

# From Awareness to Acquisition

Digital Channel Optimization that Supports International Student Acquisition

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis was commissioned by the Tampere University of Applied Sciences, located in Tampere, Finland. The main purpose of this project was to increase international student enrollments to the university, in hopes of adding diversity and multicultural perspectives to degree programs, while contributing to one of the organization's strategic objectives to internationalize. The primary objective of the research was to determine how the digital channels of the university could be optimized to increase conversion for international student prospects to enrolled attendees at the university.

The theoretical aspect of the of the study involved a literature review on content creation and engagement, information architecture, and different types of digital marketing strategies to become acquainted with current trends relating to customer-centric, digital channel practices. Integrated marketing communication was also researched, to bridge the gap between theory and practical application of digital marketing practices throughout the university's units. Then, a sample group of international students from the school were surveyed and interviewed to collect primary data. The results were intended to provide insight on expected content, channel interaction, and engagement between prospects and the university. The respondents quantitatively rated the school's digital channel usefulness in their journey from prospect to student, which led to a content analysis of a sample from the university's Instagram account. The results were meant to provide insight on expected content, channel interaction, and engagement between prospects and the university.

The results of the study highlighted the need for more content along the university of applied science's digital channels that catered to international prospects' needs and expectations. Though adequate in content creation and digital channel management, the university's marketing efforts were best suited for current students. The data analyzed and studies conducted led to the formulation of recommendations to the higher education institution. The suggestions were tactical and customer-centric, in that they were based on student insight from the respondents. Content, engagement, and channel preferences were the main areas for development. Integrated marketing communication elements were recommended to integrate into the school's processes. The suggestion was made with the intention to incrementally develop and foster new, collaborative opportunities to guide international student prospects to conversion in their journey to enrollment.

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Key words: content, engagement, digital channels, digital marketing, imc

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**ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS**

TAMK	Tampere University of Applied Sciences
UAS	University of applied sciences
RDI	Research, development, and innovation
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
E.g.	For example
SEM	Search engine marketing
IMC	Integrated marketing communication
Marcom	Marketing communication
IA	Information architecture
UX	User experience
IB	International business
BBA	Bachelor's in business administration
CTA	Call-to-action

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Hyper-connectivity has connected us in such a deep manner that we have become immersed in our electronic devices. These touchpoints to the digital world have changed the way that we operate in daily life. Streamlined communication, information search and sharing, scheduling, entertainment, and navigation are just a few ways that consumers have become accustomed to the integration of these devices in their daily routines. For consumers to make a choice that can impact their lives, browsing online for more information on the organization's channels should be an informative, enjoyable experience.

International student prospects looking to move abroad for education should be prioritized as early as possible in their first engagements with the university or college. The physical limitations of distance combined with the convenience of digital touchpoints means that in order to support guidance towards enrollment, a customer-centric mindset must be integrated into marketing efforts related to content, engagement, and user experience on the school's available digital channels.

## 1.1 Case Company: Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) is one of 22 University of Applied Sciences in Finland (EDUFI n.d.). Universities of Applied Sciences, which will from now on be referred to as UAS, differ from traditional research-based universities in that they are practice oriented, with an emphasis on preparing students for professional work life. According to the Finnish National Agency for Education, TAMK is one of the most popular UAS's in the country, offering a diverse variety of English-taught programs at the bachelor's and master's levels (EDUFI n.d.).

A well-established multidisciplinary educator, the higher education institution prides itself in their RDI cooperation, international profile, and orientation towards working life. The university offers 15 English-taught degree programs, 7 of which are bachelor's degree programs. In the latest round for the 2021 academic year, 2,276 applications were received- a record amount for the school and an 18% increase from the 2020 application round (Tuni 2020.)

In Finland, higher education tuition is free for Finnish citizens. Free tuition also applies to those with long-term or permanent residence permits for Finland, EU Blue Card owners, as well as citizens of the European Union, Economic Areas, and Switzerland (EDUFI n.d.).

The following subchapters will give insight into other aspects of TAMK that pertain to their operational priorities and strategic objectives. The goal is to properly depict the current case company (TAMK) with an adequate foundation of context before disclosing the research question and objectives.



### **1.1.1 TAMK figures**

Tampere University of Applied Sciences has over 700 staff members and works with 335 partner universities around the world. The annual budget for the school is 74 million EUR (Tuni 2020).

TAMK has over 13,000 students across nine fields of study. There are over 40 degree programs offered at the UAS, which consists of 17 bachelor's degree programs and 15 master's degree programs; 15 of the aforementioned programs are offered in English. In addition, professional teacher education is offered as a study option. Around 2,000 students graduate per year (Tuni 2020).

### **1.1.2 TAMK as a member of the Tampere universities community**

The Tampere university community consists of Tampere University of Applied Sciences and Tampere University. The community was formed in 2019, after the University of Tampere and Tampere University of Technology merged to create Tampere University (Tuni 2020).

It is together that the Tampere university community aims to innovate a new model for education and research domestically. The diverse fields of expertise among the community are prioritized so that the greatest challenges facing society can be addressed, while new opportunities can be created. Their aim is to follow the community's guiding principles in combining research and innovation, multidisciplinary learning, and loyal partnerships to develop solutions that benefit business, industry, as well as have a societal impact (Tuni 2020.)

The strategy of the university community involves the integration and cooperation between higher education institutions to strengthen international networking culture, create a digital campus environment, and develop less conventional ways to work while exceeding expectations. The community approaches these goals while considering and leading in a sustainable manner (Tuni 2020.)

### 1.1.3 TAMK's operational priorities and strategic objectives

TAMK's operational priorities as expressed in the "TAMK Strategy Towards 2030" report (2020) include work that can be described as globally responsible, inclusive, and cooperative. Furthermore, activity in learning and competence is highlighted (Tuni 2020, 4).

The following figure contains a quoted outline on TAMK's strategic objectives:

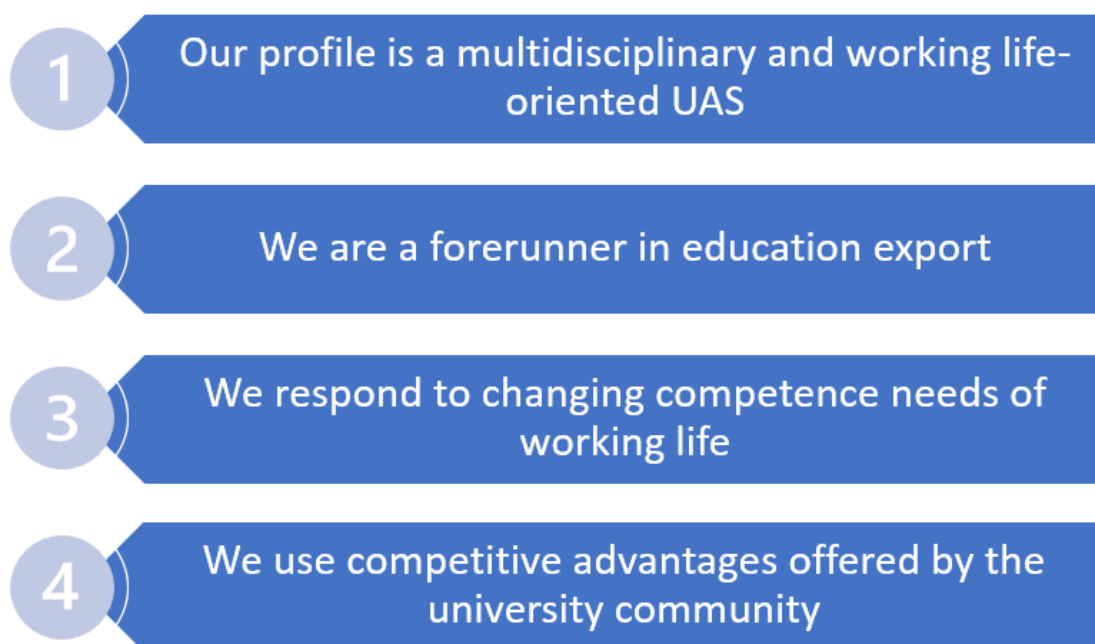


FIGURE 1: TAMK's strategic objectives (Tuni 2020, 6)

The text below gives added context to the strategic objectives depicted in Figure 1, and describes the ideal positioning for TAMK in fulfilling them:

TAMK's identity in the Tampere universities community is one that represents international and working life. The UAS places an emphasis in learning within working life and international networks, using new technology, ecological innovation support and addressing sociocultural challenges (Tuni 2020, 5.)

The internal operations of TAMK are supplemented positively by internationalization, as it increases the impact of work life, and contributes to continuous im-

provement in education. TAMK's competitive advantages stem from its membership in the Tampere universities community, as well as the continuously updated degree objectives that run parallel to the everchanging competences in work life (Tuni 2020, 5.)

#### **1.1.4 TAMK's critical success factors**

TAMK recognizes several critical success factors that should be abided by to meet these strategic objectives. The practical approach is embraced in incorporating active working connections into processes. As TAMK is a multidisciplinary UAS, the integration of working life practicalities can be seen in study programs, curriculums, group projects, and other trainings (Tuni 2020, 5.)

Digitalization is used in order to aid in growth and development in competences. operational flexibility allows for opportunities to increase the use of and impact of these competences within the organization. Digitalization also aids in efforts to attain international exposure for the UAS. The aim is for TAMK to increase its international exposure and expansion of operations (Tuni 2020, 5.)

TAMK embraces a target-oriented work culture while taking into account staff and students' well-being. Quality management is integrated into the UAS's management system and processes. in addition, paid services are developed to grow and increase external funding. Development of education, cooperation, RDI, service production and campus improvements are prioritized (Tuni 2020, 5.)

#### **1.1.5 Tuition fee exemption**

In Finland, universities and UAS's charge tuition fees for bachelor's and master's students studying for degrees in English (or any other language other than Finnish or Swedish). The amount may vary depending on the higher education institution applied to. Exemption from tuition fees apply to citizens from the European Union, European Economic Area country, and Switzerland. Exemption also applies to those with an EU Blue Card, permanent Finnish residence permit, long-

term EU residence permit, or type-a fixed-term continuous Finnish residence permit (EDUFI 2021.)

### **1.1.6 Tuition fees at TAMK**

For international students that do not qualify for tuition exemption, the fee for tuition per academic year is EUR 9,800. There are several scholarship options available for students. The “Early Bird” scholarship takes 50% off the first year’s tuition, given that the applicant accepts TAMK’s offer and pays 50% of the first year’s tuition within seven days of receiving their Conditional Offer Letter from the university. The Academic Award scholarship waivers 25% and 50% off in the following years based on credits earned and adequate Finnish language test results. In addition, Academic Excellence scholarships can be awarded to those with exceptional thesis quality, excellence in project work, and practical training successes (Tuni 2021.)

## **1.2 Thesis Background**

In a meeting with the commissioner of the project, it was agreed that there is always a need for TAMK to acquire tuition-paying students to the bachelor’s and master’s programs. The priority of the thesis project would be to focus on the acquisition of international students to the UAS’s English-taught bachelor’s degree programs, specifically the international business and Entrepreneurship and Team Leadership degree programs. As mentioned in the previous sections, there are numerous ways by which students can qualify for a tuition-free education. With a large portion of students attending TAMK not needing to pay tuition, international student acquisition was ruled a logical objective to pursue in order to widen the school’s revenue streams.

Increasing the number of international students enrolled at TAMK meets the development targets of the organization in its efforts to internationalize. Furthermore, an increase of international students to TAMK’s English-taught programs add value to internal and external stakeholders.

### 1.3 Thesis Objectives

The purpose of the project is to provide the commissioning organization with information that depicts the effectiveness of their digital channels in the conversion of international prospects into tuition-paying students at TAMK. In addition, the research is aimed towards highlighting the potential for optimization of digital channels to increase student acquisition from abroad. The main question the thesis aims to answer is:

*How can TAMK's digital channels be optimized to increase conversion rates that support international student acquisition?*

To answer the research question, there will be several sub-questions that need to be addressed to provide insight on the main thesis objective.

1. What type of online content is preferred when choosing a higher education institution abroad?
2. What kind of engagement should there be between student and university through digital channels?
3. How can TAMK increase student conversion from abroad using digital channels that are already operational?
4. What are the most vital elements of the IMC construct that can be integrated into TAMK's digital marketing efforts to increase conversion rates?

## 1.4 Thesis Structure

The next portion of the thesis will consist of theoretical framework that will add context in a supplemental manner to provide a clearer perspective on the main topics. The theoretical framework used in the research will introduce touchpoints, digital channels, and conversion. Then, there will be a will focus on key aspects of Integrated marketing communications and multi-channel strategies that are applicable to the thesis project, more specifically on channels that TAMK utilizes as part of their international student recruitment strategy. Engagement and content strategies will be covered, as well as information architecture principles that are aimed towards the usability aspect of TAMK's digital marketing channels. The information provided are from scholarly articles, books, reports, and relevant journal publications.

The third chapter will focus on the research methodology of the project. Then, chapter four will discuss TAMK's internal processes pertaining to their digital marketing channels. Data analysis in this chapter aims to answer the project's research questions and sub-questions. Furthermore, the outcomes of the research will be analyzed, summarized, and properly linked to the theoretical framework. In the final chapters, the research question and objectives will be revisited, reviewed, and answered. Applicable recommendations will be made, as well as a conclusion to the project and areas to consider for further research.

## 2 DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITY

TAMK has several digital channels that are used for marketing in their international student recruitment processes. These channels serve as digital touchpoints between the prospective student and the university. For those not living in Finland, or even Tampere, it is possible that their interactions with the university to attain more information are conducted through the digital medium. Until a potential student enrolls and attends the school, interactions are likely to be made via digital touchpoint: search engines, websites, social media platforms, and email via computer, tablet, or phone.

Different digital touchpoints have advantages and disadvantages when it comes to usability and interaction from the end-consumer, as well as for the publisher of content. They are unique in that different channels (e.g., social media platforms or websites) have different features that allow for a variety of possibilities in the transmission of marketing material to the targeted audience. For example, Instagram has an image-based platform that emphasizes photo and video sharing through stories as well as traditional post form. This could be a useful tool to include in an organization's marketing strategy. Meanwhile, Twitter may be less ideal to the organization with its limit on content per post or "tweet".

The theoretical framework for this thesis will start with a definition of touchpoints, with an emphasis on digital channels; more specifically, social media touchpoints that potential and current customers may have with a brand. The concept of conversion will be covered, followed by an explanation of integrated marketing communications and other marketing channel strategies. Engagement tactics for digital marketing channels will be discussed, as well as the principles of information architecture that may be applied to online channels. The final subchapter focuses on the value derived from network effects.

The following sections are intended to give insight into several fields and frameworks that are meant to support the research project. The project concerns the

optimization of marketing communication content distributed through digital channels to increase conversion rates for TAMK's English-taught bachelor's programs.



## **2.1 Digital Channel Usage to Support Marketing Operations**

This chapter will introduce the key pieces to the thesis: digital touchpoints, channels, and conversion. As the aim for the research is to find ways to increase acquisition of international students to TAMK, the term “conversion” in this context is intended to define the acquisition of a prospect student to an enrolled student.

### **2.1.1 Touchpoints**

Touchpoints of communication are the individual points of contact or interaction between an organization and a person (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl 2017, 388). The value of digital touchpoints can be credited to rapid technological innovation, consumer skepticism and independence (choice in media consumption), as well as the increasingly hyper-connected world. Digital touchpoints have allowed for new opportunities in revenue models that exist in disruptive cultural, social, and geopolitical environments (Wind & Hays 2016, 28.) In recent years, the importance of digital touchpoints has become more critical, even essential when considering running a marketing campaign (Quesenberry et al. 2012, 60–65). Table 1 provides insight into the emerging media communications touchpoint usage by category between 2011-2018.

TABLE 1. Emerging media communications touchpoint usage by category from 2011-2018 (Zwerin et al. 2020, 175)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<i># of awards</i>	86	76	84	68	89	73	88
Distribution changes	2%	0%	1%	0%	2%	0%	1%
Pricing	3%	0%	5%	0%	7%	4%	10%
Sampling	1%	0%	5%	0%	3%	3%	8%
Trade comm./ promo	1%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	1%
Social networking sites		70%	62%	82%	85%	74%	75%
Mobile/ tablet		37%	51%	40%	53%	52%	43%
Sales promotion		11%	7%	9%	12%	7%	10%
Professional engagement		4%	2%	4%	2%	10%	6%
Point of care		3%	4%	1%	0%	5%	9%
Branded content		%	1%	43%	38%	14%	51%
Internal marketing		%	8%	18%	16%	3%	14%
International marketing		%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%
E-commerce		%	%	4%	11%	15%	10%
SEM		%	%	34%	42%	26%	27%

The number of awards in the top row of Table 1 are Effie awards, which are awarded to marketing campaigns that possess effective marketing strategies through communications that can increase or impact a brand's success (Zwerin et. al 2020, 169). In summary of Table 1, it can be noted that social media channels have been utilized extensively in consistent fashion, as well as other digital touchpoints and supporting functions: mobile/tablet, branded content, and search engine marketing (SEM).

### 2.1.2 Digital marketing channels

Digital marketing channels are the communication medium provided by a company to transmit informative or promotional material to target audiences regarding their brand, product, or service. Besides operating in the digital space, these channels function like traditional channels in that the aim is to assist in guiding the customer to conversion, as well as move products from point of origin to point

of consumption (Pride & Ferrell 2019, 332–334.) Digital marketing channels refer to internet systems and applications that can create, promote, and deliver value to producers and consumers simultaneously (Key 2017, 27–34).

The entire consumer's buying decision process can take place among the digital space. Research, customization, purchase, review, and post-purchase communications can all be conducted through the given channel or even mobile application (Key 2017, 27–34.) Table 2 provides an overview of a selection of digital channels that can be utilized in a business's marketing efforts, as well as their differentiating factors in comparison to traditional marketing channels.

TABLE 2. Components of digital marketing channels (Key 2017, 30)

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Differentiating factors from traditional channels</b>
<b>E-mail</b>	Direct channel for informative and promotional content for customer relationship management	mass customization for content, personalization aspect for individual recipients
<b>Social media</b>	Text, photo, audio, and video content, easy to create and share among interconnected groups of users	Potential word-of-mouth effects, two-way engagement. Immediately measurable and updatable in real time
<b>Search engine optimization</b>	Long-term strategy for delivering consumer-relevant content and producing higher-ranked search results	Ability for firms to immediately modify, measurable and updatable in real time
<b>Pay per click</b>	Paid online advertising, delivers search-query based content	direct path from initial offering or first contact to final conversion
<b>Branded mobile application</b>	Firm-specific software interface designed to be downloaded to a mobile device for branded engagement through entertaining and/informative content	

### 2.1.3 Social media as a touchpoint

There is a plethora of social media platforms for firms to utilize when considering outbound marketing communication transmissions: forums, blogs, discussion boards, direct messaging, photo, and video sharing to name a few. Some channels include several of these functions consolidated into one network. The growing number of complex functionalities in social media channels increases the probability of reaching a larger audience to influence behavior, awareness, opinions, and purchase habits. Social media platforms also allow for the customer to have an outlet for post-purchase communication and review (Mangould & Faulds 2009, 358–360.)

There is an abundance of social media channels to choose from, leaving businesses with plenty of possibilities to provide value to their customers while guiding them through different parts of their buying journey (Morga 2017, 11). Figure 1 provides an overview of opportunistic touchpoints that a brand can consider utilizing for transmission of marketing material to their audience.



FIGURE 1. Social media components and potential touchpoints (Kaplan & Haenlein 2015, 62–64)

Although having digital touchpoints can be considered in-line with current trends within an organization's marketing operations, appropriate tactics should be considered to guide customers to conversion (Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie 2014, 149–151). Before this can be done, a formulation of strategy on how to transmit marketing content to targeted customer segments should be prioritized.

#### **2.1.4 Conversion**

Conversion has varying definitions regarding how it is applied in the digital space. It can be defined by the actual transition from potential customer to customer. Conversion rate can be defined as the percentage of visitors on a site that complete an intended goal: clicking a link, filling out a survey, subscribing to a newsletter, and making a purchase on a company's website. Conversions are not limited to a potential customer's behavior on a website, however. Colicev, Kumar, and O'Connor (2019,100) state that conversion can be influenced positively through other digital channels that firms choose to manage and engage with potential customers in.

Charles Doyle (2016) defines conversion marketing as “a range of activities dedicated to moving prospective customers along the path of decision-making, from initial interest to purchase.” As this project concerns the acquisition of international students, conversion will be applied and referred to with this definition. From the perspective of the commissioning UAS, conversion marketing for student acquisition can be aimed at guiding prospect students through the conversion funnel, where smaller commitments and decisions can be made, until they finally classify as enrolled students. Figure 2 is an overview of some of these decisions or conversions that are made in searching for a university to attend

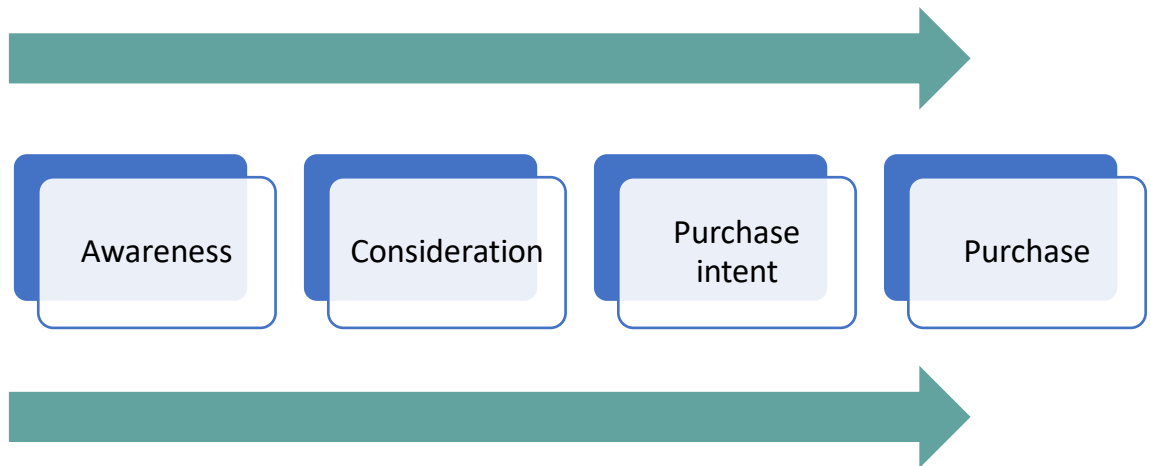


FIGURE 2. The stages of the marketing funnel: awareness, considered, purchase intent, satisfaction (Colicev et al. 2019, 103, modified)

Colicev et al. (2019, 103) depicts the marketing funnel as a four-stage model. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is possible for an organization to guide potential customers through the funnel towards conversion (purchase) by engaging and attracting targeted segments through other digital channels.

The following chapter will provide insight into different strategic marketing processes that could be implemented to increase brand visibility and image, as well as conversion.

## **2.2 Marketing Processes**

Besides the technical aspects of digital channels used for marketing communication transmission, there are also ways in which you can deploy marketing material to your audience via channel and touchpoint. Multi-channel, integrated marketing communications (IMC), and omni-channel marketing strategies differ in the approach on communication and engagement between brand and customer. Each approach has in common the idea of the organization unifying their message towards audiences. However, the emphasis on channel optimization for each strategy differs from singular focus on a specific channel to the overall experience a customer has across all offered channels (Barger, Payne & Peltier 2017, 189).

As TAMK already has their strategy in place for marketing efforts (traditional as well as digital channels), marketing strategies for the theoretical part of this thesis are provided as an overview, as they will be referred to in later chapters.

### **2.2.1 Integrated marketing communication process**

Integrated marketing communication is an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, channels, content, and results or data of brand communication programs. Contrary to the traditional organizational mindset of looking inward, which was heavily adopted in the past, IMC can be described as a customer-centric, data-driven approach (Kliatchko 2008, 140–144.) Table 3 provides some examples of traditional approaches to marketing vs. the more audience-driven IMC approach.

TABLE 3: Traditional marketing communications vs. IMC-based approach (Kliatchko 2008, 142)

Traditional marcom approach	IMC approach
mass marketing & communication	personalized approach
product focused	customer focused
marketing based on product features	marketing on solution, benefits, value
customer acquisition	customer retention
mass communications	targeted communications
advertising push strategy	building of relationships

The IMC process requires a deep understanding of customer needs, preferences, desires, and behavior. This is primarily because the process focuses on a “demand chain”, where customers’ demand pulls products and services through the supply chain for consumption. In order for the IMC process to thrive, transparency and cooperation from all levels of the organizational hierarchy is required, and a customer-centric mindset or perspective is understood, adopted, and believed in.

An example of this cross-hierarchical understanding would be for the corporate level of the organization to be responsible for driving brand-building strategies, to assume responsibility of integrating processes to functional units, and create a marketing-oriented culture with a customer-centric mindset (Kliatchko 2008,142–143.) This holistic approach of the IMC processes is depicted in Figure 3.

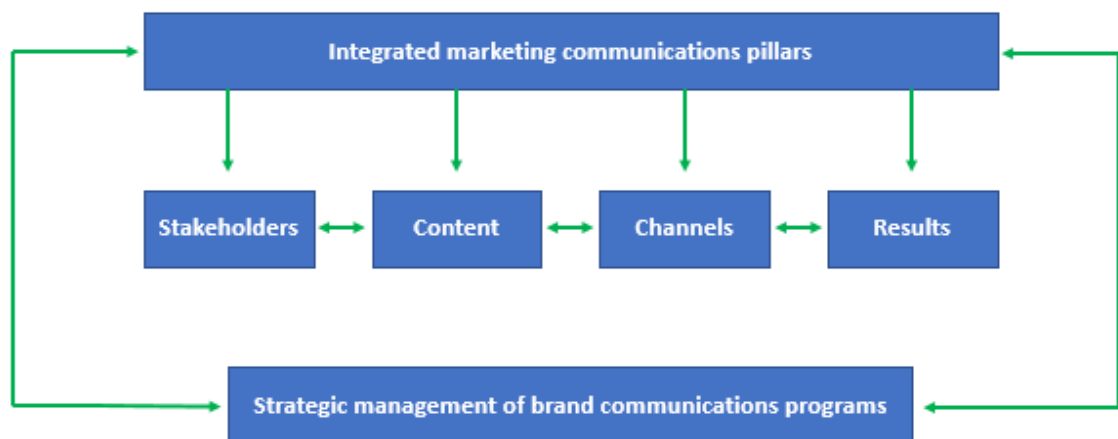


FIGURE 3. The four pillars of IMC (Kliatchko 2008,145)



In Figure 3, four pillars are shown that are represented in the center of operations in the IMC construct. The following text will provide more detail on these four pillars.

### **2.2.1.1 Stakeholders**

The stakeholder pillar consists of external audiences: customers, potential customers, and prospects. Internal audiences consist of members within the organization. To manage external markets, there must be an understanding of the target audience's needs, wants, and what they perceive to be of value. This can be acquired through the analysis of data collected from interaction through different channels, for example: transactional, engagement, and informational data collected via specific touchpoint. Behavior, sentiment, and demographic data can then be used to optimize or re-tailor brand communication accordingly (Kliatchko 2008, 145–146.)

In management of IMC processes concerning internal audience with an organization, it is important to consider an integration of urgency in unified brand messaging, and a customer-centric mindset or culture that resonates across business functions (Kliatchko 2008, 146). This includes less push-marketing and more responsiveness in providing customer-based solutions and experiences. Furthermore, an ethical approach should be considered in the formulation and transmission of marketing content. the optimal outcome is openness and positive perception of marketing efforts by potential customers (Sheth & Parvatiyar 1995, 264).

### **2.2.1.2 Content**

Content is essential in engaging with customers and prospects. Understanding markets and targeted segments allow for more impactful content. To create meaningful content- whether it be incentives and promotion, or part of an ongoing story told in a chapter-like fashion, it is important to acquire more deeper knowledge than basic demographics and psychographic data (Kliatchko 2008,

148). Content will be revisited and discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter.

### **2.2.1.3 Channels**

IMC plays a vital role in cross-channel synchronization. Multiple touchpoints can be utilized in numerous ways by marketers to communicate to their audience how, in which form, and by what frequency they choose (Kim, Han & Schultz 2004, 31–34). Rapid digitalization has brought on a plethora of new platforms for interaction with customers and potential customers. For example: social media platforms allow for cost-effective avenues for content sharing and customer service, engagement, and analytics. IMC has evolved along with technology- businesses understand the concept of “always on” hyper-connectivity that brings together empowered, savvy customers with the brand through digital channels (Kerr, Gayle & Kelly 2017, 406).

### **2.2.1.4 Results**

To meet the demands of today’s business environment, results must be measured to gain insight of an IMC effort’s channel effectiveness. Although not a new concept, the complexity and insight of digital channels and analytics tools allow for real time tracking and metrics to users. With the IMC approach, this means that several contact points with the customer would need to measure behavioral responses and purchases. This would allow for allocation of resources or adjustments to be made accordingly (Kliatchko 2008, 151). In addition, online sentiment and engagement should be assessed and can come in the form of likes, shares, mentions, and comments via social media channels, for example. Figure 4 provides a summary of the elements in each pillar of the IMC process.

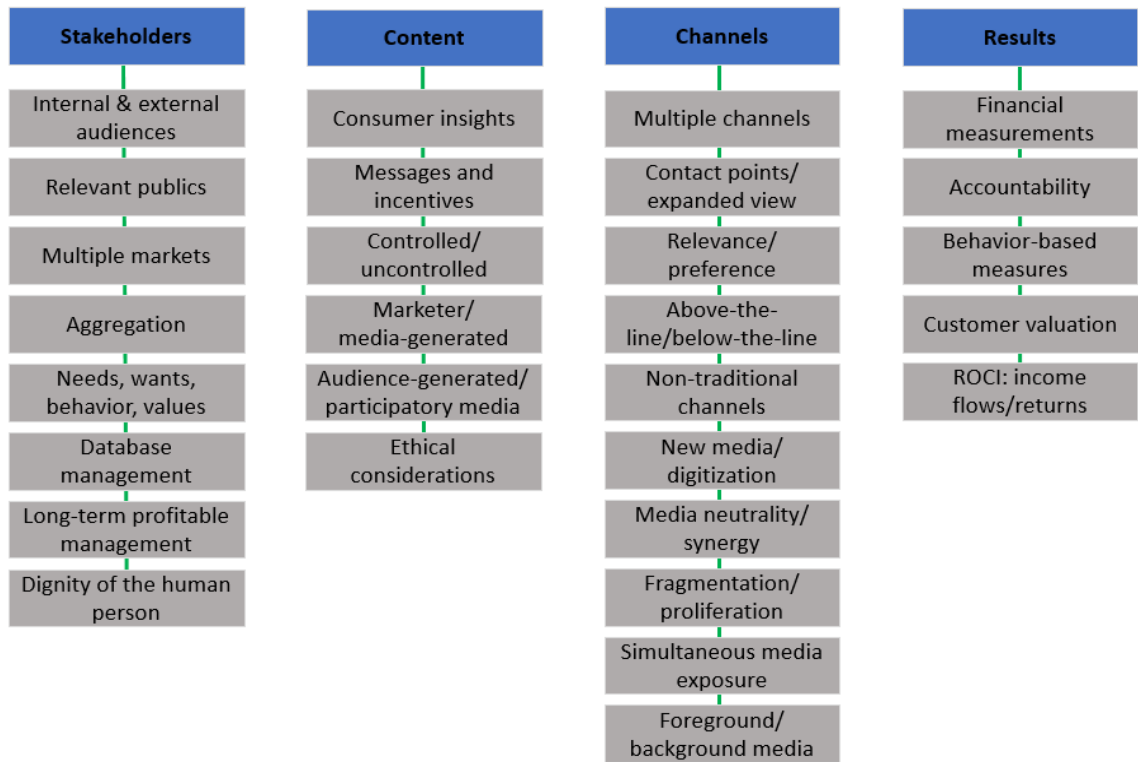


FIGURE 4. Elements of the IMC pillars (Kliatchko 2008, 152)

### 2.2.2 Levels of the IMC construct

The interdependence of the IMC pillars relies on different levels of the IMC construct. Keeping in mind the pillars *content*, *channel*, *stakeholder* and *results*, the reciprocal relationship between them will be described further by levels and is depicted in Figure 5.

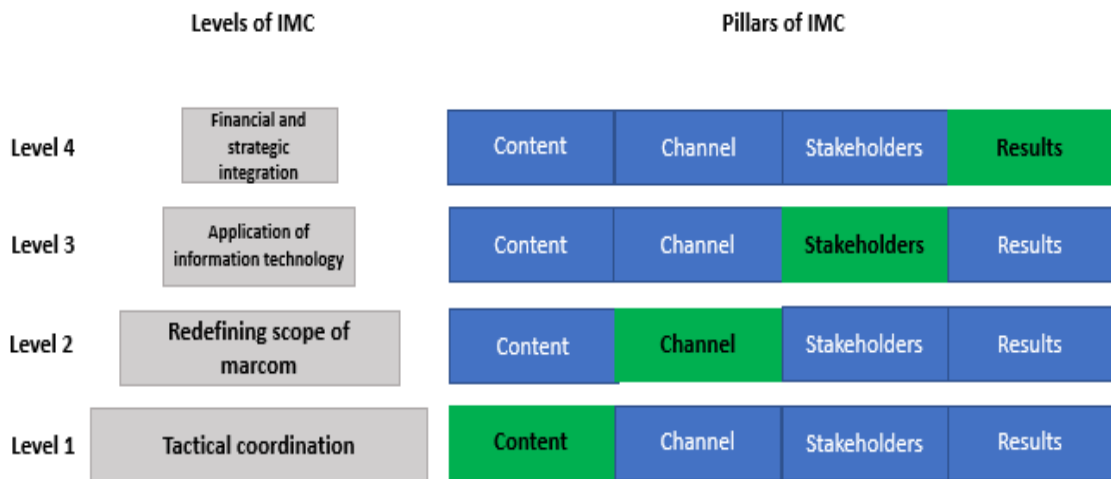


FIGURE 5. The interplay of levels and pillars of IMC (Kliatchko 2008, 152)

The following text serves as context to Figure 5. The pillars of the IMC (content, channel, stakeholders, results) will be italicized to distinguish and identify them in the explanation of interdependence between levels and pillars of the IMC construct.

### **2.2.2.1 Level 1: Tactical coordination**

In this operational phase, *content* is emphasized as a priority. The aim is to achieve synergy and consistency in unified outbound communication activities integrated through *channels* (Schultz & Schultz 1998, 21–22). The unification of messaging through relevant communications processes increases the effectiveness of *content* among *shareholders* (target audience) and can be measured via *results*.

### **2.2.2.2 Level 2: Redefining the scope of marketing communication**

The transmission of marketing communications material, or *content* in this stage requires an emphasis on strategizing from the target audience's (*stakeholder's*) perspective. *Channel* choice, engagement, frequency of use, delivery of content through touchpoint, etc. in this case is based on the preferences of the customer and can be analyzed and adjusted accordingly based on data, or *results* that are retrieved through *channels* (Kliatchko 2008, 154.)

### **2.2.2.3 Level 3: Application of information technology**

Information technology provides value to *stakeholders* as it allows for greater capabilities for engagement, consumption, conversion, as well as collection of data (*results*). The value can further be explained in that internal audiences within the organization can more accurately tailor *content* and choose *channels* based on *results* provided by external audiences. It is critical that a deeper level of information is extracted from data to analyze, such as buyer behavior through channel

and purchase history or patterns, for example (Kliatchko 2008, 154; Schultz & Schultz 1998, 21–22.)

#### **2.2.2.4 Level 4: Financial and strategic integration**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, vertical integration of IMC processes through hierarchical levels within the organization are essential in offering the customer-driven approach that IMC encapsulates. Therefore, IMC must be used as a driver for organizational and strategic directions. In addition, this level of integration also requires the ability to measure the return on customer investment. Furthermore, analysis of data (*results*) is vital to understand the effectiveness of *content* and *channels* in an organization's IMC processes (Schultz & Schultz 1998, 25).

As the IMC involves multiple channels and touchpoints of interaction with internal and external audiences, it is beneficial to understand customers' behavior through available touchpoints, and their journey through each channel and its published content. Understanding from a qualitative manner what is acquiring clicks, comments, conversion, and other quantitatively measurable engagement should be considered in consistent assessments of each function. This would allow for optimization of content, channel usage, and overall value for the stakeholders.

Some disadvantages to a traditional IMC approach are the tendency for certain processes and functions to become siloed in their attempt at a unified message, which can confuse the customer and in turn, lose effectiveness of content through channel (Manser Payne, Peltier & Barger 2017 188–189). Multi-channel and omni-channel marketing approaches will be discussed in brief in the next sub-chapters shed light on possible strategies that mitigate potential for these obstacles to surface.

### 2.2.3 Multi-channel marketing

Multi-channel management consists of “the design, employment, coordination, and evaluation of channels to enhance customer value through effective customer acquisition, retention, and development” (Neslin, et al. 2006, 95). As the name suggests, multi-channel marketing is aimed at focusing marketing efforts on two or more channels: traditional, digital, or a combination of both, to increase customer spending and overall customer lifetime value (Kushawa & Shankar 2013, 67–83). This allows for the customer or potential customer to experience the brand in different ways during their buying-decision process. In this style of marketing operations, it is important to efficiently manage customer relationships through the given channels, while making sure that channels are considered based on customer segment preferences (Kushawa & Shankar 2013, 67–70).

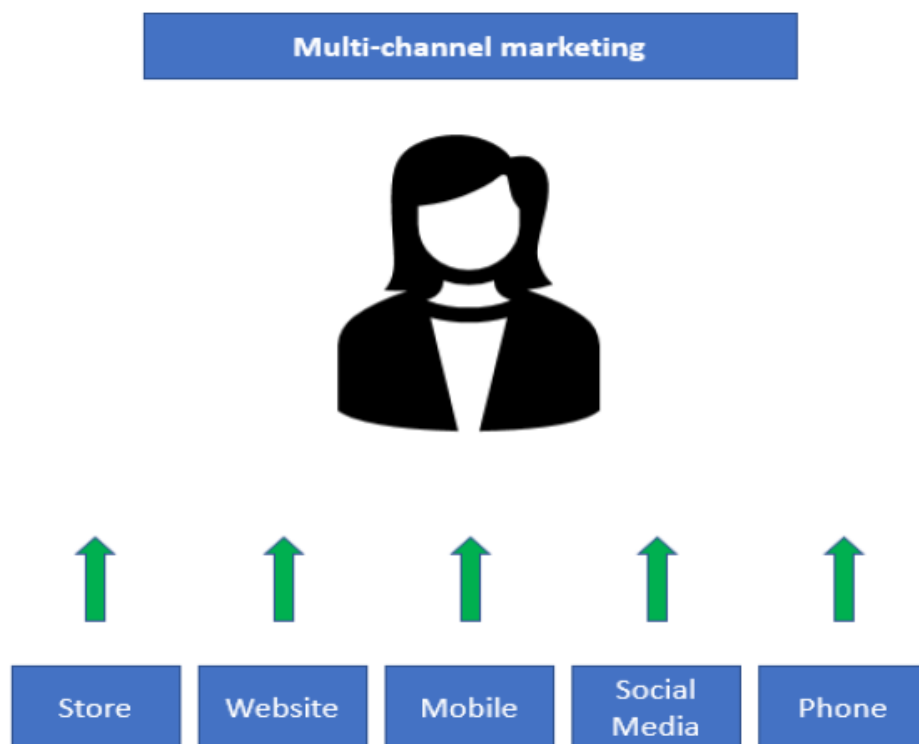


FIGURE 6. Multi-channel marketing approach depicting a non-synergistic relationship between channels

Figure 6 gives a basic visual depiction of multi-channel marketing, and how touch-points reach a customer/ potential customer. The multi-channel approach offers a selection of different channels for the consumer to choose from in engaging with a brand.

## 2.2.4 Omni-channel marketing

According to Verhoef, Kannan and Inman (2015,176), omni-channel marketing management is the “synergistic management of the numerous available channels and touchpoints, in such a way that the customer experience across channels and the performance over channels is optimized.” Intended to provide a holistic experience, the operation is centered around the customer, allowing for fluidity in the customer’s buying journey, regardless of the channel used. Furthermore, the emphasis on effectiveness through all channels can be utilized for superior value creation (Gupta, Lehmann, Stuart 2004, 7–18; Shah et al. 2006,120.)

Operationally, the primary focus of omni-channel marketing is on how customers get information, and how transactions are fulfilled. As technology has improved access possibilities to online touchpoints, consumer behavior has become more omni-channel in nature. Therefore, businesses need to guide them through channels informatively, while leading them to conversions in a seamless manner from channel-to-channel (Bell, Gallino & Moreno 2014, 52.) Below is a depiction of the omni-channel marketing process involving consumer and touchpoints.



FIGURE 7. Graphic showing the synergistic relationship of channels in a customer-centric, omni-channel marketing approach

Figure 7 shows several channels available to the customer for interaction that is managed by a brand. The channels are linked to portray their cohesiveness in the context of omni-channel marketing efforts. Figure 7 portrays the seamless connection a customer can experience among a brand's available channels.

Multi-channel, omni-channel marketing, and IMC processes are similar in that they all strive to achieve message consistency along customer touchpoints. IMC characteristics and principles can be found in both multi-channel and omni-channel marketing (Manser Payne et al. 2017, 189). However, it is the organization's approach to this consistency that shifts them into one of the processes. For example, businesses that aim for optimal performance in each channel may find themselves taking the multi-channel approach. Whereas the omni-channel marketing approach would have the firm focusing on the overall profitability derived from all channels combined (Verhoef *et al* 2015, 175–176).

In summary, IMC efforts can be effective in that it involves consistent messaging along consumer touchpoints and channels (Rodgers & Thorson 2012, 187-188). Omni-channel marketing utilizes the IMC principles in its interactivity across multiple channels (i.e., multi-channel marketing). This increases the likelihood of customer engagement in a synchronized cross-channel experience (Rangaswamy & Van Bruggen 2005, 6; Cummins, Peltier & Dixon 2016, 5.) The uniformity in communications and experience can allow for ease in use for the potential customer, while aiding in guiding them to conversion.

The next section will focus on engagement between brand and consumer- or, in the IMC construct context, internal and external audiences within the *stakeholder* pillar. The engagement among stakeholders takes place within the *channel* pillar, as *content* is transmitted and consumed.



## **2.3 Engagement Between Organization and Customer**

It is critical that a customer-oriented approach be taken into consideration regarding engagement through different touchpoints. This can be fulfilled by choosing the correct channels for use (according to the targeted segment), understanding the customers' needs, their expectations, and preferred content. A combination of these tactics can be used throughout all channels to engage the organization's audience in an optimal manner. From the organizational perspective, these actions would be aimed towards increasing conversions and customer retention. Furthermore, the efficiencies in the aforementioned tactics have the possibility of creating benefits outside of the intended scope of actions. For example, indirect marketing from loyal customers in the form of word-of-mouth (WOM) promotion and network effects among the target segment within a channel group.

The following subchapters will provide insight on the interaction between internal and external audiences from a tactical perspective, within the scope of an organization's digital channels.

### **2.3.1 Understanding Engagement Across Digital Channels**

Rapid technological innovation has led to new channels for businesses to utilize in their attempts to engage and build relationships with customers. In order to more effectively engage with potential and current customers, a more emotional level of understanding from their perspective should be considered. By understanding the customer or potential customer's thoughts on a brand, product, or service, the organization can drastically alter, or even increase consumers' engagement, preferences, and purchase behavior (Straker & Wrigley 2016, 339).

Managing good customer relations has evolved through social media and other digital channels. One of the main reasons for this is because trust is not solely attained by the customer relying on the brand to provide information and insights on their products. Instead, the balance of power has shifted to customers, as they can share and receive information with fellow members of their community (as

shown in Figure 6 (Savar 2013, 73–75). Input from other stakeholders and customers can affect purchase behavior of a particular segment or individual (Straker & Wrigley 2016, 340).

The design and management of a company's digital channels should be conducted in such a way that benefits from data availability and the growing capabilities to gather valuable information to strengthen engagements with its customers. As customers' purchase behavior and decisions are based more on brand image, advertising and engagements, companies can benefit from pursuing processes that increase the level of effectiveness in optimizing their digital channels accordingly (Straker & Wrigley 2016, 339–342).

Calder, Malthouse & Maslowska (2016, 583) describe engagement as a dynamic process and virtuous cycle created by individuals' own (subjective) experiences that are less observable. Behavioral expressions can affect, which can in turn, lead to *more* behavioral expressions. Eventually, the engagement with the brand in a specific channel may lead to purchase, consumption (information, product, or service) and loyalty.

Bowden (2009, 84) expresses consumer engagement from a slightly different perspective, stating that engagement contributes to the process by which consumer loyalty forms for new consumers of a brand, as well as to the factors in which brand loyalty is maintained. These perspectives portray engagement between brands and consumers as a primary driver that eventually leads to acquiring and retaining consumer loyalty.

### **2.3.2 Customer's expectations for online brand-consumer engagement via social media channels**

Digital channels have changed the landscape in terms of how businesses and their customers interact. From the firm's perspective, they allow for a proactive approach in communication and interaction with consumers. Besides standard segmenting of target groups for marketing communications through selected

channels, it's important to consider which channels are better engaged by specific demographics (Rohm, Kaltchheva & Milne 2013, 295). For example, younger demographics or “digital natives” may be more likely to engage with a brand’s promotional posts through social media via Tik Tok as opposed to older customer segments that are keener in their usage of Facebook.

As businesses continue to utilize a wide range of digital channels to transmit promotional and informative messages to their customer and potential customer bases, the expectations among their segments also become more dynamic in nature. Figure 8 illustrates the large spectrum of expectations a customer (or potential customer) has when visiting a brand’s social media page. Management and maintenance must be conducted regularly to ensure that their social media efforts are of worth in the customer’s eyes (Savar 2013, 146–148). Below is a diagram that depicts the customer’s needs from their point of view:

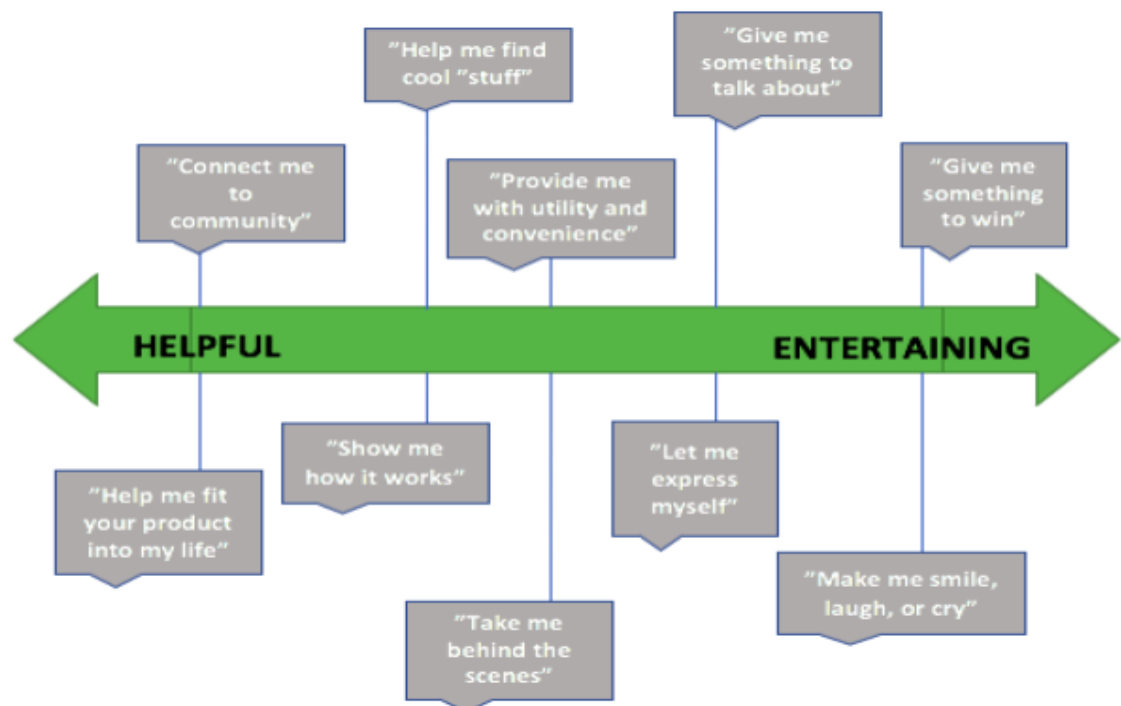


FIGURE 8. The spectrum of the customer’s expectations when visiting a brand’s social media page (Savar 2013, 147)

The expectations and motivations of an organization’s audience should be considered when creating content for transmission via specific social media channel. In addition, brand identity and communications should be aligned to retain credibility and authenticity.

### 2.3.3 Consumer motives towards online engagement with a brand

Along with channel preference, desirable content from the brand's audience should be created to increase likelihood of conversion. In a study conducted by Rohm et al. (2013), there are five classes of consumer motives and desired outcomes regarding brand-consumer engagement. Figure 9 contains the five classes and their connection with a brand's target audience.

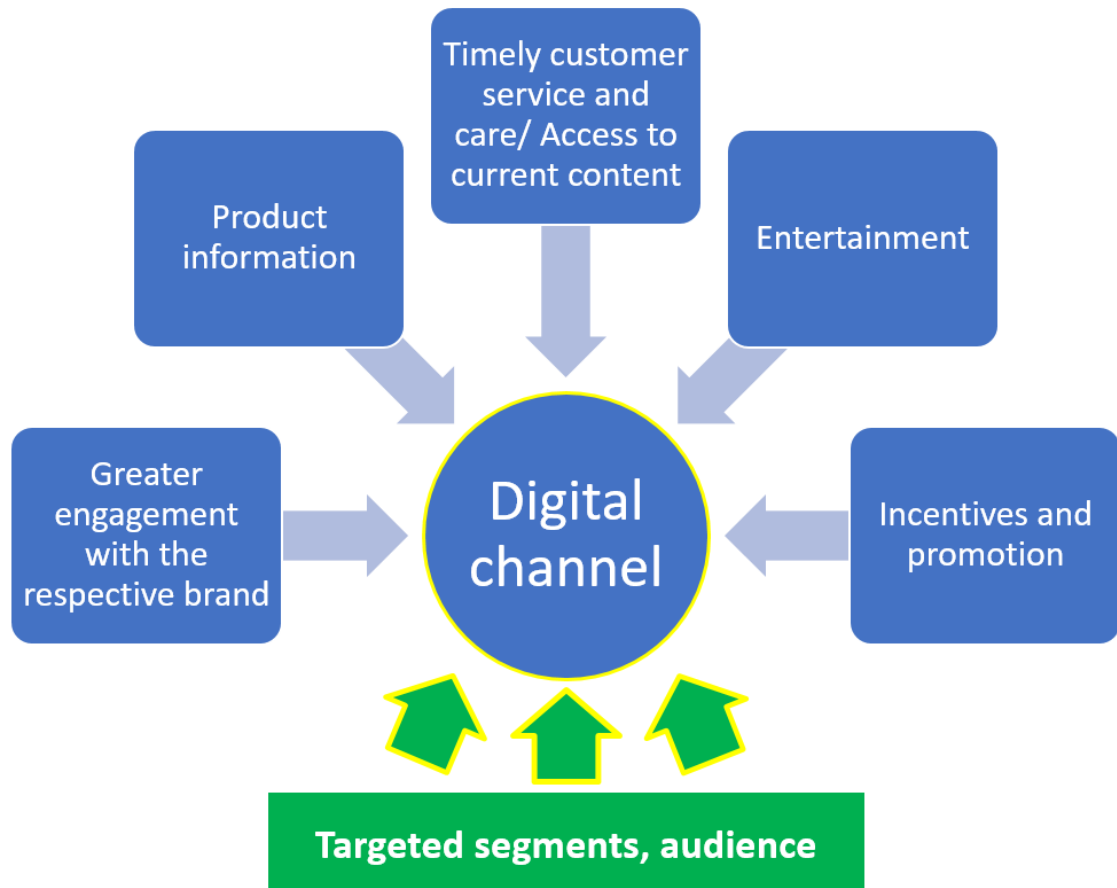


FIGURE 9. The five classes of consumer motives in brand-consumer engagement (Rohm et al. 2013, modified)

These five classes of consumer motives in brand-consumer engagement can serve as a guideline for a firm to base marketing content on via social media, the company website, and other digital channels, and is not assigned to any particular segment or order. Instead, it should be considered as a basis for the ideation of content creation for transmission of marketing messages to customer segments. Prioritizing the quality of content to distribute to the desired segment is key to

achieving a positive experience for potential and current consumers (Savar 2013, 146–148).

### **2.3.3.1 Brand-consumer engagement on social media channels**

Engagement between a company and their customers or potential customers can be unique on social media channels because to create engagement, businesses need to facilitate conversation and spark a two-way dialogue, as opposed to one-way push marketing communications. In addition, there is a level of control that the company must relinquish, as content published can easily be shared, commented on in a positive or negative manner, and modified (Parent, Plunger & Ball 2011, 222–223.)

By default, marketing efforts should always include quality content. However, when applying it to social media channels, the content shared with the audience can also be shared with the audience's own network, and so on. While being reshared, the content can be posted with either positive or negative sentiment, based on the audience member's perceived experience with the content. For example, A brand's humorous promotional post with incentive for engagement is reshared to a customer's network via Instagram, with added context from the customer in the form of a recommendation. This amplifies the effect that each social media post can have for the brand and could multiply the amount reached significantly (Rohm et al. 2013).

The consumer buying-decision process can be influenced by digital marketing. For example, sparking the recognition of need in a potential customer. However, the usability of a channel that the customer is engaging with the brand through can also influence the process- in a positive or negative way.

The next section will provide insight on how to structure customer-oriented content in an optimal manner and should be considered when choosing channels for an organization's content distribution capabilities, as well as overall user experience.

## **2.4 Information Architecture**

In a digital environment, customers and potential customers may visit a company's website or other channel numerous times, often using different information search techniques. The number of touches a customer makes before conversion is unclear. In the buying-decision process model, a customer's information search may become less effective if site contents and overall user-experience are not optimal, which may lead to a lost conversion if the customer opts to choose another company or brand to purchase from (Li & Kannan 2014, 41–42).

The following sections give deeper definition into the complexity of information architecture (IA) and how it is applied to digital channels to positively affect user experience. As IA is closely tied to user-experience (UX), it can be viewed as a customer-centric approach. In running parallel to the research project, they will also be investigated and sought to be applied to content transmission via digital channels.

### **2.4.1 Elements of information architecture**

Information architecture is a practice consistently being reshaped to meet the changing needs of society in the digital space, and how people interact with information (Resmini & Rosati 2011, 28–32). Rosenfield, Morville and Arango (2015) explain information architecture's defining elements as follows:

1. The structural design of shared information
2. The synthesis of organization, categorization, titles, labeling, search, and navigation schemes within cross-channel ecosystems comprised of digital and physical touchpoints
3. Shaping information products and experiences to support usability, ability to locate, and understanding.
4. A discipline and community that is still growing- one that brings design principle and architecture to the digital space (Rosenfield et al 2015.)

Being hyper-connected through digital touchpoints and channels allows for information seeking to be a relatively streamlined task. However, the abundance of data intake could lead to a cognitively distressed experience, and lead to information overload. The result can lead to the inability for the individual to process the information effectively (Mandel 2020.) In addition, the lack of intelligible organization may frustrate an individual on the site or channel so much that they leave with a negative experience (Rosenfield et al 2015). This would be an example of a potential customer choosing to halt engagement with a brand due to the lack of logical information structuring within the digital channel or touchpoint. Figure 10 is a representation of the coherence in several prioritized factors that make-up the foundation of information architecture.

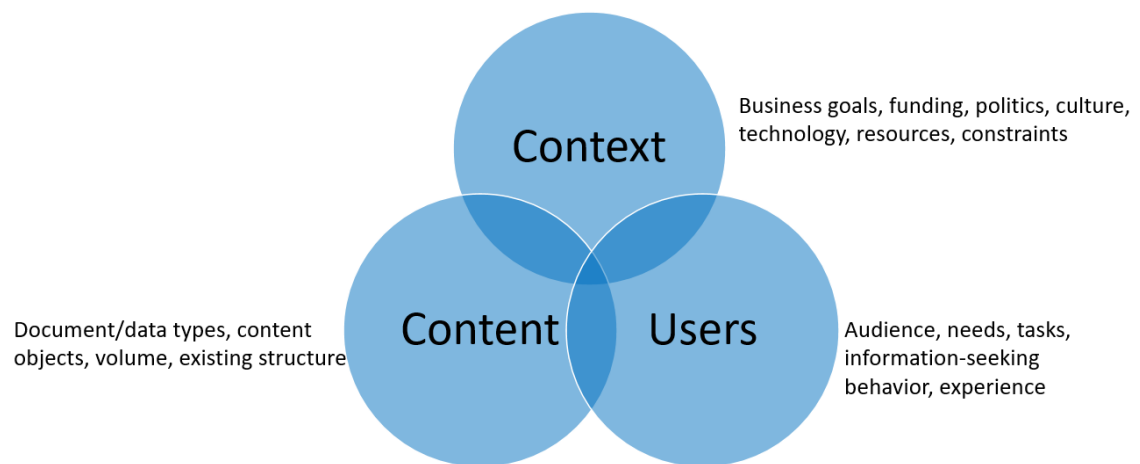


FIGURE 10. The infamous three circles of information architecture (Rosenfield et al 2015)

Content can be broad in range of characteristics in the digital space. Different digital systems allow for channels to have a wide variety of functionality for engagement with the customer, as well as in the way information is published. Functionality for the customer can include basic navigation through layers of a website for informational motives, sharing content with others, and transactional processes. Content itself requires analysis and consideration; ownership, formatting, structure, metadata, volume, and dynamism are a few characteristics that should be taken into account (Rosenfield et al 2015.) In doing so, a deeper level of planning can be conducted to determine the relevance and potential for lasting content, functional capabilities with the given content, as well as scalability (Rosenfield et al 2015).

Understanding users from an information architect's perspective should include an empathic approach. A channel's users consist of people with their own needs, desires, and motives that they are trying to fulfill. In understanding the users on a deeper level (e.g., data, customer profile, preferences), information architecture practices can be applied to better optimize the information environment that they interact with (Rosenfield et al 2015).

Prioritizing content and the characteristics and behavior of users is important when optimizing an organization's digital channel for positive user experience and engagement. However, the correlation and integration of content should be aligned with the organization's mission, goals, strategy, internal stakeholders, processes, and cultures. The prioritization of aligning these contexts can greatly improve the dialogue between the business and its employees, as well as its customers (Rosenfield et al 2015.)

#### **2.4.2 Principals of information architecture**

Dan Brown (2010, 30) assigned eight principles to information architecture that serve as a foundation for the practice of designing structures online. In this context, it is how to arrange parts of something to be understandable. The eight principles (Appendix 1) are intended to be applied in the organization of content via online channel or website.

The principles were created given the presumption that information architects:

- First focus on the structure itself, then on the user interface (on screen).
- Understand how people want to relate to content and functionality contained in the structure.
- Understand the range of content and functionality to be supported by the structure (Brown 2010.)



With these presumptions intact, the main points of Dan Brown's *Eight Principles of Information Architecture* (2010) are as follows:

Content should be treated as a living, breathing thing with a lifecycle, behaviors, and attributes. Its usage should be considered in such a way that allows for revision to accommodate to changes in relevance, demand, and engagement with users. The accumulation of content in time should be considered also and maintained accordingly. Displaying too much information can lead to a cognitive effort that may hinder a user from moving further through the information infrastructure (Brown 2010, 30–34.)

In guiding users through layers of a site or digital channel, pages should offer meaningful choices to users, while keeping the range of choices focused on a particular task. Showing only enough information to help people understand what kind of information they will consume as they move deeper into the site. These points can complement each other in that they aid in easing the level of complexity in the customer journey (Brown 2010, 30–34.)

When organizing the structure of information within a site or channel, Brown (2010) states that there should be a description of the contents of categories by showing examples or previews of what's inside. In addition, he mentions that simplicity should be utilized in creating navigation schemes, as well as variety in navigation options, enabling the user to browse the site or channel's content in a way that they prefer (Brown 2010, 30–34).

Content, categorical structure, and guidance of the user along their journey of the site and channel are aimed at providing a customer-centric approach towards user experience. Another factor to consider is that visitors can land on a site or channel by way of another channel, as opposed to the home page; it could be by way of another digital channel, link, or search engine (Brown 2010, 30–34.) Especially applicable in an IMC approach and/or omni-channel marketing, this point encapsulates the idea of different journey pathways of engagement between brand and consumer- especially when audience members are led through different touchpoints and channels.

### **2.4.3 Network effects**

Network effects “refers to the impact that the number of users of a platform has on the value created for each user.” As many touchpoints facilitate interactions and engagement between brand and customer, it is possible that they assist in creating positive, as well as negative network effects along the channel/platform (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary 2016, 40–42.)

Positive network effects refer to the ability of a large, well-managed channel or platform community to produce value for each user of the platform. Positive network effects can be relied on as the most prominent source of value creation and/or competitive advantage in a platform business. Negative network effects refers to the possibility that the growth of a poorly managed platform community can reduce the value produced for each user (Parker et al 2016, 40–42.)

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Case study**

The research for this project utilized a case study approach and was exploratory in nature. The aim was to gather insight into the effectiveness of TAMK's digital channels in converting international prospects into fee-paying students. The research and data collected was meant to obtain an understanding of how optimization of digital channels operated by TAMK could lead to an increase of conversion rates that support their international student acquisition processes.

To obtain a better understanding of current efforts and potential areas for development in TAMK's digital marketing processes, content, engagement, channel preference, and user experience were considered to be key areas of literature review, data collection, and analysis procedures. Although the marketing function at TAMK had prior knowledge and insight into general digital channel performance, it was understood by the author that there had not been previous investigations regarding these topics with students of the target population in the same manner. Therefore, the author concluded that the data would not only provide new insights, but also help validate prior or current assumptions on the topic.

A mixed-method approach was used to collect data, both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The following sections will provide further insight into the data collection and analysis methods used in the project.

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection was conducted on an initially targeted population within the International Business (IB) Degree Program at TAMK. The target population consisted of international tuition paying students belonging to cohorts that started 2019-2021. Sample groups were divided by cohort starting year. The targeted population and sample group specifics can be found in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Target population, criteria, respondent totals for semi-structured interviews

Target population samples	Criteria	Sampling frame (Total # of individuals in the cohort)	# of respondents	% of total target population sample represented in data
2021 IB cohort	International, fee-paying	7	7	100
2020 IB cohort	International, fee-paying	12	6	50
2019 IB cohort	International, fee-paying	8	5	62.5

Table 4 contains the target population and sample groups, total number of individuals representing the populations, respondent totals, and percentage of respondent totals relative to the represented targeted population. The total number of enrolled international, tuition-paying students at TAMK that started between 2019-2021 is 27. Out of the 27, there were 18 who participated in the study. A total of 67% of the target population is represented in the data collected from the project. The reason for the non-responses is unknown.

The 2019-2021 IB cohorts were selected for data collection based on their international, tuition-paying status. They were approached about the study as potential respondents of a convenience sample. The range of years eligible for the study only extended to 2019, because the research was based on TAMK's digital channels under the current, re-branded identity as part of the Tampere universities community, which changed back in January of 2019. Research on prior years would not have provided sufficient data.

## **3.2 Qualitative approach**

### **3.2.1 Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews allow for respondents to share their answers in a free manner, so long as it is within a certain range (Liu, Hua & Chang 2016, 151-155). Semi-structured online interviews were given to the participants of the case study in 30-minute time slots. The researcher hosted the meetings with each participant individually, disclosed safe data management protocols, and proceeded to ask questions for the interview. The interview questions (Appendix 2) were created to investigate the respondents' journeys from international prospects to enrolled, tuition-paying students at TAMK. In addition, the questions were aimed at uncovering the role of TAMK's digital channels in the respondents' decision-making process to conversion, as well as their thoughts on channel content, usability, preferences, and overall experience. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded categorically for analysis.

Because of the low total target population, the researcher found it reasonable and realistic within the project timeframe to conduct interviews for primary data collection. The interviews were meant to complement, add reasoning, and provide background to the respondents' quantitative surveys that would be given to them shortly after the interview.

### **3.2.2 Content analysis**

A conventional content analysis was conducted on TAMK's Instagram accounts. a sample size base of 50 published posts on each account were used to assess the effectiveness of the content published in correlation to the most sought-after information categories that international student prospects looked for when browsing the channel. The content categories were determined based off of feedback responses from respondents of the research project. Quantitative results were extracted from the content analysis, as well as qualitative conclusions in correlation to the respondents' interviews and surveys.

### 3.3 Quantitative approach

#### 3.3.1 Surveys

Immediately following the interviews, surveys were distributed (Appendix 3) to the interview participants for completion. Surveys were selected to collect primary data that could be measured quantitatively. The purpose for the survey was to quantitatively measure their perceived effectiveness of TAMK's digital channels, touchpoint usage, user experience, as well as content preference in their journey from prospect to enrolled student. The digital channels used in the survey for quantitative and qualitative responses were: TAMK's website (tuni.fi), Facebook (@tampereenamk, @TAMKSBS), and Instagram (@tamk\_uas, @tamk4sbs).

The target population, criteria, and respondent rates for the survey were the same as in Table 4. The survey response rate was 100% among all interview participants. Surveys were selected to collect primary data that could be measured quantitatively. The data collected from the survey was used to choose one of TAMK's digital channels for content analysis, as well as in further analysis of the qualitative data collected in interviews. TAMK's Instagram channels were chosen because of the score received from respondents.

## 4 ANALYSIS

The data collected from the interviews and surveys were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the commissioning organization's digital channels in leading international prospects to conversion as enrolled, tuition-paying students at TAMK. The research was aimed at pinpointing areas for optimization among TAMK's digital channels to increase conversion and support the UAS's international student acquisition efforts.

The 2019, 2020, and 2021 International Business Degree Program cohorts at TAMK were targeted for participation in the research. The response rate was 67% of the total target population in both the interviews and surveys. An important aspect regarding research participants is that the 2021 IB cohort had a respondent rate of 100% from the entire target population sample (Table 4). Thus, their responses have a significant impact in terms of relevance and validity in representation. The following sections will provide insight into key areas notable to the project.

In this chapter, the analysis of data will be given in a manner that is representative of the target population. First, touchpoint and channel usage among respondents will be discussed, followed by an analysis of their multi-channel behavior in the decision process towards enrollment at TAMK. Expectations for content among the students will be revealed, followed by an analysis of various digital channels currently operative in TAMK's marketing efforts. The application of themes covered in the theoretical framework will be included in the analysis. A content analysis will be conducted on TAMK's Instagram accounts. The goal was to analyze content samples from the channel to determine their effectiveness towards international student prospects.

## 4.1 Touchpoints and channel usage during student prospect stage

The student prospect stage in the context of this project refers to an international student abroad that discovers TAMK and seeks out more information about the school via digital channels.

### 4.1.1 Touchpoints and channels

The respondents of the study come from several different countries around the world. Out of the 18 respondents from the cohorts studied, 10 different countries were represented and were previously home to the respondents. When asked about how students first heard about TAMK, there was a varying degree of responses. Figure 11 shows the variance in how the respondents first heard of TAMK.

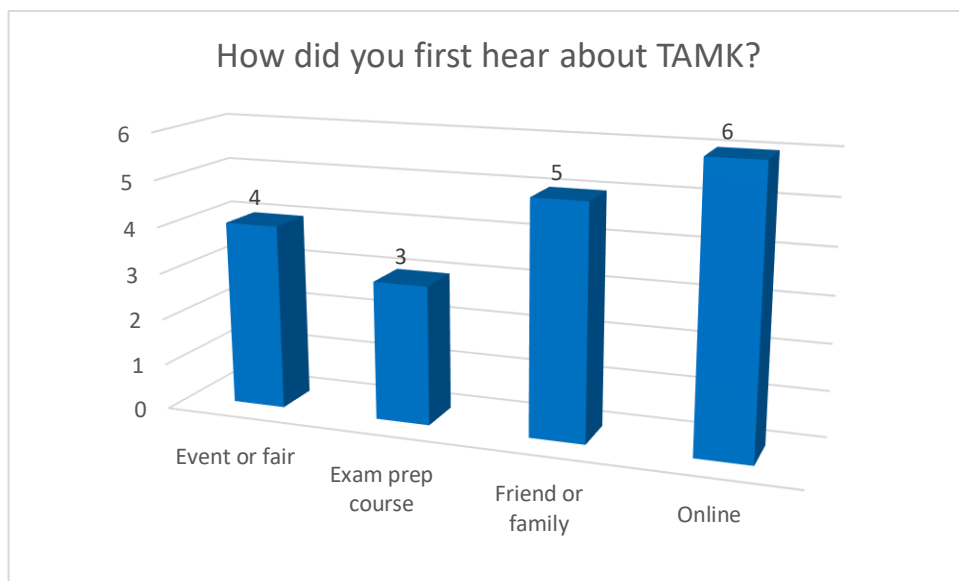


FIGURE 11. Results from the survey showing how the respondents first heard about TAMK

Results from the respondents varied in the first contact or discovery of TAMK. There were no trends or correlations between countries and interactions in learning about the school.



The most used touchpoint among participants of the study when visiting TAMK's digital channels was the computer, with 13 confirming it as their preference. The phone was used by four of the respondents, and one respondent did not browse any of TAMK's content prior to applying for a study place.

Out of the 18 participants in the study, 15 students pursued more information on TAMK prior to applying. Regarding the information search about TAMK by respondents prior to their micro-conversion in applying to the school, seven of the students first visited TAMK's official site, *tuni.fi*, to attain vital information that would affect their decision process. Another seven respondents shared that they chose *studyinfo.fi* as their first digital channel in their information search prior to applying. Three respondents did not choose to pursue more information before applying, and one individual's channel of choice was TAMK's Instagram account.

#### 4.1.2 Multi-channel behavior

The respondents were questioned regarding their digital channel browsing behavior during the decision process prior to committing to TAMK as enrolled students. Out of the 18 participants of the study, 14 students visited other channels for content on the school during this process, while the remaining 4 did not. Figure 12 shows the number of channels chosen in the multi-channel browsing behavior of the respondents in their decision-making process towards enrollment.

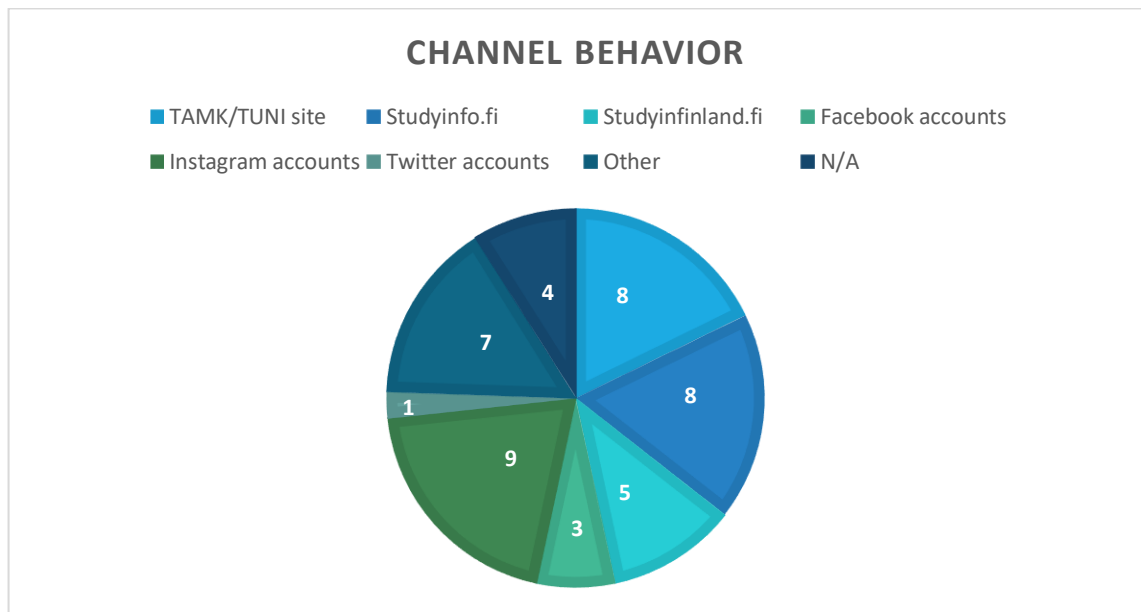


FIGURE 12. Digital channels visited during the respondents' decision-making process prior to commitment at TAMK.

Figure 12 shows the multi-channel usage from respondents of the study. These channels were visited by the respondents after their initial visit to the TAMK/TUNI website, studyinfo.fi, and Instagram account as first choice channels. Students were able to choose all channels visited during their decision-making process towards enrollment. The mean average number of channels visited per student was 3. The bimodal value for channel visits per students was {4,1}.

## 4.2 Student expectations when engaging with TAMK's channels

Respondents were asked to rank the most important categories of information sought out on TAMK's digital channels during their decision process towards conversion. Figure 13 shows the prioritization of information categories.

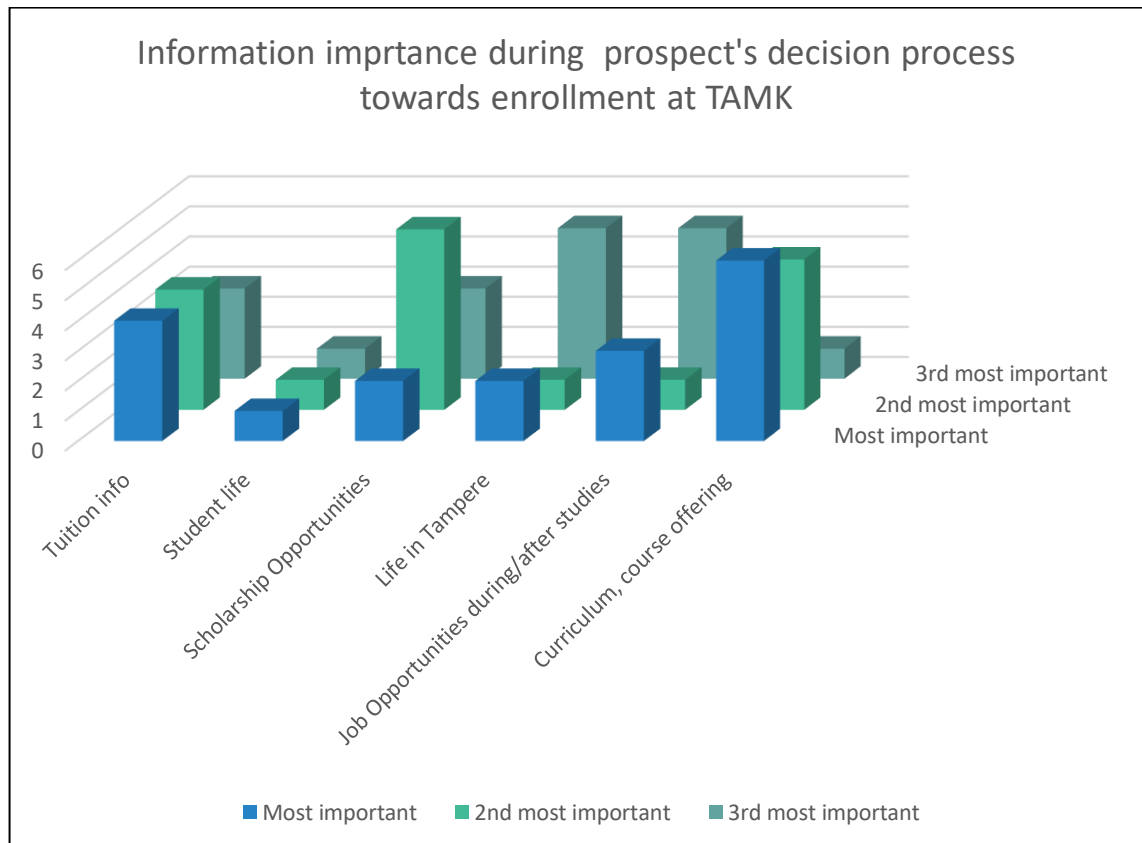


FIGURE 13. Categories of information most important to the respondents during their decision process towards enrollment at TAMK.

These categories were used to code for an analysis of TAMK's content on currently operational Instagram channels. For international student prospects, content pertaining to tuition, scholarships, and curriculum were of the highest priority when browsing TAMK's digital channels during their decision process towards enrollment.

The next sections will include an analysis of TAMK's channels in their current state. The expectations of students regarding informative content were used in the analyses of TAMK's social media channel posts.

### **4.3 TAMK's digital channels**

TAMK has several digital channels available for current students, potential students, and staff. The channels selected for evaluation in effectiveness towards acquisition of international tuition-paying students were TAMK's website, Facebook, and Instagram account pages.

Different aspects of TAMK's website will be discussed regarding usability and elements of information architecture. Facebook account pages will be assessed for engagement and frequency. Then, a content analysis will be made on the university's Instagram accounts. At the end of each section, key points extracted from the data collected from surveys and interviews will be highlighted.

#### **4.3.1 Website**

TAMK's main site is shared with Tampere University. When searching "TAMK" or "Tampere University of Applied Sciences", the site can be found at the top of the search engine (Google) results page. This is an indication of optimal search engine optimization from the UAS. Once on the page, the user is greeted with a clear depiction of TAMK's values as a UAS, as well as its added value as a member of the Tampere Universities community. This is followed by a testimonial from a former student and downloadable brochures that better explain the school's offerings, international aspects, and life in Tampere. There are distinct categorical separations that allow the user to select from categories and subtopics related to them. Picture 1 is an example of the categorical representation of relevant information that can be deemed useful to potential applicants.



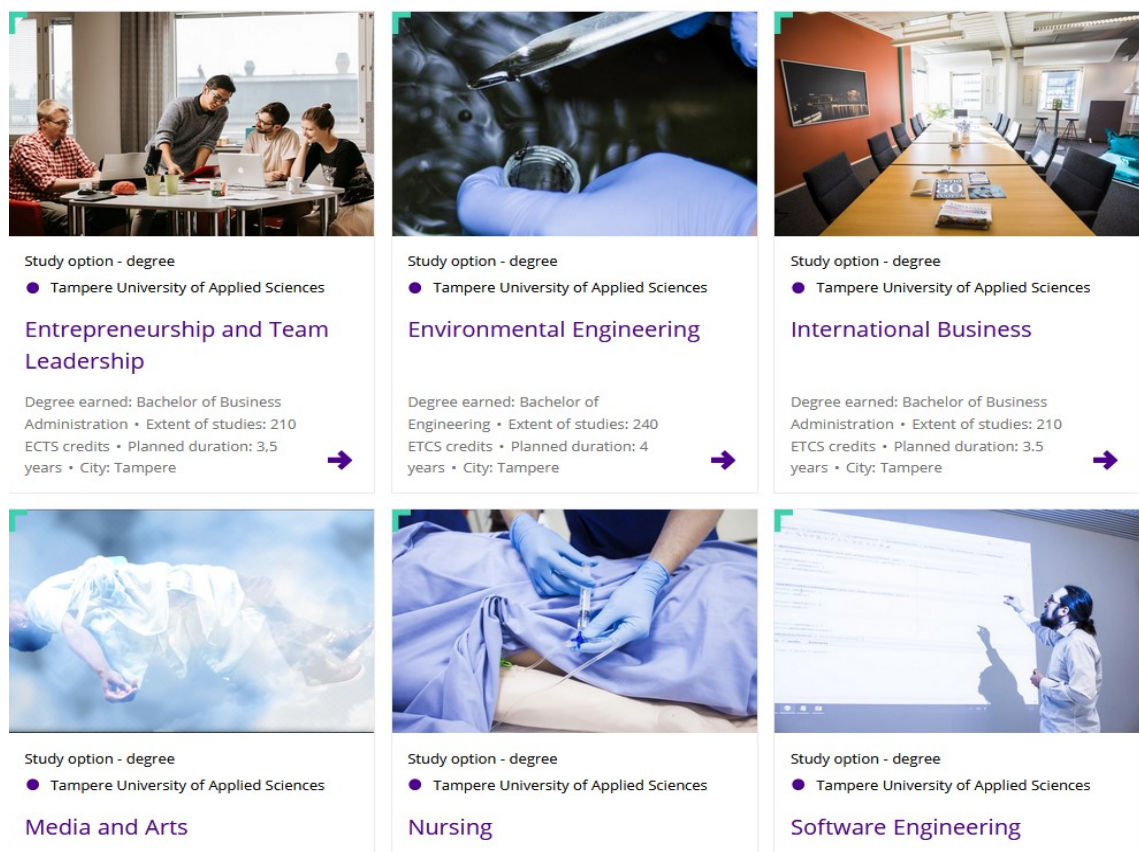
PICTURE 1. Layout of the home page on TAMK's website (Tuni 2021)

To explore degree program offerings, there are several layers of pages needed to navigate through in order to reach them. Once there, a similar block-style presentation gives the user pre-info, or an overview of degree programs; this serves as a preview of what they will find as they delve deeper into the site contents. Picture 1 shows the presentation of information regarding TAMK's English-taught bachelor's degree programs.

Users can then choose the program that interests them, leading to a new page containing a program overview, international student testimonials, and application instructions. In addition, there are dropdown links containing information such as: study objectives, duration of study, tuition fees, scholarship opportunities, specialization fields, internationalization, and postgraduate study opportunities (TUNI 2021). In what can be considered the most valuable information to potential applicants, TAMK's website structure allows for navigation to acquire the information necessary to consider, plan, and take the next steps towards conversion.

#### 4.3.1.1 Elements of information architecture on TAMK's website

The site incorporates elements of information architecture in that there are brief link titles that are descriptive enough to give an idea of what the user will find when they click the link to move into the next layer of the site. In Picture 1, under the title "Welcome to study at TAMK", there is no extra unnecessary description or added text, which could lead to information overload. This would be an example of "The Principal of Disclosure" (Appendix 1), where only enough information is given to help site visitors understand what they will find as they move deeper into the site (Brown 2010, 31).



PICTURE 2. Categorical display of English- taught bachelor's degree programs on TAMK's website (Tuni 2021)

The "Principal of Exemplars" is also used (Appendix 1), where examples of contents of the category are shown as a preview to provide insight and reduce unnecessary cognitive efforts in site navigation and search (Brown 2010, 32). This principal can be seen in Picture 2, under the degree program name. In grey font, key information on the general information of the studies is displayed.

#### 4.3.1.2 Website usefulness in the journey towards enrollment

Participants were asked to rank the usefulness of the TAMK/TUNI website in their information search as a potential student in the decision-making process prior to their enrollment at TAMK. The participants were asked to review the site only if they visited it during this stage. A total of 94% of students gave a rating. The average was 4 out of 5 (Appendix 4).

The respondents had different opinions regarding usability of TAMK's website. The main divide between them was in the navigation of the site. About 16% percent of respondents shared praise for the site in that it contained the right amount of information and was easy to find. On the contrary, 33% of respondents felt that the site was lacking in organization, structure, and not user-friendly when it came to navigation. One respondent had even given a recommendation to provide a tutorial on how to navigate the page for necessary information. In addition, several students had mentioned the frustration in the site being overloaded with information, which was not inspiring them to read further into certain topic categories.

Some of the participants (22%) of the research had stated that there was not enough content regarding employment opportunities during and after studies. It was also mentioned that there was a lack of content depicting student life (events and happenings), as well as life in Tampere in general. When asked what type of content would be most effective in providing an enjoyable experience for potential students visiting TAMK's website, 25% of the respondents chose informative content pertaining to scholarship opportunities as their first option. The interviews held with students had an underlying theme which gave added context to this result. Scholarship, tuition, and other financial matters were of utmost importance to many students, as it may drastically alter their personal life, especially if they would need to fund their schooling independently.

Another important mention from the respondents (22%) was the need for more visibility on what the education can bring in terms of value. The students wanted to understand clearly what kinds of job opportunities and future possibilities a bachelor's degree in business administration would bring, and how it would enrich

their lives. This was not only due to personal interest, but to also point out a unique selling point to a parent or family member that was looking to pay for their education.



### 4.3.2 Facebook

The TAMK Facebook pages used for the research were the main page, *@tampereenamk*, as well as the TAMK School of Business page, *@TAMK4SBS*. As the marketing function and account managers at TAMK are more aware of data pertaining to channel performance and engagement, Facebook channels were analyzed based only on what was visible to public. This would provide context for analysis on the data collected from the respondents. Table 4 provides insight into specifics for both account pages.

TABLE 4. Post frequency and user engagement for TAMK's Facebook channels (@tampereenamk 2021; @TAMKSBS 2021)

Account	@tampereenamk	@TAMK4SBS
Likes	15,308	696
Followers	15,874	706
Check-ins	15,336	17
Date range on last 50 posts	10/29/21 - 22/11/21	14/5/20 -18/11/21
Language ratio on last 50 posts	37 Finnish, 13 English	50 English
Average likes on last 50 posts	10	2

Though the main Facebook account for TAMK (@tampereenamk) had 15,874 followers, there was significant lack of engagement along the channel. Out of the 50 posts between 10/29/21 and 22/11/21, there was an average of 9.7 likes among them. The lowest recorded value was 2, while the highest value was 38 individual engagements out of 15,308 followers. The trimodal value for likes on the pages were {2,5,6}.

The account for TAMK School of Business (@TAMK4SBS) had 706 followers, and, similar to the main account, had a relatively low engagement rate. A major difference that set the account apart is the lack of frequency in posts. There were 50 published posts that were spread out over the span of 16 months and 4 days, compared to the @tampereenamk account that posted 50 times in only 31 days.

#### 4.3.2.1 Facebook's usefulness in the journey towards enrollment

The Facebook accounts received an average score of 1.88 out of 5 from the participants of the study. The response rate was 44% of the target population sample. The score is indicative of the students' perception towards the channel's usefulness in guiding them to conversion.

The students that gave a score for TAMK's Facebook accounts emphasized a revamp in content posted on the channel. One of the main points within the respondent group was the fact that the page was not interactive, meaning there are little to no call-to-action elements directed towards students and student prospects in content posted that they recognized. In regard to a student's information search for a university to apply to, this lack of interactivity could lead to the user moving to another channel of a competitor in their evaluation of alternatives (Li & Kannan 2014, 41–42).

In addition, other respondents mentioned leaving the page due to the lack of English posts. These can be considered contributing factors that have affected the site's level of engagement between students, potential students, and the organization. However, the conclusion can be made that the students that are leaving the channel are browsing the @tampereenamk page instead of the @TAMK4SBS account, where the posts are published in English.

One of the respondents mentioned that Facebook is the most used social media channel in their home country of Vietnam (Appendix 5), and that there was an expectation to find all necessary information on the Facebook page that can be found on the website. Another student from Vietnam validated this point with a similar response.

### 4.3.3 Instagram

There are several Instagram channels that can be traced back to TAMK. The channels exist separately based on degree program, for example. The account chosen for conventional content analysis in this study were TAMK's primary account and the account for TAMK School of Business. Table 5 provides an overview of engagement and frequency of both channels, as well as a summary of division of language for each.

TABLE 5. Frequency and engagement on TAMK'S Instagram channels (@tamk\_uas 2021; @tamk4sbs 2021)

Account	tamk_uas	tamk4sbs
Followers	3,988	513
Posts	863	523
Date range on last 50 posts	24/08/21 - 18/11/21	08/5/20 -19/01/21
Language ratio on last 50 posts	23 Finnish, 9 English 18 Finnish/English	45 English, 5 Finnish/English
Average likes on last 50 posts	63	12

The main Instagram account for TAMK (@tamk\_uas) had 3,988 followers. Despite having a fraction of the followers that the @tampereenamk Facebook account has, TAMK's primary Instagram account page has a significantly higher amount of engagement on the channel. Out of the 50 posts between 24/08/21 and 18/11/21, there was an average of 63 likes among them. The lowest recorded value was 22, while the highest value was 206 individual engagements (likes). The modal value for likes on the account page was 44. A key mention on the account is the fact that less than 50 percent of the posts were in Finnish only. The inclusion of both languages on posts can be perceived as a positive aspect of the channel, especially for international students and prospects.

The TAMK School of Business account page (@tamk4sbs) had 513 followers during the period of study. Similar to their Facebook account, there was a relatively low engagement rate with their audience along the channel. One of the most noticeable aspects about the account was that it appeared dormant in terms of channel management. The reason for this is because the latest post on the

channel was published on 19/01/21. There were 50 published posts that were spread out over the span of just over 8 months, compared to the @tamk\_uas account that posted 50 times in just under 3 months.

#### 4.3.4 Instagram content analysis

Table 6 shows the information content that was considered valuable for the respondents in their journey from international prospect to enrolled student at TAMK (Figure 13).

The categories were used to analyze content published on TAMK's main Instagram account and TAMK School of Business pages. A total of 50 of the latest posts were analyzed from *tamk4sbs*, while 27 of the most recent posts were analyzed from the *tamk\_uas* site. Only 23 posts out of 50 from the *tamk\_uas* account was analyzed because the remaining posts were in Finnish only.

The posts (content) were analyzed and placed into categories based on Figure 13. The reasoning behind this categorization was to determine if content posted on the channels were impactful or relevant to the decision-making process of international student prospects.

Criteria for categorization of the posts:

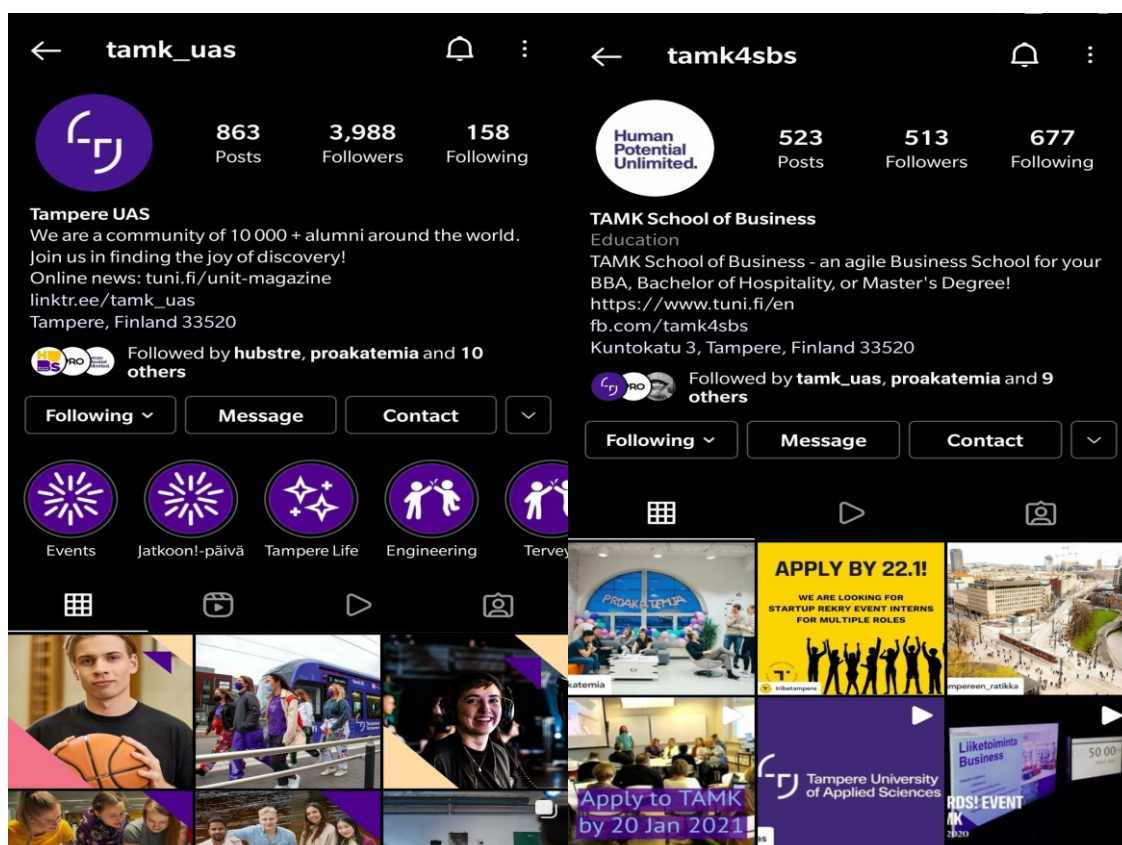
- Tuition info: Info related to tuition fees
- Student life: Everyday life of students, extracurricular activities, clubs, etc.
- Scholarship opportunities: Scholarship news, details, links
- Life in Tampere: Culture, lifestyle, cuisine, businesses, and attractions
- Job opportunities during/after studies: Internships, training, networking
- Curriculum, course offering: Enrollments, workshops, seminars, projects, specializations, exchange

The results from the content analysis can be found in Table 6.

TABLE 6. Content analysis of TAMK's Instagram channels' posts

Vital categories of information	tamk_uas	tamk4sbs
Tuition info	0	0
Student life	10	16
Scholarship opportunities	0	0
Life in Tampere	4	5
Job opportunities during/after studies	5	3
Curriculum, course offering	8	26

Many of the posts that were analyzed on both of TAMK's accounts have an emphasis on curriculum and course offerings (see category criteria, Pg. 59). Seminars, informative events, workshops, and other opportunities are posted regularly, and often include a call-to-action with links as pathways to other channels for more information. Student life is represented well on the channels, and consistency in brand image is apparent through posts and "story highlight" icons (picture 3). The content published is of high quality and a professional touch is consistent for most of the published content. Picture 3 consists of content samples from both accounts included in the project's research.



PICTURE 3. Content sample (@tamk\_uas 2021; @tamk4sbs 2021)

One of the critical factors of the data collected and analyzed regarding content is the curriculum and course offering category. Many of the posts are directed towards students that are already enrolled at the university. This is not necessarily a negative thing, as the content is meant to add value to current students. It also gives insight into what additional offerings are at TAMK for the international prospects. However, if an international student prospect is searching for specific information related to the application process, financial specifics, legalities, getting settled in Tampere, and other practicalities, they may not find it on TAMK's Instagram accounts.

The *tamk\_uas* account uses several of the media delivery modes that Instagram has to offer. In doing so, the channel caters to different content consumption preferences of the account's followers. For example, the "stories" function has been utilized to give a personable, relatable touch to the content meant to portray student life in different programs at TAMK. The variety in content can be an indication of the prioritization in fulfilling the students' expectations they may have when engaging with the school through the channel (Figure 8, Figure 9). There were no further analysis efforts made on the *tamk4sbs* account due to its inactive status.

#### **4.3.3.2 Instagram's usefulness in the journey towards enrollment**

Participants were asked to rank the usefulness of TAMK's Instagram accounts in their information search as a potential student in the decision-making process towards enrollment at TAMK. The participants were asked to review the site only if they visited it during this stage. A total of 56% of students gave a rating. The average was 3.1 out of 5.

The feedback from respondents regarding the usefulness of Instagram in guiding students to conversion pointed out that there should be more content targeted towards international prospects. The channel publishes content promoting application periods and entrance exams regularly. However, according to 3 out of the 10 respondents that used Instagram to gather information helpful in their decision processes, the content at the time was not sufficient.

Another issue extracted from the data collected was the absence of English language in content posted. This can be indicative of the students primarily engaging with the *tamk\_uas* main site. There is also the possibility that in the Finnish/English language posts, the respondents failed to scroll past the Finnish text to get to the English portion of content.

Stories was mentioned as a positive aspect of the channel, as 40% of respondents that browsed the channel prior to enrollment were fond of the personable and relatable qualities of Instagram takeovers.

#### **4.3.5 Studyinfo.fi**

The participants of the research also gave ratings for usefulness of other channels used in their decision-making process. The Studyinfo portal is maintained by the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) and implemented by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Higher education institutions maintain and update their study programs in the portal accordingly. The site offers official, up-to-date info on study programs that offer degrees in Finland. It aids in providing transparency in options for study, qualifications, and practicalities of the application process (EDUFI 2021.)

Out of the total number of participants in the study (18), 15 respondents visited *studyinfo.fi* in their decision-making process towards enrollment to TAMK. The average score was 4.27 out of 5.

#### **4.3.6 Studyinfinland.fi**

The Finnish National Agency for Education also operates a site, *studyinfinland.fi*, and is targeted towards international students that may be interested in the opportunities that Finland has to offer in higher education (EDUFI 2021). The site offers a list and overview of universities, degree programs, admissions processes, scholarships, student testimonials, as well as insight into life in Finland.

In rating the site for usefulness in the respondents' conversion to enrolled students at TAMK, 72% of respondents gave a score. The average for *studyinfinland.fi* was 3.31 out of 5.



## **5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this chapter, practical recommendations will be given that combine themes from the theoretical framework with the information gathered from the research. First, a tactical perspective will be shared that emphasizes short-term action and can be used to optimize TAMK's digital channels' effectiveness towards international student acquisition. Then, more strategic-based recommendations will be discussed that are meant to support new processes and be incrementally developed in time.

### **5.1 The Synthesis of Content, Engagement, and IA**

Content, engagement, and information architecture techniques have a few things in common. There is one thing that they need in order to be applied to digital channels— customers. Without customers, users, or audience, content cannot be created in an effective manner, engagement would be difficult because it is meant to be a two-way dialogue, and information architecture techniques cannot be applied because there would be no insight (data) to base the creation of enjoyable user experiences on.

#### **5.1.1 Tailored content and increased engagement**

TAMK's digital channels that are already in use can be utilized to continue creating visibility and "awareness" (Figure 2) of its offerings to international student prospects abroad. To help guide them to the "consideration" stage in their decision process (Figure 2), new insights from the study can be considered when creating content that matters most. Channel managers can create content parallel to the most important categories of information for international student prospects (Figure 13). Although the most sought-after categories in Figure 13 (tuition info, curriculum, scholarship information) are not necessarily appealing to current or non-tuition paying students, it gives the international student prospect some of the more critical pieces of information that they are seeking. Tailoring content for

these prospects can reduce their amount of information search along TAMK's other channels. It may also reduce the risk of them leaving the channel to browse a competitor's offering.

### **5.1.2 Continuous engagement through continuous value**

While international student prospects are in the "consideration" stage of their decision-making process (Figure 2), TAMK's digital channels can continuously provide value by creating content that not only meets the students' practical information needs (Figure 13), but also meets their other expectations for content and engagement with the university. A combination of helpful and entertaining posts can be utilized (Figure 8) with the intention of fulfilling prospects' motives for engaging with the brand and channel (Figure 9). Appendix 6 represents points made by respondents of the study that can be highlighted in published content to positively influence international student prospects towards enrollment at TAMK.

### **5.1.3 "Getting close" to guide prospects to conversion**

Utilizing tailored content that fulfills needs and engagement motives can improve the chances of international student prospects to move further in their journey towards enrollment. For the ones that find themselves in the "purchase intent" stage of the marketing funnel (Figure 2), ease of access to TAMK's content through various channels and touchpoints could potentially be the factor that leads them to conversion.

To support this possibility, TAMK should continue posting relevant content pertaining to the international student prospect segment. Simultaneously, engagement efforts in the form of calls-to-action (CTA) can be included in published content, in hopes of attracting the prospects to participate in micro-conversion activities. The goal is to collect more information and insight as to where the prospect is in the conversion funnel. An omni-channel strategy should be considered to extend reach, improve usability, and increase volume of effective engagements.

Considering the fact that choosing a UAS abroad is likely an important choice for an international student prospect to make, TAMK may want to extend support to guide them in their decision-making process. Elements of storytelling could be used to give prospects an idea of what their life could be like once enrolled at TAMK. Campus life, interactions with teachers and staff on campus, and a glimpse into life in Tampere can give a “tangible” aspect towards their decision-making process towards conversion

To add credibility and trust to these actions, alumni can be used to aid in storytelling and provide credible stories pertaining to school and job experience during studies, relevance of study modules to employment in the field, opportunities after graduation, and any other information that may provide insight to international prospect students. They can come in the form of static posts, video, blog entry, takeover live sessions, or through any channel or medium that TAMK sees fit.

These actions can result in the bigger picture becoming clearer for the prospect. The level of immersion through all aspects of TAMK on a personal, credible level (alumni) could be the final “guiding effort” to push prospects to conversion and enrollment.

#### **5.1.4 Data collection to support IA**

Information architecture focuses on logical structuring of information to provide an optimized experience for users. Although customer-centric in nature, the reality is that individuals perceive things differently, and have subjective perspectives on given interactions.

The ability to continuously improve digital channel experience is reliant on user data. TAMK Should consider continuous data collection through newsletter, info inquiries, etc. to increase engagement and improve where necessary. Incentivized participation would be helpful. However, the validity of data may be questioned. Annual data collection protocols by designated staff should be applied to international tuition paying students to investigate their journey from prospect to

enrolled student at TAMK. This would ensure that all experiences (positive and negative) can be analyzed, and processes improved.

### **5.1.5 Opportunities and support**

There are opportunities that can be pursued by TAMK that allow for indirect benefits to their marketing efforts. Network effects “refers to the impact that the number of users of a platform has on the value created for each user.” (Parker et al 2016, 40–42). As mentioned in chapter 4.3.2.1, multiple respondents from Vietnam mentioned that the majority of people in her country prefer to use Facebook over other social media channels. One respondent in the research shared that her primary source of information regarding TAMK was a Facebook group whose aim was to share knowledge on experiences at different schools around the world. One way that TAMK can achieve positive effects on a channel like this is if they implement a system that allocates current international students to designated account pages or groups within a channel to engage and distribute promotional and informative material, answer questions, and assist them in their journey towards potential conversion.

For example, a course module, course implementation, or even practical training position can be created to offer students credit points and experience to work alongside the marketing function at TAMK. Outreach from international students to their home countries to engage with education agencies, attend university fairs to give some relatability to prospects, and assist in content creation could benefit both themselves, as well as the university’s acquisition efforts.

## **5.2 IMC construct applied to processes**

Elements of the IMC construct are already present in TAMK's current processes. The intention of the recommendations given in this chapter are aimed to support current processes, as well as optimize the ongoing efforts towards acquisition of international, tuition-paying students to TAMK's English-taught degree programs. The following sections integrate aspects of the IMC construct (2.2.2–2.2.2.4) to TAMK's processes.

### **5.2.1 Tactical coordination and redefining the scope of marketing communication**

When it comes to content, TAMK's staff should understand the importance of its creation. Radical change in culture at TAMK could be accepted as a value adding activity. Just as individuals along social media channels are able to share experiences seamlessly, internal stakeholders within TAMK should integrate and foster opportunities to record and share the aspects of the university that are desirable to not only students in the domestic market, but to international markets as well. The scope of this "content-capturing" mindset would entail all relevant units at TAMK, even down to the individual employee.

The prioritization of the synthesis of content, engagement, and IA should be considered, as they incorporate the best practices towards fulfilling the needs of TAMK's digital channel audience. Pursuit and reliance on the collection of data in a consistent manner will further optimize these efforts.

Cross-department coordination on an organizational level will increase opportunities for content, as well as strengthen cooperation within different functions at TAMK. For example, in creating content towards the international student prospect segment, collaboration between the Media and International Business degree program (e.g., staff, student projects) would allow for professional-level production, while also providing experience in all members involved.

### 5.2.3 Strategic integration of IMC elements into TAMK's processes

The recommendations have included practical applications of the four pillars of the IMC construct and their relevance towards TAMK's processes. In order for *channels*, *content*, *stakeholders* and *results* to succeed in practice at the university, communications and implementation specifics should be communicated at strategic, tactical, and operational decision-making levels.

Responsibilities could be distributed among voluntary participants of each degree program and unit, and they can decide amongst themselves what would be considered valuable to capture or share along TAMK's digital channels. Clear goals and quotas can be defined by unit managers, while keeping expectations realistic and achievable. Roles and contributions related to content creation and sharing should be tailored to each unit member's competences, to avoid excess upskilling and training that may interfere with their core responsibilities. Continuous data collection from channels, students, and international student prospects would aid in staying up to date on segments, while providing inspiration and direction towards future opportunities.

## 6 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this project was to provide the commissioning UAS with insights on the effectiveness of their digital channels in converting international prospects to tuition-paying, enrolled students. The research was aimed towards identifying aspects of their marketing efforts on digital channels that could be optimized to increase international student acquisition from abroad. To complete this objective, there were several sub-questions that needed to be investigated.

- What type of online content is preferred when choosing a higher education institution abroad?
- What kind of engagement should there be between student and university through digital channels?
- How can TAMK increase student conversion from abroad using digital channels that are already operational?
- What are the most vital elements of the IMC construct that can be integrated into TAMK's digital marketing efforts to increase conversion rates?

A literature review was conducted to build a foundation of knowledge pertaining to digital channels, content, engagement, information architecture, and marketing channel strategies. Then, research was conducted among currently enrolled, international tuition-paying students at the UAS. The interviews and surveys that were held/distributed provided insight into channel preference, behavior, and content. In addition, select digital channels at TAMK were given scores by the respondents, to quantitatively measure their usefulness in their journey from prospect to enrolled and in attendance at the university. A content analysis was performed on one of the university's digital channels (Instagram) based on respondent data.

The research resulted in the conclusion that although the UAS puts significant effort in some of their currently operational channels, there is a noticeable lack of emphasis in publishing content that would be considered appealing to the international prospect student. Regarding the research, it was confirmed that most of the students engaged with multiple channels that the university had to offer during

their information search towards enrollment. This leaves opportunity for implementation of the suggested recommendations regarding tailored content based on data, IA optimization, and engagement to guide international student prospects through their decision-making process towards conversion (enrollment).

Finally, elements of the IMC construct, particularly the four pillars and the interplay between them (Figure 3, Figure 5) were applied to TAMK's processes in a practical manner, to introduce a more content-creation minded culture amongst internal stakeholders in all functions of the university. Moreover, the increase in cooperation between units could lead to new opportunities for engagement with international student prospects. In prioritization of guiding them to conversion, the UAS would be fulfilling their strategic objective of internationalization of the organization.

The primary limitation of the research was the timing of surveys and interviews of the target population. The sample size was sufficient enough, especially with the 2021 cohort, which had a 100% representation rate in the study. However, a few of the questions related to digital channel ranking had relatively low response rates. Ideally, the time for conducting a study regarding an international student's journey from prospect to enrollment should be in their first period or semester at the university. The timing would allow for a more accurate recollection of events in their decision-making processes.

An opportunity for further research would be a more targeted approach towards investigating content, channel, and engagement preferences of international student prospects in their search for universities to attend on a geographic basis. The approach could focus on categorization of preferences or online behavior by country.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Eight Principals of Information Architecture

Appendices are numbered consecutively in the order they are referred to in the text. The appendices must have a title and reference if not constructed by the author. If the appendix has for example three pages, you should write 1 (3) on the right top of the first page, 2 (3) on the following page, and 3 (3) on the last page.

#### *The principle of objects:*

Treat content as a living, breathing thing with a lifecycle, behaviors and attributes (Brown 2010, 30). Consider the fact that the object, (product or service) may alter, become obsolete, etc. For example, a recipe can change in value according to engagement from audience members that share their versions and contribute to the original. Another example would be a school curriculum that changes incrementally by academic year.

#### *The principle of choices:*

Create pages that offer meaningful choices to users, keeping the range of choices available focused on a particular task (Brown 2010, 30). During a customer's journey through a touchpoint may become exhausting if they are faced with too many options, using excessive amounts of cognitive effort.

#### *The principle of disclosure:*

Show only enough information to help people understand what kinds of information as they move deeper into the site or channel (Brown 2010, 30). The incremental disclosure of information in layers of content may also lead audiences to the next stage in order to fill the information gap or lack thereof.

#### *The principle of exemplars:*

This principle states that there should be a description of the contents of categories by showing examples or previews of what's inside (Brown 2010, 31).

This serves as an aid in helping the user classify what fits in their need vs the categories of content that does not suit them.

*The principle of front doors:*

The principle front doors emphasize the fact that there should be consideration that at least half of a website's visitors would come through a page other than the home page- another digital channel, link, or search engine (Brown 2010, 30). Especially applicable in an IMC and/or omni channel marketing, this principle encapsulates the idea of different journey pathways of engagement between brand and customer- especially when audience members are led through different touchpoints and channels the brand uses in its communications strategy.

*The principle of multiple classification*

Brown (2010, 30) states that there should be different classification schemes offered to users to allow them to browse the site's content. For a website, search bar function combined with categorical links would be an example of this principle.

*The principle of focused navigation:*

The principle of focused navigation, according to Brown (2010, 30), states that simplicity should be used in creating a site's navigation scheme. Content should be categorized in such a way that allows for growth, or the creation of categorical subsets (Brown 2010, 30).

*The principal of growth*

"Assume the content you have today is a small fraction of the content you will have tomorrow" (Brown 2010, 32). The principle emphasizes the importance of understanding the relevance of a site or channel's content and being aware that it may need to change or be taken down completely. As new content adds up over time, it should be known that an overwhelming amount of information may hinder the effectiveness of the channel's usability and coherence.

## Appendix 2. Interview questions for interviews with respondents

1. Age?
2. Nationality?
3. Year started at TAMK?
4. What year was it that you first heard about TAMK?
5. How did you first hear about TAMK?
6. What was your journey like? What were your options in university choice?
7. What intrigued you to pursue TAMK?
8. What digital channels did you visit to gather more info on the school?
9. What was the first channel you visited to get more info on TAMK?
10. How did you hear about it? How did you get to that channel? (pathway)
11. Do you recall the first things you wanted to know about TAMK?
12. Did you browse any more channels to gather more information on TAMK?
13. What channels?
14. Did you browse social media?
15. What social media channels did you visit?
16. Why did you visit them? what info were you looking for?
17. Did you find the info?
18. What was your first contact with TAMK? for example questions, concerns?
19. Were you able to get the answers to questions you had in an effectively?
20. Why? why not?
21. How would you rate the efficiency in engagement with TAMK?
22. Out of all the questions I asked, refresh your mind. Now, when you think about your experience in browsing TAMK's information and content along channels, what were your thoughts on TAMK as a brand? What was your perception on their identity and what they have to offer?
23. What were the factors that led you to choosing to convert from potential student to enrolled and attending student at TAMK?
24. What were some of the other universities you were closely considering, and what were the reasons for considering them?
25. Does anyone in your home country know about TAMK? explain
26. What do you think are the most important differentiating factors that could lead individuals back home to pursuing an education at TAMK?

27. Do you feel that sharing your story at TAMK would improve the likelihood of pursuing students in your home country to apply to TAMK?
28. What improvements could TAMK make in their digital channels to guide students to application and enrollment?
29. Why Finland?
30. What were your thoughts on committing to the move here?
31. Was Tampere your first choice?
32. Was TAMK your first choice of school?
33. What did you know about Finland before applying to TAMK?
34. What stood out about Finland as a positive in your decision process?
35. What stood out about Finland as a negative in your decision process?
36. Now that you are attending TAMK, do you feel that the experience is in-line with the image depicted in content on digital channels? Explain.



Appendix 3. Survey questions to respondents

1. Year you started at TAMK \*

2021

2020

2019

2. Nationality? \*

Enter your answer

3. What device did you use the most when visiting TAMK's digital channels prior to applying and committing to the school?

\*  

Tablet

Computer

Phone

None

4. How did you first hear about TAMK?

\* 

- Event or fair
- Friend or family
- School
- Exam prep course
- Online
- Social media

5. Before you applied to TAMK, did you look up information about the school via digital channel?

\*

- Yes
- No

6. If you answered yes to question 5, please specify which channel you used first. If you answered no, answer "N/A"

\*

- TAMK/TUNI website
- [Studyinfo.fi](https://www.studyinfo.fi)
- [Studyinfinland.fi](https://www.studyinfinland.fi)
- Facebook account
- Instagram account
- Twitter account
- Other
- N/A

7. Did you browse any other digital channels in your information search?

\*

Yes

No

8. If you answered yes to question 7, please mark **all** channels visited. If you answered no, please select "N/A"

\*

TAMK/TUNI website

[Studyinfo.fi](#)

[Studyinfinland.fi](#)

Facebook accounts

Instagram account

Twitter account

Other

N/A

8. If you answered yes to question 7, please mark **all** channels visited. If you answered no, please select "N/A"

\*

TAMK/TUNI website

[Studyinfo.fi](https://www.studyinfo.fi)

[Studyinfinland.fi](https://www.studyinfinland.fi)

Facebook accounts

Instagram account

Twitter account

Other

N/A

9. What was the **most** important information for you to seek out while on TAMK's digital channels? (during your decision process)

\*

Curriculum, course offering

Tuition info

Scholarship opportunities

Student life

Job opportunities during and after studies

Life in Tampere

Other

10. What was the **2nd** most important category of information for you to seek out while on TAMK's digital channels? (during your decision process)

\*

- Curriculum, course offering
- Tuition info
- Scholarship opportunities
- Student life
- Job opportunities during and after studies
- Life in Tampere
- Other

11. What was the **3rd** most important category of information for you to seek out while on TAMK's digital channels? (during your decision process)

\*

- Curriculum, course offering
- Tuition info
- Scholarship opportunities
- Student life
- Job opportunities during and after studies
- Life in Tampere
- Other

12. Rank the usefulness of **TAMK/TUNI website** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

- 1   2   3   4   5

13. Rank the usefulness of [Studyinfo.fi](#) in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

- 1   2   3   4   5

14. Rank the usefulness of [Studyinfinland.fi](#) in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

- 1   2   3   4   5

15. Rank the usefulness of TAMK's **Facebook accounts** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

- 1   2   3   4   5

16. Rank the usefulness of TAMK's **Instagram accounts** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

- 1   2   3   4   5

17. Rank the usefulness of TAMK's **Twitter accounts** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

- 1   2   3   4   5

18. How can TAMK improve the usefulness of its **website** in providing information to potential students from abroad?

\*

Enter your answer

19. What kind of content would be most effective in providing an enjoyable experience for potential students visiting **TAMK's website**? Please choose **3**

\*

- Curriculum
- Scholarship opportunities
- Tuition info
- Student experience at TAMK
- Life in Tampere
- Culture and events
- Finnish lifestyle
- Job opportunities during and after studies
- Content in English

20. How can TAMK improve the usefulness of its **Facebook** channel(s) in providing information to potential students from abroad?

\* 

Enter your answer

21. What kind of content would be most effective in providing an enjoyable experience for potential students visiting **TAMK's Facebook** channel(s)? Please choose **3**.

\*

- Curriculum
- Scholarship opportunities
- Tuition info
- Student experience at TAMK
- Life in Tampere
- Culture and events
- Finnish lifestyle
- Job opportunities during and after studies
- Content in English

22. How can TAMK improve the usefulness of its **Instagram** channel(s) in providing information to potential students from abroad?

\*

Enter your answer



23. What kind of content would be most effective in providing an enjoyable experience for potential students visiting **TAMK's Instagram** channel(s)? Please choose **3**.

\*

- Curriculum
- Scholarship opportunities
- Tuition info
- Student experience at TAMK
- Life in Tampere
- Culture and events
- Finnish lifestyle
- Job opportunities during and after studies
- Content in English

24. How can TAMK improve the usefulness it's **Twitter** channel(s) in providing information to potential students from abroad?

\*

Enter your answer

25. What kind of content would be most effective in providing an enjoyable experience for potential students visiting **TAMK's Twitter** channel(s)? Please choose **3**.

\* 

- Curriculum
- Scholarship opportunities
- Tuition info
- Student experience at TAMK
- Life in Tampere
- Culture and events
- Finnish lifestyle
- Job opportunities during and after studies
- Content in English

26. Do you consider your experience at TAMK to be in-line with the image portrayed online?

\*

- Yes
- No

27. Please explain your answer from question 26

\*

Enter your answer

## Appendix 4. Survey results for digital channel ratings

1 (1)

12. Rank the usefulness of **TAMK/TUNI website** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

[More Details](#)

17

Responses

4

Average Number

13. Rank the usefulness of **Studyinfo.fi** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

[More Details](#)

15

Responses

4.27

Average Number

14. Rank the usefulness of **Studyinfinland.fi** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

[More Details](#)

13

Responses

3.31

Average Number

15. Rank the usefulness of TAMK's **Facebook accounts** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

[More Details](#)

8

Responses

1.88

Average Number

16. Rank the usefulness of TAMK's **Instagram accounts** in your information search (during your decision process). If you did not visit this channel, please move on to the next question.

[More Details](#)

10

Responses

3.1

Average Number

Sean Morga

OK, thank you for commenting. And if you think about your experience looking at the website and as well as the Instagram account, is there any improvements that you could see that TAMK could make to help students get to apply on an international level?

*Respondent A*

I think like it is digital channel. Like, yeah, when I see the channel from TAMK firstly like Facebook, Instagram and website. But I think like Facebook TAMK doesn't use it. Only Instagram and website. Our website is sometimes quite hard for students like in Vietnamese.

*Respondent A*

And about Instagram account is like too much Finnish language there and. So, it makes me a little bit confused when I go to it the first time.

Sean Morga

I understand.

*Respondent A*

Yeah, because in Vietnam we like, almost all Vietnamese people use Facebook. We don't usually use Instagram.

## Appendix 6. Key points from respondents on content suggestions

1 (1)

<b>TAMK aspects</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Getting started</b>	<b>Other</b>
Exchange	Happiest country on earth	application process	Student life
Unique approach to teaching and learning	Reputable education (world renown)	Tuition info	Power of TAMK degree in other countries
Tampere universities community perks	Green country	Scholarship info	Job opportunities in Finland
Ranking	Safe	Settling in Finland	Clubs and events
Located in a student city	Clean		