activities, it is not only the responsibility of the university to organize them, alumni can also do so. Alumni activities, can be formal or informal, are an excellent way to bring together graduates, current students, and university staff together.

Alumni network and activities are incredibly useful tools to broaden the horizons for everyone involved. HAMK organizes some activities such as workshops and seminars. In this part, the author introduces some of the events that have been held, such as HAMK Talent which is a free of charge service for both employers and students. It is a website where companies and current or already graduated students can match professionally, it is considered a meeting place for students and working life (HAMK, n.d). There are job advertisements and internships offers and the user can create their profile depending on their needs, either as a company or as a student. The service facilitates the entry to labour market and the contact between university students and graduates (HAMK, n.d; Tiitus, n.d).

Moreover, HAMK organized a two-day event at Valkeakoski campus entitled Career Days. The event aims to connect local companies with potential employees, summer interns and thesis writers through the recruitment mini fair. Also, there is a workshop exclusively targeted to HAMK IB students, where IB's international alumni attend to share their career stories and offer advice on how to find employment, particularly in Finland. The workshop

participants are alumni from the following business fields: sales, start-ups and entrepreneurship, logistics, and marketing. (HAMK, 2020)

HAMK Alumni Event is also one of the events that has been held at the university, it is a networking event held annually in Hämeenlinna campus. In 2019, HAMK provided its alumni with the opportunity to watch a live stream of the Nordic Business Forum's entire two-day program. The Nordic Business Forum attracts thousands of businesspeople to Helsinki each year. The speakers during 2019 event included speakers Steve Wozniak and George Clooney. (HAMK, 2020).

Lastly, there is a Design Career Day organized by HAMK's students at HAMK Design Factory Stage in Hämeenlinna. Maalispäivä event aims to inspire current students by alumni's career paths stories, and offer guidance for branding expertise. (HAMK, 2020).

3 Theoretical framework

While the early history of formal alumni association is ambiguous, presumably it all began in 1792 at Yale University, when Timothy Mather Cooley gathered information about his classmates; each chosen class secretary would collect all the necessary information (Mitchell, 2013; Embree et al., 1917). This is thought to be the first known alumni system. The first alumni association was formed in 1821 at Williams College in response to a request from a number of graduates. (Mitchell, 2013; Embree et al., 1917). Reverend Williams Rogers held the first alumni fundraiser at Brown University in 1823, with a goal of raising 1,000 U.S dollars at the time, and Yale held the first reunion in 1824. The university of Michigan was the first to hire full-time alumni secretary 1897 (Mitchell, 2013).

Nowadays, due to the importance of alumni to the university, alumni relations are part of internal offices, departments dedicated to upholding the university's mission and promoting alumni involvement, conducting research, building bonds with alumni, collaborating with career services, student affairs, admission, and athletics to keep alumni engaged (Martinez, 2014).

3.1 Alumni in Finland

In Finland, alumni activities started in the 1990s or even the 21st century for some universities, therefore it is a relatively new concept among Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences. The first University of Applied Sciences Graduates appeared in 1997, and the first alumni networks followed soon after. In general, both universities and universities of applied sciences approach their alumni relationships similarly. Alumni activities in Finland are focused on graduate-university collaboration as well as the area's social and economic development. Recruitment of new students is also a common alumni activity in Finland (Häkkinen, 2008).

As stated previously, the European mentality may obscure the value that alumni can provide to a university through non-monetary contributions. For example, Stockholm University's main motivation for developing alumni relations is to build relationships with non-university organizations and increase interactions with society through alumni marketing support and connections to the labor market (Ebert et al., 2015).

Saarinen (2013), claims that alumni activities in Finland are rather disorganized, and universities of applied sciences have different approaches when arranging their alumni activities. On one hand, the Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (hereinafter Metropolia) has its own Alumni Association to handle alumni-related matters (Metropolia Alumni, 2020). The alumni have to pay a onetime-fee of 15 euros to join the association. The purpose of the association is to serve as a link between alumni members and their alma mater; to improve and maintain students' and the university's connections to work life and to improve the quality of education; to promote and support the university's management of public relations; to develop international cooperation; and to improve the social status of graduates from the Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (Saarinen, 2013). The Metropolia Alumni Association organizes events that are both professional and social in nature. All events are open to all staff, students, and alumni. The Alumni Association hosts seminars with professional alumni speakers. An Entrepreneur Club is managed by alumni and is aimed at alumni members and current students who are entrepreneurs or are thinking about becoming one. The Club's mission is to assist entrepreneurs in making their businesses a success, so it organizes entrepreneurship seminars and visits to organizations

that assist entrepreneurs. The Alumni Association runs a mentoring program in which alumni visit campuses to talk about their careers after graduation and inspire current students. Some commercial discounts are available to Metropolia alumni in Helsinki area (Metropolia Alumni, 2020).

On the other hand, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (hereinafter Haaga-Helia) does not have a separate alumni association, rather it is part of Haaga-Helia's function (Haaga-Helia Alumni, n.d). The Haaga-Helia Alumni activities serve as a link between the educational institution and professional life; a network of graduates; promote the success of Haaga-Helia; maintain a high level of respect for the Haaga-Helia Degrees; and aid in the development of the degrees (Saarinen, 2013). The university established the HH Fellows network to collaborate closely with other members of society and strengthen their cooperation with experts in variety of fields. The HH Fellows network offers its members experts opportunities to give lectures and collaborate on research, development, and innovation projects as much as possible to build future skills and competencies. Alumni are welcome to participate in other Haaga-Helia events that are primarily intended for current students, and other events that are organized specifically for alumni. The emphasis of these events is primarily social, but there are some business-related events as well (Haaga-Helia, n.d).

Most higher education organizations in Europe are supported by government or public funding, and there are cultural norms that influence how alumni from these countries perceive their roles as alumni (Ebert et al., 2015).

3.2 Customer engagement

Customers have always been the primary focus of businesses. What has changed is the manner in which customers are managed. With the emergence of customer and marketing databases, customer acquisition strategies shifted from transactional to relationship marketing, and now to customer engagement. This evolution can be seen in the metrics used at various stages of marketing. Managers analyzed customer transaction data until the early 1990s to develop metrics such as past customer value and the recency, frequency, and monetary value of purchases. Managers designed strategies to increase customer value and

firm profits using only these metrics. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, businesses realized that their customers required more than just transacting with them, prompting managers to shift their focus from transaction marketing to relationship marketing. Firms then sought to increase customer trust, commitment, and loyalty through improved product services and loyalty programs. Firms in this era focused on retaining profitable customers by employing the customer lifetime value metric (Kumar, V. 2008).

Additionally, with the use of social media platforms for marketing activities over the years, marketers realized that it is not enough to understand how long a customer will stay with the firm, but also to understand if there are other ways for customers to contribute to the firm other than purchases. As a result, the term "customer engagement" has become popular in marketing (Kumar, 2008).

It follows that the various interpretations of engagement that have been discussed in a range of contexts over the last century. Civic engagement, social engagement, community engagement, and other forms of engagement are discussed in the context of social welfare. In the business world, it is discussed in the context of a contractual relationship, and in management, it is discussed as an organizational activity with internal stakeholders. Additionally, in the marketing domain, customer engagement (CE) is associated with the level of an active relationship that a customer shares with the firm.

Pansari and Kumar (2017) define customer engagement as the mechanisms by which a customer adds value to the firm, either through explicit or implicit contributions. The explicit contributions are customer purchases, while the implicit contributions are incentivized referrals provided by customers, social media conversations about the brand, and customer feedback or suggestions provided to the firm.

Since customer engagement has received a lot of attention over the last decade, both in marketing academic research and in the corporate environment in an attempt to differentiate it from existing constructs, such as involvement and commitment, which has consequently created confusion over other customer relationship management notions, here are some definition of key related concepts:

- Customer experience:

It is holistic in nature, encompassing the customers' cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical reactions to the entity's products and services (Verhoef et al. 2009).

- Customer involvement:

A person's perception of the object's relevance based on inherent needs, values, and interests (Zaichowsky, 1985).

- Customer satisfaction:

It is an assessment that a product or service features, or that the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under or over fulfillment (Oliver, 1997).

- Customer commitment:

A persistent desire to keep a valuable relationship (Moorman et al. 1992),

And other terms are frequently misconstrued as customer engagement. Customers nowadays value the journey (Yachin, 2018), and look for a meaningful interaction that resonates with them on various levels. Companies should create and nurture a consistent, long-term relationship with customers to keep them engaged. It is still necessary to be aware of the existence of a product or service in order to purchase it, and the endpoint of the marketer is still a transaction, something tangible in the short term. Other variables, such as recommendations from friends or family, or what is called word-of-mouth, product reviews, and competitive alternatives by peers, influence individuals in the interim. The most valuable customer is not always the one who spends the most money. Good customers cannot be identified solely by their purchases in this socially charged era.

According to the customer engagement theory, when a customer is satisfied with her/his relationship with the firm and has an emotional attachment to the firm, the customer is then considered to be engaged with the firm (Kumar & Pansari, 2017).

3.2.1 The elements of engagement

Engagement goes beyond reach and frequency to capture people's true feelings about brands. It begins with their own brand relationship and continues as they extend that relationship to other customers. As a customer's involvement with a brand progresses from site use and purchases (involvement and interaction) to affinity and championing (intimacy and influence), measuring and acting on engagement becomes increasingly important in understanding customer's intentions. The four components of engagement complement one another to form a complete picture (Haven, B et al., 2007):

Involvement: The component is the most fundamental measure of engagement, reflecting the measurable aspects of an individual's relationship with a company or brand. Visits to a website or physical store, time spent per page, and pages viewed are all examples of actions. While this is not sufficient, monitoring these activities is critical because they are frequently the first point of contact between an individual and a brand.

Interaction: This component adds depth to involvement by tracking events in which people participate content about a brand, seek more information, and provide contacts details, or buy a product or service. This is shown as click-throughs, completed transactions, social network connections, and comments. Social media contributions are increasingly vital in calculating a customer's value and in tracking emerging behaviors.

Intimacy: This component looks beyond interaction to assess an individual's attachment or sentiment toward a brand. This can include standpoint, perspective, or passion for the brand expressed through the words used and the content created by the individual. Intimacy is a critical new component that sheds light on the customer's perceptions and feelings of the brand.

Influence: This component goes further than sentiment to evaluate an individual's likelihood of recommending a brand, product, or service to another potential customer. It includes awareness, loyalty, and the probability of purchasing again. Understanding the customer's proclivity to return, repurchase, or recommend is essential to developing a long-term relationship.

With the set of components mentioned above, brands can build the engagement profile, and can assess the level of engagement a customer displays. In other words, engagement can be considered as a psychologic state in conjunction with behavioral manifestation (Schaufeli, 2013).

3.2.2 Customer engagement in higher education

Student engagement is important for two reasons. The first factor is the amount of time and effort students devote to their studies and other educationally beneficial activities. The second aspect of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to encourage students to participate in activities that lead to experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Kuh et al, 2007).

While higher education is viewed as a service business, student-as-customer metaphors are distinguished by the integration of students' involvement in the learning process and their interaction with the university's staff (Khalifa, 2009). Higher education institutions are under increased strain as a result of fierce competition for new students, and creating a positive learning journey from student recruitment to alumni engagement. As Hummel (2001) observed, recruitment is an essential first step in a potential sustainable lifelong journey for the student and the higher education institution that can be maintained after graduation.

3.3 Student Involvement

Student involvement, which includes active participation in fundraising, political concerns, mentoring, and volunteering is a major predictor of a graduate's engagement as an alumnus. (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). According to Volin (2016), student involvement is a range of behaviors that showcase a level of involvement as an undergraduate student that goes beyond attendance and satisfactory course completion.

There are five concepts in the student involvement theory. The first concerns how much a student contributes to academics and physical campus activities. An example would be the amount of effort a student promotes in class through a presentation. The second states that

student involvement varies depending on the individual student, and the amount of involvement varies between students; however, student involvement continues to occur. The third is that the level of involvement includes both quantitative and qualitative measures. For instance, if a student joins a student organization and runs for a leadership position, or if a student rarely attends meetings. The fourth is how much a student retains from their activities, whether educational or personal development. The fifth is whether the policies in place are educationally involving the student in the journey (Astin. A, 1999).

Student involvement can be measured by the number of events attended by a student, as well as membership and leadership positions held in those institutions (Aloi. R.J, 2020). Alumni who had a positive student experience provide positive feedback to people in their networks, serve as role models for students, share their skills and experiences, and advise institutional programs. According to an attitudinal survey conducted by Newman and Petrosko (2011), alumni who were proud of their degree, recommended the university to others, and felt their life had improved as a result of their college education were more likely to become involved with the institution as alumni.

3.3.1 Alumni engagement

Studies into alumni attitudes and how they relate to giving behavior have revealed more promising results. Researchers and practitioners have been interested in the concept of alumni engagement, or how well connected alumni are to their alma mater. Alumni engagement refers to active involvement with the institution after receiving a degree. Engagement encompasses both monetary and non-monetary behaviors (Volin. J, 2016).

• Monetary Engagement: refers to individuals who have made monetary contributions to the institution. These donations are then ranked based on donation size and frequency (Aloi. R.J, 2020).

• Non-monetary Engagement is defined as the level of participation in alumni-related events such as socials, reunions, and volunteer opportunities with the institution. These participations are then ranked based on the amount of time committed to the organization on an hourly basis (Aloi. R.J, 2020).

Alumni giving is not a new concept for higher educational institutions in the US. Universities such as Harvard were supported by private funds and named after significant donors, as well as the Yale Alumni Fund established in 1980 by Yale alumni, 365 graduates contributed $11,000 to the fund in the first year (Mora & Nugent, 1998). However, it should be noted that monetary contributions are only one element of alumni engagement. For instance, most European universities funded by their governments such as HAMK do not share this concern, and it may be awkward to ask alumni for money (Ebert. K et al., 2015).

As mentioned before, the European mentality may overlook the value that alumni can provide to a university in the form of non-monetary contributions, which are frequently critical to the launch and growth of an effective alumni relations program. It does not imply that European universities do not value alumni relations; rather, they do so for different reasons. For example, Stockholm University's main motivation for developing alumni relations is to build relationships with non-university organizations and increase interactions with society through alumni marketing support and connections to the labor market (Ebert et al., 2015).

From the above previously conducted researches, there is a strong link between the student experience, participation, and involvement academically, regarding the quality of education, socially, which is related to the extra curriculum activities throughout the student's journey have a direct impact on the student engagement and to what level is the student engaged. Moreover, we must consider the alumni as customers, from a pragmatic standpoint, a satisfied customer will always be interested and motivated to learn more about the organization and to be more involved, whereas an unsatisfied customer will be more negligent. Hence, ensuring that students have a positive experience at university is a critical driver to maintaining a future relationship with their alma mater.

Thus, in order to achieve student engagement, the university needs to establish a brand that both current students and alumni can identify with, while the popularity of social networks is growing, it has necessitated a better understanding of the use and implementation of different strategies and tools, as a mean of improving student engagement by providing a brand that alumni will be proud to identify with.

3.4 Branding in higher education

Branding is a management concept that has grown in popularity in higher education institutions in recent years. In the face of increased national and international competition, a drive to differentiation and a desire to build and maintain a reputation, higher education institutions all over the world have begun to seek a distinct definition of what they are in order to distinguish themselves and attract students and academic staff (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). According to Aaker (1991), a brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol intended to distinguish the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers from those of competition. While a physical product may be very similar to other products, a brand is recognized as being distinct. It exists more in the minds of customers than in the product or the organization itself. It may even be perceived as having a distinct personality (Aaker, 1997), with whom consumers may form personal relationships (Fournier, 1998) or use to define and express themselves (Aaker, 1999). As a result, branding in higher education has been identified as an important area of future brand theory and practice (Melewar & Nguyen, 2014).

In addition to that, it is important to mention that the concept of branding in higher education differs from that of branding in the commercial sector. In higher education, branding is particularly about who we are, rather than what a specific product offers the marketplace. An educational brand is frequently associated with a university's academic reputation. According to Black (2008), a brand of a college or university is considered to be synonymous with the institution's personality, one that is coherent with its mission and defined by its values.

For that reason, the desired brand identity (how an institution wants others to perceive it) must be defined before the brand can be effectively promoted. A brand rationale, brand attributes, and brand benefits should be clearly outlined and reflect the institution's values while aligning with constituent expectations to drive engagement. Moreover, the brand, as previously stated, reside in the hearts and minds of those served. As a result, an assessment of the existing brand image for various constituent groups valued by the institution is a logical place to start when defining the brand identity. Though the assessment can take many forms, the goal is to gain understanding of the current situation. Hence, shaping how

constituents perceive an institution must be done effectively by first understanding the promise inherent in the university's existing brand or the brand it aspires to have. Such promises are frequently veiled and always symbolic. Symbolism's power should not be underestimated. Simply put, there must be consistency between what an institution claims to be and what its constituents experience when interacting with any individual or unit affiliated with the campus. (Black, 2008).

In fact, several researches are optimistic, seeing branding as a tool for increasing competitiveness and driving engagement in higher education. According to Melewar and Akel (2006), in a market where students are recognized as customers, universities and colleges must implement strategies to maintain and improve their competitiveness. They must create a competitive advantage based on a set of distinct characteristics. Moreover, universities and colleges must effectively and consistently communicate these characteristics to all relevant stakeholders. Under these settings, universities have finally recognized the importance of corporate identity as a source of competitive advantage (Kumar & Manjunath, 2020).

Although branding can be more difficult in Finland, since the culture have a high value on originality and modesty, institutions should actively campaign for a more visible identity for Finland and raise the bar for branding (Suonio, 2010), since research explains how a trustworthy brand provides extraordinary benefits to a company or an institution and provides advantages such as increased engagement and less vulnerability to rivalry and emergencies. It also explains how a trustworthy brand influences customer behavior (Myrick et al. 2011). Despite the fact that branding efforts in academia are easily visible, such as the use of vision statements, visual designs, and core values, it is essential to shed light on the importance of internal branding.

3.4.1 Internal branding

According to the marketing literature, marketing must begin from the inside out (De Chernatony, 2001), as internal branding stems from internal marketing, which is based on the concept of the employee as a customer (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Internal branding is important because branding literature shows that brand building efforts are often limited to

quick-fix solutions such as logo redesigns and catchy slogans (Whisman, 2009), however creating visible elements such as logos, slogans, and color palettes is only a part of successful brand building.

The majority of higher education branding research focuses on external branding or image-building toward external stakeholders such as students. Internal branding is a topic that is understudied, despite the fact that it is just as important as external branding. Internal branding is the process of gaining internal support for the external brand (Mampaey, 2020). Without this internal support, external branding activities risk becoming unsupported and thus purposeless communication or even being opposed by a large portion of the insiders (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001; Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2005). Therefore, shared brand attitudes among insiders are required for sustainable external branding.

Furthermore, internal branding is critical for increasing employees' attachment and identification with the brand, as well as managing employees' brand awareness and perceptions (Foster et al. 2010). In terms of identification, Ind (2001) suggests that employers engage employees so that they can identify with the organization and hence become brand champions who "live the brand". Sequentially, additional research indicates that managers must engage in brand-supportive behavior that fosters a shared understanding of organizational brand values (Punjaisri et al. 2008).

In turn, Liu et al. (2015) define internal branding as an organization's efforts to persuade its employees to believe in and act on the organization's brand value. Likewise, Foster et al. (2010) state that internal branding aims to ensure that employees communicate the brand promise to customers at every service encounter (Foster et al. 2010). Another study by Saleem and Iglesias (2016) highlighted the importance of brand co-creation in internal branding, arguing that the goal of internal branding is to enable employee co-creation of brand value with various stakeholders.

Further, the majority of human resource management research in relation to internal marketing focuses on recruiting, training, and compensating (Punjaisri et al. 2008). Training activities may include, for instance, explanations of brand attributes and roles, brand workshops, and brand tool kits (MacLaverty et al. 2007).

Clearly, internal branding activities are now just as important as external ones in communicating the brand promise to customers. Managers should carefully consider how external and internal communication should be aligned (Punjaisri and Wilson 2011).

Research has demonstrated that internal branding and communications supporting institutional branding activities play a significant and valuable role in an institution's brand strategy by concentrating on the middle-management stakeholder group. Without internal credibility, an external brand will only consist of unsupported external communications by university administrators, communications that are disengaged from academic staff's actual internal activities (Mampaey, 2017). Such an external brand will fail to compel HAMK IB to attain its goals in the given cultural context and limit the potential drivers of alumni engagement.

3.5 Social networking in higher education

There are numerous reasons why universities should maintain contact with alumni and social networking is one way of doing it. According to the questionnaire that the author has conducted, it appears that 100% of HAMK IB alumni that answered are not currently living in Valkeakoski, the city where the IB campus is localized. That is why establishing a social network is crucial in this context.

In today's highly competitive HE landscapes, the HEI sector must embrace innovation by engaging potential students, currently enrolled students, and alumni (Bagley & Portnoi 2014). Being present online in higher education is critical for increasing enrollment and retention, as well as keeping alumni informed. Long-term relationships and a supportive alumni network provide benefits to the institution that go beyond any financial contribution (Cannon, 2015). And while there is a large body of literature devoted to how people and brands use social media for community building, there has been little research regarding how academics and graduate students use social media to connect and engage in online academic communities. However, recently there has been a surge of academic and research interest in the use of social networking for educational purposes in recent years (Arquero & Romero-Frías, 2013; Alam, 2018), and the representation of higher education institutions on social networks (Golubić, 2017). Academics are using social media platforms for increasing

public engagement and create an online professional presence. Alumni constitute an important but often underused resource for universities in countries that do not have a long tradition of developing and maintaining alumni relations.

A social network is a structure composed of a set of actors and the connections that exist between them (DeMarcos et al. 2016). Social networks have become widely used for educational purposes in a variety of academic fields such as education, humanities, business, engineering, and so on. One of the reasons people use social networks in everyday life is to enrich interactions among learners, colleagues, researchers, academics, and others, as well as to increase a sense of belonging to a formal and non-formal community. Furthermore, social networks can provide valuable resources, support, and sources (Pérez, 2017). Further a social networking site is a platform for people who share interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections to form social networks or social relations. A social network is a website on the Internet that gathers people in one place to talk, share ideas, and share interests. People with similar interests can share information with one another in the Social Network Space (SNS) by using a wide range of social networking sites. Social networking sites can refer to community-based Web sites, online discussion forums, chat rooms, and other online social spaces (Desale & Borgohain, 2015).

For instance, according to the the Six Degrees of Separation concept, which suggests that in today's world, every single person can be linked to every other person through six other people. Barabási (2003) argues that this is a result of modern technology, the Internet, and the continuous web of communication via emails and other methods. These theories and concepts provide a strong indication of the potential of an extensive and active alumni network. Geographic boundaries have shrunk, and the ability to stay connected with people all over the world makes building an alumni network attainable. It is also essential to mention that building a social network should involve students before the graduation, in order for the transition to be smooth and effective.

Research findings have shown that consumers prefer social media over other advertising channels, many businesses have begun to focus their marketing efforts on social media (Palmer, 2013). This has also been observed in the context of university communication, where, despite not having the full support of all stakeholders, social media presence is a

requirement (Reuben, 2008). As a result, adopting this new way of networking will benefit alumni communication (Palmer, 2013), even beyond the purpose of mere marketing (Busch 2011).

Networking is defined as goal-directed behavior that occurs both inside and outside of an institution and is centered on the creation, cultivation, and utilization of interpersonal relationships (Buckley et al., 2014). We are now all connected as individuals. There is always a path between any two people in this global network to be connected. Our world is shrinking because links and networks that would have died out prior to the invention of modern communication technology can now be kept alive and activated (Barabási, 2003).

Not only social networking can be extremely beneficial to any business or institution but it can establish communities around products and services which is a potential strategy for building brand loyalty, establishing exit barriers, and facilitating viral marketing through self-emergent customer testimonials. Such communities can also serve as a source of innovation by soliciting consumer feedback and suggestions. Social media can help you find new customers as well as conduct brand intelligence and market research (Gotta & O'Kelly, 2011).

Students in the twenty-first century are constantly connected to the world around them via smart phones, tablets, and computers. Nowadays, social networking is becoming an increasingly powerful tool for communication, information sharing, and discussions on a variety of topics. The widespread academic and research interest in the use of social networking for educational purposes in higher education is a natural result of social networking's ever-increasing popularity (Doneva & Gaftandzhieva, 2017). Moreover, digital technologies offer new educational opportunities by learning to work with others and self-regulated learning processes have become important elements that are enriched through interactions, improve learner engagement, and increase the sense of community (Perez, 2018).

In the context of this research, taking into consideration that HAMK alumni are business students, previous research has identified networking as an important factor in students' entrepreneurial intentions (Palalic et al., 2016). While studying, young people can build

networks that will serve as a future hub for their professional careers. Building networks that bring value to stakeholders, on the other hand, is something that all leaders do. As a result, we propose that networking can be one of the important factors influencing students' leadership intentions, which, when properly leveraged HAMK can maintain contact with its former students and use them effectively to promote itself. However, it is important to note that this relationship should be reciprocal.

Now, it is established that the need of a having a coherent branding strategy and the usage of social networking are crucial to involve and potentially engage students and alumni, the higher education institution must have a clear plan, a calendar and a marketing strategy to achieve its goals. And in order to do that, the institution will need to use data analytics to ensure that those tactics are effective and to modify the strategy to find ways to continuously improve (Slater, 2021). Social media strategy can be based on a variety of models and frameworks, in this research, the honeycomb framework has been selected.

3.5.1 Honeycomb framework for social media strategy

The Honeycomb model is a method of outlining the most important forces at work in the social media ecology, within which all social media marketers, users, and platforms operate. The honeycomb model of social media provides a useful framework for marketers. Since, SMM, or social media marketing, is now an essential component of digital marketing, the increase in social media site usage in recent years has significantly increased the ROI that businesses and institutions can achieve by promoting their brand identity on these sites (Slater, 2021),

Kietzmann et al. (2011) created the honeycomb framework that identifies seven functional social media (SM) building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. According to them, each block enables us to unpack and examine a specific aspect of SM user experience and its implications for businesses. It is not required to use all of the building blocks in any given SM action. They are constructs that enable us to comprehend the various levels of SM functionality (Silva et al. 2020). In other words, the honeycomb framework for social media is an approach that aims to introduce the various

aspects of social media in order for businesses to better understand the opportunities and pitfalls of social media and to use it effectively in stakeholder engagement.

Identity block: according to Kietzmann et al. (2011), it represents the extent to which users reveal their identities in an SM setting. Users can choose what information they share and with whom they share it. For example, name, age, gender, profession, location, and information that exposes users in specific ways whether it is done consciously and unconsciously. One significant implication of identity is privacy. Users share their identities on social media sites, however, this does not imply that they are unconcerned about what happens to this information.

Conversation block: describes the users' ability and eagerness to actively engage in discussions (Kietzmann et al., 2011). According to Machado et al. (2016), on social media platforms, consumers can learn more about a company by tapping into the knowledge and experience of other users. Customers can also contribute to brand-related content by posting comments (Shu & Chuang, 2011).

Sharing block: refers to the sending and receiving of content, such as photos, comments, and videos, between users on the same social media platform (Kietzmann et al., 2011). According to Machado et al. (2016), social media metrics should include the number of shares in addition to likes and comments (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Customers can feel an interpersonal social interaction by interacting with a brand on social media (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). This block has two implications for businesses that want to engage in social media. To begin, businesses must understand what social objects their users share, or to discover new objects that can facilitate their shared interests. Second, businesses must assess to which extent the object can or should be shared (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Presence block: demonstrates a user's online presence and, more specifically, how well other users can access this availability information. While some platforms limit this availability to their online presence, others have developed functionalities that link the user's location to their physical location, blurring the line between virtual and physical reality. The presence implication is that in some cases, simultaneous virtual presence may prompt users to engage in sharing and conversations (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Relationships block: represents the connection that two users can have and contains the likelihood that they will converse, share, or simply list each other as connections. The nature of the relationship is frequently dictated by the nature of the social media platform. LinkedIn, for example, is primarily used for professional purposes, so it includes features such as network information beyond first contacts, profile validation, referral, and endorsement. In terms of implications, two parameters should be considered: structure, which indicates the user's influence, for instance, the more connections they have and the denser the network, the more central their role in the network is, and flow, which indicates the variety of connections the user has, for instance colleagues and friends (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Reputation block: refers to the standing of other users within the context of social media. Trust, for example, Instagram followers validate the content delivered by the followee, or rating are two ways reputation can manifest itself, for instance endorsements in LinkedIn. The implication for businesses is that if reputation is important to them, they should select a metric to validate the reputation, such as the number of views or followers (Kietzmann et al., 2011). According to Kudeshia et al. (2015), a company's online reputation is critical to its success. An online presence enables businesses to understand their customers' feelings about the brand, and it may also provide an incentive to prevent any negative thoughts.

Group block: describes the users' ability to form communities and sub-communities. When social media users like the same brand, a community is formed. According to Machado et al. (2016), social interaction is critical for the creation of user-generated content because consumers can connect with others, experience a sense of community, and feel important by creating content. Furthermore, by interacting with a brand via social media platforms, consumers can experience an interpersonal interaction as well as an intimacy feeling (Hudson et al., 2016).

The framework's seven building blocks are not mutually exclusive, nor do they all have to be present in a specific social media context. The model assist researchers and managers in comprehending the functional characteristics and implications of various social media activities. The functional building blocks of the honeycomb framework are illustrated below (Kietzmann et al, 2011):

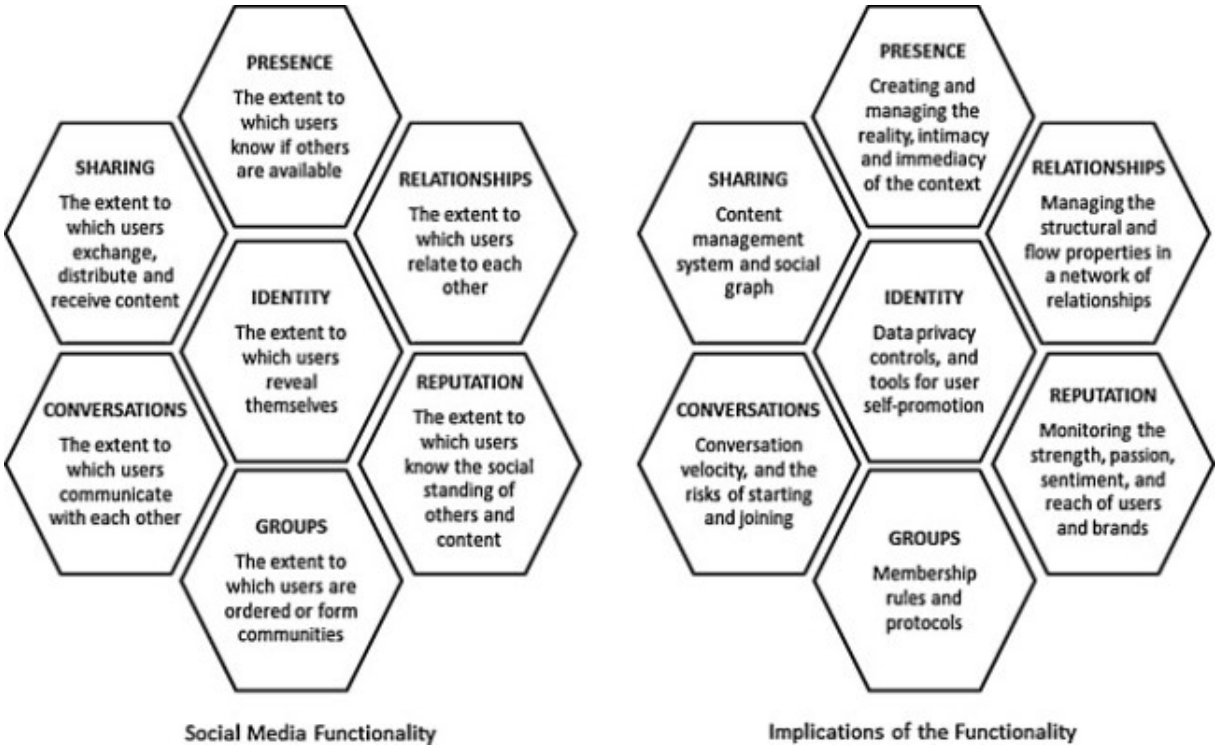

Figure 3. Functional Building Blocks of Social Media (Kietzmann et al, 2011)

The Honeycomb framework facilitates in explaining the implications that each block can have on how organizations should engage with social media in three significant ways. First, the model defines various specific aspects of social media user experience. Each social media platform, for example, is driven by primary, secondary, and tertiary building blocks that communicate the rationale for major social media design decisions. Second, using the social media honeycomb as an analysis tool allows managers to conduct a focused deductive study of their organizations' specific community needs, the findings of which can be used to improve the design or practice of a relevant social media platform. Third, the model can be used on an ongoing basis as a method for observing how dynamically changes in community needs vis a vis changes in social media applications current implications for the organization (Kietzmann et al, 2012).

According to the honeycomb framework above, social media has seven essential building blocks that constitute of its foundation. Through these various building blocks, social media is able to establish its value as a channel for collaboration and communication, that of course after proper branding has been built, applying this framework can be a way to drive

engagement in several actor and stakeholders, or more precisely to this research, employees, current students, and alumni.

4 SWOT analysis

SWOT analysis is a strategic analytical tool that revolves around assessing four key areas of any business, resulting in a comprehensive overview of its business situation. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. SWOT analysis is a framework for organizing data and presenting it in a logical, useful, and easy-to-interpret format. As a result, it can guide research and be useful in presenting research findings (Jadczak, M. 2022). SWOT Analysis is a simple but effective tool for evaluating an organization's resource capabilities and deficiencies, market opportunities, and external threats to its future (Thompson et al., 2007).

A SWOT analysis provides a snapshot of an organization's current situation. They can use these key elements to develop an optimized strategy for the organization. Furthermore, the strategy should be consistent with the organization's mission, vision, and objectives (short & long-term). A good strategy is critical to an organization's overall success; when executed correctly, it provides three fundamental attributes: direction, momentum, and a sustainable competitive advantage (Vernall, M. 2022). SWOT analysis has practical value, senior management can identify and build on their strengths, discover new opportunities, and work to eliminate or minimize threats to the business. As a result, SWOT analysis can be a valuable tool for senior management in developing an appropriate business strategy (Bell et al, 2021).

The tried-and-true SWOT analysis technique is being used on this chapter to enable a better assessment of HAMK IB's current situation, as stated before, the need of a having a coherent branding strategy and the usage of social networking are crucial to involve and potentially engage students and alumni, hence understanding how to identify each of these areas will aid in the development of HAMK’s overall online presence.

Thus, the author has carried out a SWOT analysis of the use of social networks at HAMK IB as seen below:

SWOT ANALYSIS	
Strengths	**Weaknesses**
- Easy to create a community (low expenses); - Students themselves are motivated to be online; - Convenient notification system; - Ability to use a variety of content; - Possibility of communicating in different languages across platforms and of extended reach of audience; - Fast information-sharing with both internal and external audience; - Stakeholders become more knowledgeable about the university which drives an increase in interactions, therefore engagement.	- Presence of distracting advertising and entertainment content; - Insufficient interaction; - Lack of ability to measure social interaction; - Tendency to use formats prepared for other social networks, instead of conforming to platform-specific communication norms; - Difficulty of ensuring consistency.
Opportunities	**Threats**
- Prompt wide distribution and collection of information and data; - A highly informative community can be a competitive advantage; - Partnerships; - An effective channel for collecting feedback from students and alumni; - Establishment of links between current students and alumni; - Opportunity for professors to get to know their students better and stay in touch with alumni. -Chance to attract international prospect students.	- Students may have access to the professor's personal information; - Risk of incomplete coverage (e.g., those who do not use certain social networks or do not have daily access to the Internet); - Competition with corporate/private systems of education support; - Social networks may become obsolete as new channels of communication emerge; - If social networks are not managed properly by professionals, it could fall into disuse.

Figure 4. SWOT analysis on the use of social networks by HAMK IB.

The findings of the analysis identified the strengths and weaknesses of social networks in educational/professional environment, as well as threats and existing opportunities.

The analysis demonstrates that one of the opportunities that social networks can offer is the ability to distribute and collet data, with the usage of analytics to evaluate the current state of social media marketing, HAMK IB will be able to identify the alumni needs and improve their services to meet them.

Another important observation, from what is mentioned before, a well-established brand, will make alumni proud to be identified with and that will expand the exposure of HAMK on social networks. Which will drive more exposure into HAMK's social networks, as well as attract potential partnerships, which the author believes is an advantage since HAMK encourage learning by doing and offers real-life projects to its students which will make them feel more involved.

Further, while the use of social networks is important, it is even more important to make sure that HAMK has the organizational stamina to commit to doing social networks management by an assigned senior level employee instead of assigning tasks to intern students which can make ensuring consistency an issue, and consequently can turn from being a weakness now to being a threat since consistency in a brand allows it to expand its audience engagement and reach (Payne, n.d). Having identified the benefits of incorporating social networks, incorporating them can help to improve the existing challenges that HAMK IB is facing and be the driver of alumni engagement.

5 Methodology

When conducting the research, the author had planned to send questionnaire to alumni. The first survey was sent on the 11th of April 2022. Through a period of 4 days, the author, being a student at HAMK IB herself, sent out the questionnaire to alumni from her network and also approached alumni on LinkedIn. After 10 days' period of waiting, the questionnaire only gathered 12 responses. The number of responses was low which is not statistically significant, and in this case considered insufficient data to draw a reliable analysis. Taking into consideration the limitation of time, to fit the submission time granted, and population which is not large, as mentioned before only 12 responses gathered from the questionnaire, qualitative data is considered to be more best suited research method and more valuable than qualitative to this paper. Qualitative data is interpretive and descriptive, opposed to quantitative data tells us how many, how much, or how frequently something occurs in a numeric form, which limits information such as needs, behavioral patterns, use cases, and personality traits. Qualitative data can assist us in understanding why, how, or what caused certain behaviors that quantitative studies cannot provide (Madrigal & McClain, 2012).

While quantitative research requires data standardization for statistical comparison, qualitative research necessitates flexibility, allowing the researcher to respond to user data as it emerges during a session. Thus, a semi- structured interview and a focus group interview were chosen to be implemented by the author in this thesis. Semi-structured interviews are frequently qualitative in nature in research. In marketing, social science, survey methodology, and other research fields, they are commonly used as an exploratory tool. Therefore, a semi-structured interview is a method of data collection that involves

asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework. The questions, however, are not in any particular order or phrasing (George, 2022). That means, the author prepared a set of questions, however, flexibility was maintained by skipping next question if it was irrelevant to ask depending on the answer of the previous questions, for example. The author had 22 questions prepared, however, at the end, only 15 were asked and answered. The semi-structured interview with HAMK's marketing representative, who would like to remain anonymous, was held on 25th April 2022 on Teams.

Additionally, focus group interviews have historically been used in a wide range of disciplines to research and solve a wide range of problems, such as generating hypotheses, exploring opinions and attributes, and developing new product ideas (Powell & Single, 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). That qualitative method that seeks data from a deliberately selected group of individuals rather than a statistically representative sample of a larger population, it is a group interview of minimum 6 people, where the researcher can get more in-depth information on perceptions, insights, attitudes and experiences of the interviewees (Marczak & Sewell, 2018). The focus group interview was held on the 25th April 2022, the author invited 3 alumni and 3 third-year students to participate online via Zoom. Online focus groups have several inherent benefits that address many of the limitations of in-person focus groups, encouraging both researchers and participants to use this data collection method. For researchers, online focus groups are a more convenient and cost-effective alternative to in-person focus groups (Reid & Reid, 2005; Schweitzer et al., 2012), whereas participants value the flexibility of being able to choose both the time and location of their contribution (Van Dulmen & Zwaanswijk, 2014).

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate concepts, evaluate experiences, and gain in-depth knowledge about various potential approaches to improve alumni engagement using student involvement, branding and social networking as drivers. Therefore, the primary data is collected through qualitative research method, namely the interview with HAMK's marketing staff representative, as well at the focus group interview mentioned above. While secondary data is represented in the developments, strategies, and patterns that can be identified through findings from literature, generating the information needed to draw accurate conclusions (Rogelberg, 2008).

Moreover, the reliability and validity of the process of collecting and analyzing qualitative data are major considerations in in-depth research. These elements greatly contribute to the credibility of the information and conclusions, and it is the researcher's responsibility to uphold these elements and be as objective as possible when conducting qualitative research. The research methods mentioned above are best suited for writing this thesis, as they allow for the development and presentation of a clear analysis of the topic based on relevant literature and findings from experts in the higher education subjects (Rogelberg, 2008).

As for the limitations, as mentioned previously, the restriction of time due to the author's planning in the given situation, as well as the limited number of participants, in addition to the lack of literature regarding alumni in the European context. Moreover, both interviews were conducted online, through Zoom and Teams which have limited the author's opportunity to get to know the subjects better, analyze their body language, and expand on some topics further during a face-to-face conversation.

5.1 Findings

5.1.1 Interview with HAMK's marketing representative

This interview with the marketing representative at HAMK is important to this research, since the author has emphasized throughout this paper the importance of branding and social networking in higher education, and when leveraged properly, it can be used to improve alumni engagement.

The marketing representative stated that at the moment HAMK university does not have a defined brand. Even though, the university does feel the requirement of building and strengthening the brand, at the moment it is not considered as priority due to the resources available. That means there is no set budget that is being actively invested in branding. As mentioned previously, branding can be more difficult in Finland, since the culture have a high value on originality and modesty, however institutions need to perceive branding a tool to increase competitiveness and maintain alumni relations, and should actively campaign for a more visible identity for Finland and raise the bar for branding (Suonio, 2010).

Further, the university is currently aware of the importance of engaging alumni, however HAMK's marketing representative claims that at this time being, it is not a priority. She also adds that the university does perceive alumni as ambassadors, but there is no established process to make use of that. As for the use of social networking, HAMK does not have a clear marketing strategy that is being followed, nor the social networking sites are being constantly monitored since the marketing team does not use KPIs. Currently, email is the main tool that HAMK uses to communicate with alumni in the registry, which are overall 1565 Finnish speaking, and approximately 30 English speaking alumni (the way the university differentiate between them is the language used to fill the form on HAMK's website to register in the Alumni Network), and HAMK is currently working on reforming the English register. That means sending 3 newsletters per year to alumni in the registry is the only way HAMK directly communicates with them. As for the social media accounts, HAMK IB Instagram account for instance, is not being actively monitored by the marketing team, and that is also due to lack of resources.

Nevertheless, the HAMK's marketing staff is aware of the importance of branding and the representation of higher education through social networking nowadays. Particularly, in today's world where modern technology, the Internet, and the continuous web of communication have shrunk geographic boundaries, and enabled people to stay connected with each other all over the world, which provide a strong indication of the potential of an extensive and active alumni network and how attainable it is to build it (Barabási, 2003).

With that being stated, the marketing representative added that they are observing how other universities of applied sciences are representing themselves online, and are meeting with some of these universities for a potential collaboration, in addition to the efforts that the university will employ to develop a brand identity and marketing strategy to improve their presence online in general but also build a network with the university's alumni.

5.1.2 Focus group interview

The focus group interview involved 6 people in total. The author has reached out to 3 alumni, first, Caroline Bondier, who is originally from France. Caroline moved to Valkeakoski in 2003 as an Erasmus student but she decided to stay and study International Business

degree program at HAMK, she graduated in 2005. Currently Caroline is living in Helsinki and working as the Vice President of sales development for Naava company. She is also the co-founder of International Working Women in Finland organization, which has a Facebook group of more than 7600 members, and the author is part of that group since 2020 and have been closely following the progression of the group's network. The second alumnus that was contacted is Triet Ngo, who is came to Finland in 2016 as an IB student, he graduated in 2019, at the moment Triet is working two restaurants while actively looking for a job related to his IB degree. The third alumna that was invited to the focus group interview is Sorana Rida, originally from Romania, she began studying at HAMK IB in autumn 2018. Sorana is the freshest graduate among the alumni invited to the interview as she graduated from HAMK IB in December 2021. She currently lives in Tampere and working as a Project Coordinator at Telus International company. Moreover, since the author has emphasized the importance of student involvement, 3 of HAMK IB third-year students were invited to be part of the interview, namely, Derek Suarez, Erik Kovács, and Mouhanad Mousalam, who all have started their thesis planning to graduate in 2022. The author believes that the diversity of the interviewees will contribute to a rich conversation, as well as varied, yet relevant, insights to the topic of discussion.

The author has managed to prepare questions that allow both alumni and third-year students to participate in the conversation, however, there was one question slightly grammatically changed to fit the context, third year students were asked if they are willing to be part of HAMK IB Network, they were all welcoming to idea even though at the moment, they are still not sure how that would be beneficial. As for alumni, they were not sure whether they belong to the network, for Caroline, who graduated more than 15 years ago, she has received only one email invitation from HAMK IB, which caused a confusion of whether she is part of the Alumni IB Network, but HAMK IB has not been sending emails, or for some reason, she is not part of the Network anymore. Triet has mentioned that after his graduation in 2019 he joined the Network through the website, he added that he has received an email, "three days ago" on the day of the interview, to fill a survey. Triet added that he only received emails to fill a survey twice or thrice, and there was no invitation for activities or updates from the university to be involved. Similarly, Sorana has completed a form to join IB Alumni Network while completing her graduation process in December 2021,

however, from that day to the 25th April 2022, Sorana have yet to receive an email from HAMK.

Furthermore, when asked whether they attended any alumni event organized by HAMK as a student. Erik and Caroline have answered in the negative, as well as Mouhanad and Triet at the first until Derek mentioned a seminar that he attended in his first year that featured alumni giving presentations and sharing their professional story, that Mouhanad and Triet have remembered that they did in fact attend one event as well, however, it was not clear for them that it was an alumni event because HAMK did not promote it that way. Triet also added that the event was not significant for him. Additionally, Sorana has mentioned that she has also attended one similar event in her first year, 2018, where alumni were invited to share their life experience during and after graduation, as well as their journey of job search in Finland as foreigners which was interesting for her as a first year student back them.

Following this, Sorana has expressed her interest in participating in future alumni events, and if the university ever reach out, she would be willing to cooperate. Caroline has also demonstrated her motivation to give back and share the knowledge that she gathered throughout her professional career to help people achieve success in theirs, as mentioned before, she is helping in empowering a group of 7600 foreign women in Finland, and she possesses an extensive network. Caroline has also revealed her interest in a reunion or informal gatherings with her class, or alumni who graduated around the same time as her, she said that it will be a good opportunity for everyone to network. This has led to the question of whether their student experience has an influence on their involvement or the way they want to get involved. All interviewees agreed that there has to be a variety of activities and stories to involve alumni with different interests. Each one of them is willing to participate if HAMK IB can organize a meeting that would be of interest to them, from informal gatherings, to success stories, to sharing knowledge and tips of Finnish working life, to organizing workshops or trainings with certification, to exposing struggles and obstacles that students, especially internationals one, might face.

Overall, all the interviewees are satisfied with their student experience at HAMK, however, they all agreed on the lack of proactivity from HAMK IB is the obstacle that they are facing to give back to the university and participate or even organize different activities. All the

participants in the focus group interview have exhibited that HAMK establishing a brand will definitely drive them to be more engaged since it will add a value to them being associated with a good brand. Mouhanad and Erik pointed out the lack of important information in English languages. Moreover, Caroline added, which is worth mentioning since the university's marketing representative has pointed out the lack of resources as one of the reasons HAMK is not investing in branding currently, that HAMK IB can brand itself through showcasing IB alumni who have attained high positions within big firms and have over 10 years of work experience, which will enlarge the network that HAMK reaches within its social networking sites, Derek added. Branding does not have to be expensive, since with social networking nowadays, it is easy to convey a message. Moreover, Sorana has pointed out that she did notice an improvement of HAMK IB presence online since her first year, that is from 2018 until 2021, the university has put some efforts into that, however, it still needs more diversity in the content, one which will add a value to HAMK IB, current students and alumni. Content that showcase what HAMK IB students are studying, the use of technology in classrooms, the specifics of some programs and what students and alumni can benefit from the material that HAMK IB is offering.

5.2 Data analysis

The aim of this thesis is to provide HAMK IB with insights on potential drivers of alumni engagement. The author investigates student involvement, branding, and social networking in this study by incorporating theories and insights based on existing literature, as well as an interview with HAMK marketing representative, and a focus group interview with alumni and third-year students as participants.

According to Etzelmueller (2014), alumni engagement is critical to an institution's advancement and success, as some alumni choose to become involved in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons, as have the data from the focus group revealed, all interviewees agreed that there has to be a variety of activities and stories to involve alumni with different interests. Alumni engagement is critical to an institution's advancement and success, as some alumni can contribute to the diversity of the activities.

Universities rely on graduates to support a wide range of activities that necessitate alumni participation, particularly in the branding of the university. Student involvement in the university is important in many ways, but the goal of university development should include establishing a consistent, long-term connection and relationship once they graduate and become alumni (Etzelmueller, 2014). Following the data obtained from the focus group interview, each participant is indeed willing to participate in activities that would be tailored to different students and alumni since everyone has different obligations and characters, that ranged from informal gatherings, to success stories, to sharing knowledge and tips of Finnish working life, to organizing workshops or trainings with certification, to exposing struggles and obstacles that students and alumni, especially internationals one, might face.

In contrast, according to the data collected from the focus group interview, both alumni and third-year students willing to give back and be proactive, the interview with the university's marketing representative has revealed that currently HAMK IB has not set up a process that focuses on building long-lasting relationships with alumni to meet their needs and expectations, and they are not properly promoting the alumni activities that have been done as most participants did not attend or did not remember to attend one as a student. Finnish universities should actively campaign for a more visible identity and raise the bar for branding (Suonio, 2010), since theories based on existing literature explains how a trustworthy brand provides extraordinary benefits to a company or an institution and provides advantages such as increased engagement and less vulnerability to rivalry and emergencies. It also explains how a trustworthy brand influences customer behavior (Myrick et al. 2011).

Whereas the interview with HAMK's marketing representative disclosed that the university does not currently have a defined brand, there is no investment for branding or social networking as it is not considered a priority at the moment, and that the main tool to communicate with alumni is email. Participants in the focus group interview has given incentives to HAMK IB to improve alumni engagement, as that will also add a value to them being associated with a university that has a good brand identity. Participants pointed out that branding does not have to be expensive, since with social networking nowadays, it is easy to convey a message through showcasing IB alumni who have attained high positions within big firms and have over 10 years of work experience, which will enlarge the network

that HAMK reaches within its social networking sites with people that will expand it further, which can provide HAMK IB with partnerships and project ideas. It is important to mention that from 2018 until 2021, the university has indeed put some efforts into its online presence, especially IB in this context with their Instagram account. However, it still needs more diversity in the content, one which will add a value to HAMK IB, current students and alumni. Content that showcase what HAMK IB students are studying, the use of technology in classrooms, the specifics of some programs and what students and alumni can benefit from the material that HAMK IB is offering.

Moreover, the questionnaire that was mentioned before, it featured 12 responses, however the author believe that it is important to mention that from 12 respondents (the three alumni in the focus group interview included), it appears that 100% of HAMK IB alumni are not currently living in Valkeakoski, the city where the IB campus is localized, and even some current students live in another city and commute to Valkeakoski.

Figure 5. Location data from the questionnaire

Further to what have been mentioned previously, in today's highly competitive higher education landscapes, the HEI sector must embrace innovation by engaging potential students, currently enrolled students, and alumni (Bagley & Portnoi 2014). Being present online in higher education is critical for increasing enrollment and retention, as well as

keeping alumni informed. Long-term relationships and a supportive alumni network provide benefits to the institution that go beyond any financial contribution (Cannon, 2015). HAMK IB needs to encourage alumni to be interactive by setting a brand and marketing strategy to employ its social networking sites properly, and in order to do that, the institution will need to use data analytics to ensure that those tactics are effective and to modify the strategy to find ways to continuously improve.

Social media strategy can be based on a variety of models and frameworks, however the author suggests the honeycomb framework which focuses on building identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The author believes HAMK IB needs to initiate the establishment of a framework in order to improve the alumni engagement.

On one hand, the findings from the focus group interview that HAMK IB alumni and current students are willing to participate and engage with the university, however, the findings from the interview with HAMK's marketing representative has revealed that the university does not invest in branding, rarely monitor their social networking sites and lack resources, hence, not prioritizing alumni relations at this moment. On the other hand, it seems that HAMK IB is aware of the importance of building an active and extensive alumni network on the long run, as it is included in the university's 2030 vision, and in order for that to happen, HAMK IB needs to initiate the establishment of a framework in order to drive improvement of alumni engagement.

6 Conclusion

This thesis attempts to investigate if student involvement, branding, and social networking can be drivers for alumni engagement at HAMK International Business degree programme. The author has gathered insights on how those three notions can improve alumni engagement.

As mentioned throughout this paper, interaction between the university and students begins when the student enrolls as a freshman and continues throughout the student's time on campus. From admission until graduation, the university and students have established a

relationship together, that will more likely determine the alumni relation later on. When students graduate, building an alumni network is the only agent that can make and maintain a relationship between them as alumni and HAMK IB.

The data gathered showcases that HAMK IB is aware of the importance of building an active and extensive alumni network, as it is included in the university's 2030 vision, figure2. Moreover, both current students and alumni, whether freshly graduated or over 15 years ago, are all willing to be part of HAMK IB's network, and be actively participating in activities, events, workshops, reunion, and so on. The author believes that HAMK IB should get in touch with alumni and give them a chance to be heard and express what motivates them to be active, that way HAMK IB can tailor its effort to something that would benefit the alumni which in return will benefit the university as well. HAMK IB needs to make this a priority if they want to have a presence online that would not be only advantageous to maintain a long-lasting relationship with the alumni, but would also help in distinguishing themselves and attract students and academic staff.

Moreover, these activities that will engage alumni can be excellent tools for recruitment and retention that can influence loyalty and university recommendation, since in this context, IB programme is a bachelor's degree, and current students and alumni can be interested in pursuing further studies. The findings from the focus group revealed that alumni can serve as classroom speakers, mentors, internship hosts, board members, or other formal or informal engagement in which they are willing to dedicate their time or talent to students or other alumni to enhance student experience and expand their own network. Their involvement and support can make a significant difference in the lives of students.

All things considered, students and alumni alike want more personalization in HAMK IB's outreach and engagement efforts. Data from the focus group interview has provided examples of what current students and alumni value and what truly resonates with them. Potential assistance is being squandered, because HAMK IB has not established routines for soliciting alumni assistance, a clear definition of all the tasks alumni are willing to offer is required. Also, the university needs to effectively promote the events that are already being organized within the university itself. Students are not aware whether the event they participated in involved alumni, and the latter are not receiving invitations or newsletters as

was promised, and marketing staff is not using analytical or automated tools to collect or monitor data which may jeopardize efforts to reach alumni and improve engagement.

This study could have been conducted with greater depth. Given more time, there would be more to learn and more pathways to explore. The focus group interview has given a glimpse of what alumni and students want, the time constraint has limited the author to reach and gather more than 6 participants at the same time in a short time, however that interview served to prove that when putting in efforts to engage alumni it should be reminded that the university is dealing with such a diverse range of interests and needs.

Overall, the findings of this research demonstrate alumni and current students are eager to be contacted and willing to participate in events that match their interest and needs that HAMK IB might organize. However, that is not met with the actions that the university is taking currently. HAMK IB needs to start viewing alumni as an asset, a resource that the university can utilize. Student involvement, branding and social networking can drive alumni engagement when being correctly employed.

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Figure 1. HAMK VISION 2030

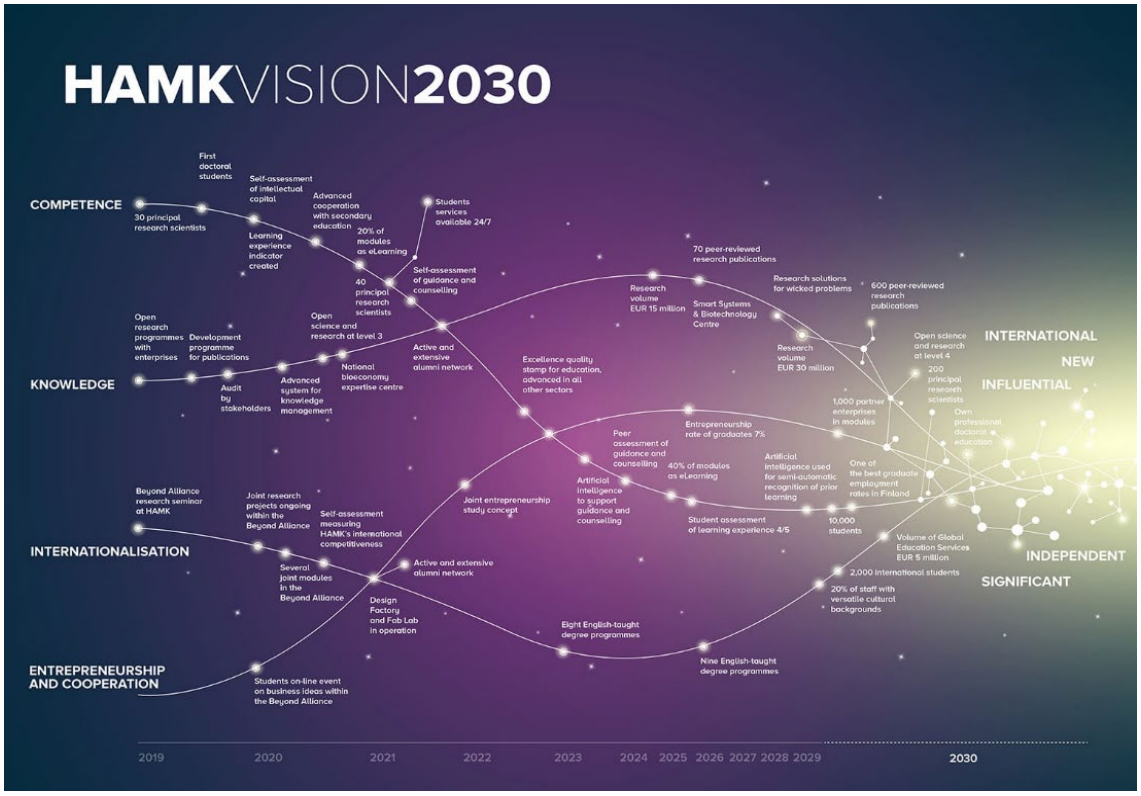

Figure 2. International Business Degree Programme Module Map

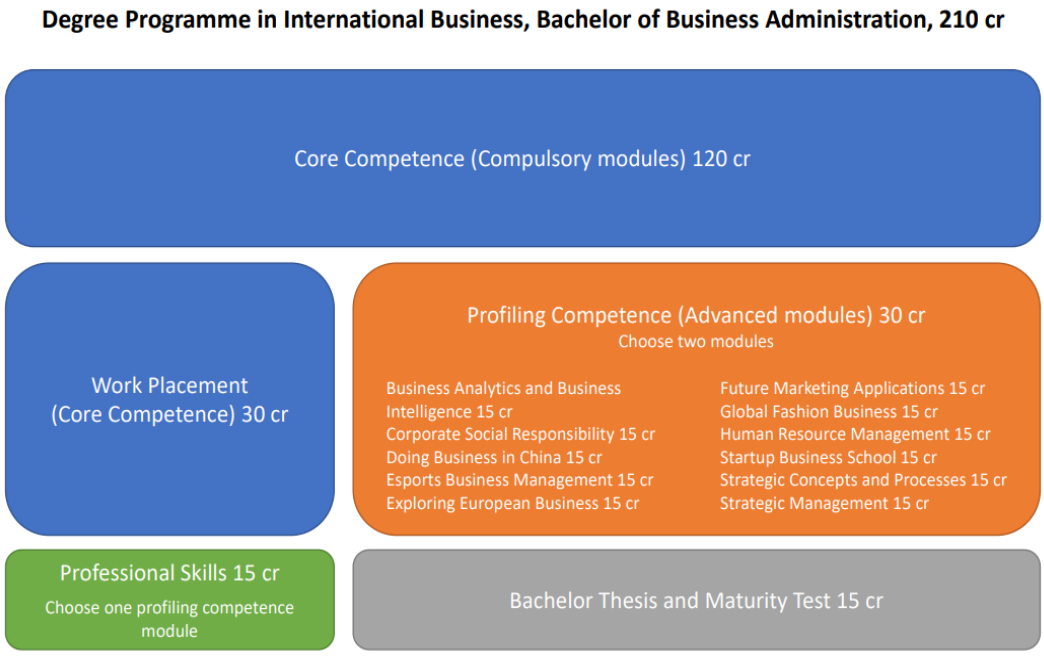

Figure 3. Functional Building Blocks of Social Media

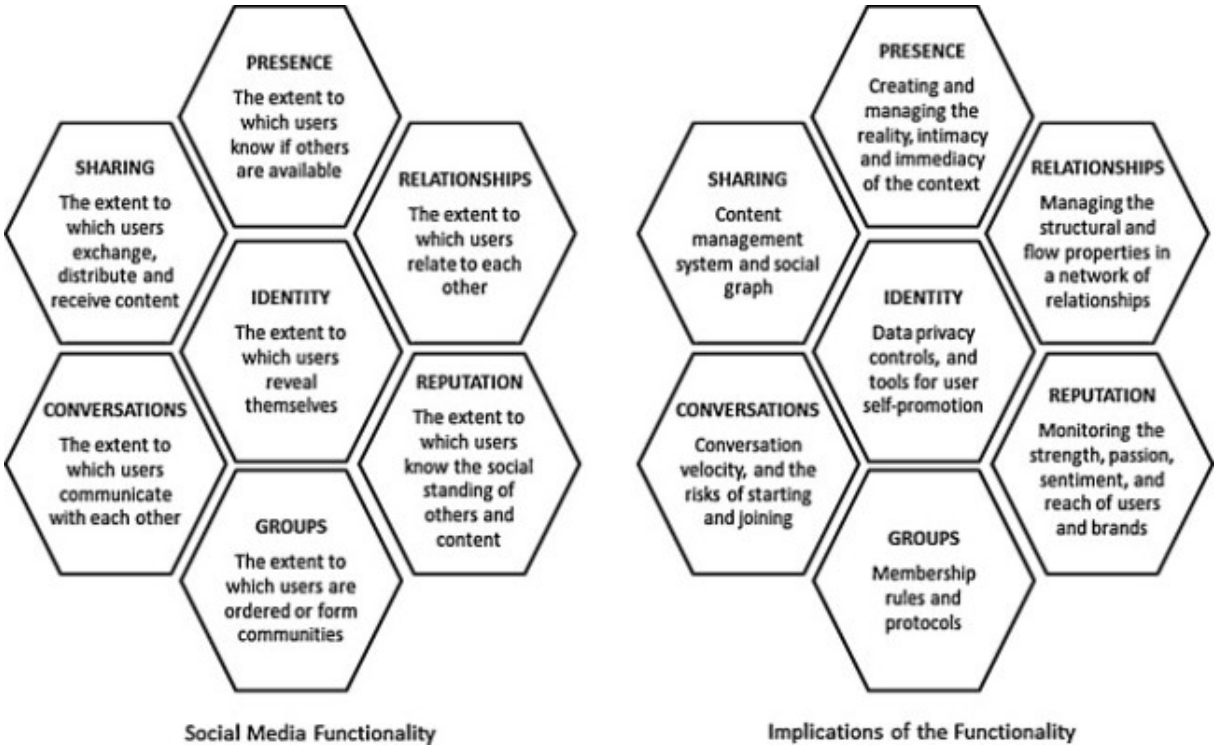

Figure 4. SWOT analysis on the use of social networks at HAMK IB

SWOT ANALYSIS	
Strengths	**Weaknesses**
- Easy to create a community (low expenses); - Students themselves are motivated to be online; - Convenient notification system; - Ability to use a variety of content; - Possibility of communicating in different languages across platforms and of extended reach of audience; - Fast information-sharing with both internal and external audience; - Stakeholders become more knowledgeable about the university which drives an increase in interactions, therefore engagement.	- Presence of distracting advertising and entertainment content; - Insufficient interaction; - Lack of ability to measure social interaction; - Tendency to use formats prepared for other social networks, instead of conforming to platform-specific communication norms; - Difficulty of ensuring consistency.
Opportunities	**Threats**
- Prompt wide distribution and collection of information and data; - A highly informative community can be a competitive advantage; - Partnerships; - An effective channel for collecting feedback from students and alumni; - Establishment of links between current students and alumni; - Opportunity for professors to get to know their students better and stay in touch with alumni. -Chance to attract international prospect students.	- Students may have access to the professor's personal information; - Risk of incomplete coverage (e.g., those who do not use certain social networks or do not have daily access to the Internet); - Competition with corporate/private systems of education support; - Social networks may become obsolete as new channels of communication emerge; - If social networks are not managed properly by professionals, it could fall into disuse.

Figure 5. Location data from the questionnaire

HAMK'S MARKETING REPRESENTATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How many alumni you have registered?

Could you define your brand for us?

What are the core values, aims and beliefs of HAMK IB?

Do you feel required to strengthen your brand?

Does the university actively invest in branding? (time/money)

Is there focus put on building long-lasting relationships with alumni?

What are the activities used to create this relationship?

Does the university see alumni as ambassadors for the university? are they important? How is that shown to them?

How is the marketing organized at the university?

How often do meetings take place and who is involved?

Do you perceive differences in the branding regarding the other universities of applied sciences?

Does the university have partnerships with other universities? (collaborations of any type)

Do you use social networking? Which ones (Instagram, Facebook, twitter, LinkedIn)

Do you have a posting strategy (guidelines, content plan) when it comes to posting content?

Do you monitor the feedback you get from the social media posts?

Do you work with KPI?

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

For alumni: Are you part of HAMK IB Network?

For 3rd year student: Are you willing to join HAMK IB Network?

Did you attend any event with alumni as a student?

If yes, was it helpful?

Would you be willing to participate in an alumni event?

Do you think that your personal student experience affects your involvement as an alumnus?

Are you satisfied with HAMK IB online presence?

Would you be more willing to be involved if HAMK IB has established a brand identity that you can identify with?