

Enhancing Alumni Participation through External Communication in Lusaka's Public Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This research sought to assess how external communication is employed for purposes of motivating alumni to support their former public secondary schools. It sought to reveal the preferred modes of external communication to alumni by school administrators; the factors that influenced the choice of these communication methods; and the influence these modes had on alumni participation. Public secondary schools in Zambia make up 87% of the total population of secondary schools but experience resource challenges, worsened following implementation of free education policy through increased student enrolments. Despite termly government funding ranging between K237,000 per school with the most streams per grade, to K96,000 per schools with the least, as well as access to Constituency Development Fund, challenges have persisted, necessitating the need for alternative funding from stakeholders, including alumni. Descriptive survey design was used, where structured questionnaires were distributed to 51 randomly sampled school administrators. Data was analysed using SPSS to compute descriptive and inferential statistics. Social media topped the means of communication among 78% of respondents. Availability of contact details for alumni, $M=4.68$, $SD=0.769$, was the highest factor influencing effective communication. For all respondents, 59% believed that engagement improved due to strategic communication. By event type, communication frequency significantly associated with alumni engagement at $r = 0.715$. Event attendance highest, $M = 4.79$, $SD = 0.859$, then promoting the school in public spaces $M = 4.66$, $SD = 0.872$, followed by donation to fundraising initiatives, $M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.549$ and volunteering in school programs, $M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.588$. Challenges included obsolete alumni databases and inadequate technological infrastructure for effective communication. Recommendations included strengthening digital communication infrastructure, improved contact management systems and crafting communication based on alumni preferred communication modes.

Keywords: Alumni, Alumni Participation, Public Secondary Schools, Administrators, External Communication.

Introduction

This study seeks to assess the use of external communication towards encouraging alumni participation at public secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia. As rightfully put, for an organisation to exist, communication must occur with all stakeholder groups (Keyton, 2010). These stakeholders include internal stakeholders as well as external stakeholders. The organisation must ensure that mutual relationships are maintained with both internal and external stakeholders, and one way of achieving this is through communication.

Communication is the process of sending and receiving messages through verbal (speech or oral communication) or nonverbal means. The communicated message is the result of the encoding which takes the form of verbal, non-verbal or written language (*Kapur, 2020*). Simply put, communication is creation and exchange of meaning.

The crux of this study is the use of external communication by school administrators to encourage alumni participation in public secondary schools of Lusaka district. Despite being government owned and funded, most public secondary schools in the country have faced numerous challenges (*Zenda, 2022*), leading to need of additional support for their survival. The schools look to external stakeholders for alternative support and one such potential source of support is the school's former students or alumni. Alumni who are former students or pupils who graduated from a particular School, are ambassadors of their alma mater and at the same time are vital for revenue mobilisation (*Ofori, 2021*). Now, unlike tertiary institutions and universities that in most cases, maintain sound relationships with alumni, such as the University of Zambia alumni (*University of Zambia, 2021*), the same cannot be said for public secondary schools. It's against this background that this study focuses on whether out of their various external stakeholders, public secondary schools do engage with alumni, through external communication for purposes of soliciting the much-needed extra support. It is only through external communication between the school and its former students that sustained relationships can be made possible. As such, public secondary school administrators in Zambia need to leverage the effective and consistent use of external communication to encourage alumni participation.

Sustainable Development Goal number 4 of Zambia's Eighth National Development Plan emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all (*UN in Zambia, 2025*), echoing government's recognition of education as a basic right (*National Policy on Education, 1966*). However, Zambia's rising population, from 13 million in 2010 to over 19 million in 2022, Central Statistical Office, (2022), has increased demand for education at all levels, resulting in a need for more facilities and funding. Although some public secondary schools have produced prominent graduates, many still face financial challenges, partly due to limited engagement with alumni stemming from a lack of targeted external communication (*Clark, 2021*). The government has proposed a K31.5 billion allocation towards education in the 2025 budget, increasing it from 13% to 14.5% (*Maseka, 2024*). However, this remains insufficient especially with the implementation of the free education policy (*Chanda, 2024; Mwelwa et al, 2023*). As a result, schools must seek alternative funding from stakeholders such as alumni. This study explores whether public secondary school administrators recognize alumni as key stakeholders and are actively using external communication to engage them. How schools communicate with alumni about need for support in terms of finances, material, or otherwise, is crucial as such communication helps sustain strong relationships that benefit school development (*McAlexander et al, 2006*).

In other countries such as the United States of America, the existence of organisations such as the Council for Advancement and Support for Education (CASE), which coordinates activities tailored to ensure that alumni relations with former schools are maintained,

Council for Advancement and Support for Education, (2018), demonstrates the level of seriousness attached to the need for keeping alumni active in the affairs of their former educational institutions. Schools and colleges are dependent upon alumni for support (Gaier, 2005). This goes to show that alumni are an essential part of schools. Alumni engagement when done correctly can not only sustain the institution's annual fund over the long term but can also help build major donor pipelines and provide schools with some of the most active and effective volunteers (Campbell and Company, 2018). This is supported by Slover and Stoner, (2012) and Gilmore, (2012) who have in their studies, highlighted that external communication, including the use of online communication is vital for alumni engagement.

Zhimin et al, (2016) in their case study of three major universities in China stated that alumni possess financial, cultural and material resources, are informative and can have social influence which can be used to enable schools improve their competitiveness in areas of institutional funding and operations. Thus, the need to bring alumni on board through specific communication programmes cannot be over-emphasised. Zsigmond et al, (2017) describes strategic external communication as an emerging domain for educational institutions, especially in ex-communist countries from Eastern Europe, re-emphasizing its power as a tool that can influence external stakeholders once tapped into.

At the University of Cape Town in South Africa for example, the Alumni Association is not autonomous of the university but is a statutory body which is part of the university structure, (Onukwuba, 2018). Meaning that the institution is highly involved in ensuring that by hosting the Alumni Association within its structure, alumni are easily accessible, thereby, enabling the seamless nurturing of the relations that existed during the time alumni attended the learning institution. Institutions such as public secondary schools could emulate this by championing the dissemination of information highlighting their specific challenges through segmented communication to target audiences such as alumni, among others.

In Zambia, Government in its Circular of December 8, 2021, announced that going forward, the free education policy which only applied to primary schools in the past, would include public secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 2021). This pronouncement further cemented the idea that 'the responsibility for education provision in Zambia rests heavily on government' (Michael, 1991), because by disallowing payment of fees, operational costs of government owned schools would become the sole responsibility of government. However, government aid alone as earlier alluded to, is not enough to cover all educational requirements for students. For example, purchase of educational supplies such as library books and various stationery, sinking of boreholes for clean water, extension of infrastructure and various maintenance costs which in part, echoes the sentiments by Zenda, (2022), who observed that Zambian schools face a perennial shortage of resources ranging from qualified teachers to classroom blocks, as well as those of Maseka, (2024) who attested to the presence of challenges in government schools, require concerted effort with regards funding. In a bid to mitigate such challenges, government has made available the

Constituency Development Fund (CDF) to every constituency, making it easier for public institutions to apply and access these funds for various projects. CDF financed projects are essentially community based and driven with the major aim of bringing facilities and services closer to the people (*Musamba, 2019*). It should however be noted that CDF is not specifically tailored for public secondary schools alone but for primary schools and grant aided schools in the constituencies. Thus, amid competing needs for CDF, public secondary school administrators could consider exploring the possibility of leveraging the assistance of alumni as potential providers of additional support.

Regrettably, unlike higher learning institutions such as the University of Zambia, which over the years has garnered more than 40,000 alumni, yet maintains strong relations while coordinating activities through hosting a designated alumni affairs office, (*University of Zambia, 2021*), the same cannot be said for public secondary schools. There is a gap regarding notable programmes specifically tailored to facilitate and encourage lasting relationships with former students. This study, therefore, seeks to assess the use of external communication by public secondary school administrators in Lusaka district to encourage alumni participation. Government or public school in this study means a school directly administered and controlled by the Ministry of Education and includes a school, educational institution or class established and maintained by the Minister (*Education Act, 1966*).

Statement of the Problem

Population growth in Zambia has caused increased demand for educational facilities and supplies, more so with government's reinforcement of free education to include public secondary schools (*Ministry of Education, 2021*). By the year 2022, there were 1,543 secondary schools that were receiving government aid, reflecting a percentage of 87% from a total of 1,767 secondary schools in the country (*Ministry of Education, 2023*). The Policy Monitoring and Research Centre, (2024) reveals that several schools currently lack basic infrastructure like classroom blocks and toilets meant to cater for increased pupil enrolments resulting from the free education policy. This is supported by (*Maseka, 2024; and Chanda, 2024*), an indication of a need for support from stakeholders, alumni included. Engaging alumni through external communication increases chances of receiving valuable financial, intellectual and human resources (*Tulankar, 2020*). In Zambia, alumni engagement is more prevalent at tertiary level than in public secondary schools. For example, the University of Zambia makes in-house efforts to communicate with its alumni, resulting in realisation of benefits like adoption of hostels once occupied by alumni (*University of Zambia, 2021*). Some public secondary schools like Rusangu Secondary school which has active alumni who among other things, raised funds amounting to K100,000 for the rehabilitation of the dining hall at their former school, are among the lucky ones where alumni have mobilised themselves. This alumni association also utilises social media to coordinate alumni activities with former students that are in far-away places (*Rusangu Secondary School, 2024*). Notwithstanding the aforesaid, the identified gap and motivation of this study is that at public secondary schools in Zambia, the alumni engagement agenda

is hardly initiated and driven by the school administrators but handled by alumni themselves. Reviewed work, including that of UC San Diego Create, (2019) and McKinsey, (2020), indicate that efforts to engage are more effective when made from the institution to external stakeholders.

What sets the current study apart is that related studies concerning alumni engagement focused more on areas such as secondary schools based in developed countries (*UC San Diego Create, 2019*), alumni engagement in relation to student's academic performance in Uganda (*Kyorimpa et al, 2024*), role of alumni in higher education of Ghana (*Ofori, 2021*), etcetera, but did not highlight the need for public secondary schools in Zambia to leverage external communication and be the driver of the alumni engagement agenda for maximum benefits.

Research Objectives

1. To find out the preferred mode(s) of external communication applied by respective public secondary school administrators to encourage alumni support to their former schools in Lusaka district.
2. To examine the factors affecting the selection of the preferred type(s) of external communication which is used by public secondary school administrators to encourage alumni participation.
3. To assess the effects of the preferred mode of external communication on alumni participation at public secondary schools in Lusaka district.

Literature Review

This section delves into reviewed literature relevant to addressing the research objectives.

Need for Communication with Student Alumni

Fostering strong relationships with groups of external stakeholders can help institutions understand and meet needs (*McKinsey, 2020*). According to Avram, A., (2015), the external level of a given school comprises the graduates, the business environment, society, government and professional associations. Thus, when it comes to requesting for financial or material assistance, the duty to initiate communication largely falls on the requesting institution. In view of this, an institution should endeavour to invest in strategic external stakeholder engagement tactics in order to maintain mutual and beneficial relationships between itself and its stakeholders. External communication increases engagement with target audiences of schools, colleges, and universities alike, Slover, (2012), and public secondary schools are no exception to this, if they are to mobilise additional support from the likes of alumni, who make up part of the schools' various external stakeholders.

Research entitled 'the educational value of alumni on public high schools, which was undertaken by the UC San Diego Centre for Research, (2019) on Educational Equity, Assessment and Teaching Excellence, in the United States of America, supports the notion that the effort to engage alumni in public secondary schools largely rests on the schools

themselves. This is in line with the efforts made through the experimental use of the Alumni Toolkit by the schools. The toolkit was purposed to transform the practices of schools by creating alumni partnerships which would provide educators and students alike, with inspiring role models, diverse college advocates, and career partners that could improve educational experiences of today's youths. The key takeaway was that the schools needed to be positioned to be able to initiate and maintain consistent interaction purposed to invoke interest in the minds of alumni for them to in turn, provide the much-needed feedback in terms of support. The educators from the 15 high schools which took part in the research embraced the idea of alumni engagement and felt that the Tool Kit helped them become more efficient in utilising or engaging alumni effectively (*UC San Diego Create, 2019*).

The Communication Process

One critical factor that only requires support and encouragement and brings strength and expansion to the institutions reputation and progress is effective engagement with alumni (*Kwarteng and Ofori, 2021*). However, for alumni engagement to be made a reality, the effective use of external communication by public secondary schools cannot be understated. Fatimayin (2018), explains that the general view of communication is that it is an interaction within a social context. The communication process involves the message or idea being initiated by the sender, also known as the source (*Nordquist, 2020*). The message is then transformed or encoded into verbal, non-verbal or symbolic format in readiness to be transmitted, Indeed Editorial, (2020) via a medium or channel through which communication is conveyed. Once this is done, the message then finds its way to the receiver who decodes it by mentally processing the message in order to understand it. When the message has been decoded, the receiver then provides verbal or non-verbal response or feedback to the sender Nordquist (2019), in order to complete the communication process. It is worth noting that the communication process takes place in a physical, or psychological environment wherein messages are received or sent (*McLean, 2005*). Here, obstacles to communication, also referred to as noise such as spelling errors, intermittent internet, language barriers, to mention but a few, may affect or interfere with the effectiveness of communication. Kumbakonam (2016) defines barriers of communication as anything that prevents receiving and understanding messages used to convey information, ideas or thoughts. Further to this and supported by (*study.com, 2022*), circumstances and setting of the communication also known as the context in which the communication takes place may affect the expression and interpretation of the communication.

In Business Communication, communication mainly occurs either within an organisation (amongst internal stakeholders) or between the organisation and its external environment (external stakeholders). Koschmann and Kopczynski (2017) state that stakeholder communication involves any process of interaction or information exchange between an organisation and its constituencies. In this study, we focus on communication with external

stakeholders as we delve into how public secondary school administrators engage with alumni in a bid to motivate them into rendering financial or material support to their former schools.

External communication is the transmission of information between an organisation and other entities or persons in the organisation's external environment. It is the exchange of information and messages between organisations, various groups, as well as individuals outside an entity's formal structure Kiriago (2013) and typically includes all types of spoken, written, pictorial and video communication. These can be conveyed through mediums such as live events and conferences, press releases, direct mail, newsletters, flyers and other written communication, email communication, websites, social media and messaging Apps, as well as phones. Thus, external communication is critical for a school as it looks to inform external stakeholders about its goals, activities and challenges, and motivate them to take an interest. It is through external communication that feedback from external stakeholders is obtained.

Driving the Communication Agenda

An institution such as a public secondary school, needs to be deliberate when deciding on the most effective type of external communication. Communication barriers when encountered can hamper the growth of communication relegating it to the status of a conversation where feedback is not expected (*Alshuwairakh, 2017*). Organisations, therefore, need to be aware that various factors may affect their preferred types of external communication and as such, should carefully examine these factors in order to select the most effective means of communication. Rani, (2016) identifies, attitude, behaviour, culture, language and the environment as being the main sources of communication barriers. The factors affecting selection of the mode of communication may include, nature of the message, cost of communication, record keeping, organisation type, supporting technology, relationship between communicators, safety, urgency and distance between communicators. In view of this, public secondary school administrators need to bear in mind the implications of using particular modes of communication to reach alumni for desired results, and as such, be able to design their communication in a way that's appealing enough for alumni to recognise the need to help. Thus, the most efficient and effective external communication tools, be it traditional or modern, should be identified and employed for purposes of engaging and encouraging participation of external stakeholders such as alumni. For instance, social media, an internet based, isolated, permanent, face-to-face mass communication channel which promotes awareness of user interactions and draws value primarily from user generated content (*Aichner et al, 2020*) is one ideal mode of communication. Social media includes a variety of online platforms such as blogs and business networks and can be used to reach external stakeholders. Given the availability of various means of external communication, it remains up to the sender of the message to select the most appropriate mode of communication in order to ensure that the message is well transmitted and understood by the receiver. This should be done in order to enable the

receiver of the message to provide the desired feedback, and as such, achieve what is known as effective communication.

UC San Diego Create (2019) concludes that High Schools tapping into alumni as an educational resource is a promising new strategy which may provide much at little overall cost. Given the opportunity, alumni have the potential to participate in different ways towards improving the welfare of public secondary schools for as long as they are kept engaged and connected to their former schools. Contributions by alumni, could be channelled towards the provision of infrastructure such as classroom buildings, libraries, and furniture, to mention but a few.

Connecting with Alumni

Monetary and non-monetary behaviours are both considered a product of engagement with the school (Alumni Engagement Metrics Task Force, 2018). To achieve this level of engagement, some schools have Alumni Associations which are entrusted with the mandate of ensuring that relationships with former students are maintained. Alumni Associations are important because they serve as entities in marketing educational institutions and promoting the best interests of their schools (*Adeniyi, 2015*). Alumni can be engaged in various ways. For example, in a study by Tsao, (2005), it was discovered that the alumni respondents preferred direct mail by a considerable margin compared to phone solicitations as a tool of engagement. Additionally, Levine, (2008) concluded that the consistent dissemination of electronic alumni newsletters was positively correlated with general alumni giving and alumni participation rates. This supports the notion that external communication once applied strategically on alumni by schools such as public secondary schools, could be of great benefit.

According to the 2008 CASE survey report, Thompson and Casteuble, (2008) stated that connecting with alumni is one of the primary goals of alumni offices. This highlights the importance of having alumni offices within schools. Alumni offices in schools need to be willing to meet alumni where they are by taking advantage of modern communication technology. For as the world connects in new ways, so does the student body, so does graduates and therefore, so does alumni (*Wankel, 2011*).

Empirical Studies

The study conducted by Clark, (2021) on the preferred methods of communication and the impact of brand community on potential philanthropy on Millennial Alumni of the University of Arkansas' Agricultural Education, Communications and Technology Department, aimed at describing the most preferred communication methods of young Agricultural Education, Communications and Technology (AECT) Department alumni (graduates from 2008 to 2018) to encourage their initial and consistent financial giving. The study used a quantitative research design that consisted of an electronic survey to gather data for interpretation. The study also attempted to identify the impact of brand community on potential AECT philanthropic income. The research objective aimed to

describe desired communication methods of AECT young alumni. The research revealed that with an average daily screen time of 205 minutes, it was not surprising to see that the methods of communication that respondents ranked as their top two choices were “e-mail” and “links to online giving”. This study provided insights into how the said schools applied external communication to enhance alumni participation and gave perspective on the respondent’s preferred mode of communication.

In another study which was conducted by Condon, (2013) on social media usage among Andrews University alumni and their preferences for Alumni communication, a simple online survey was used to collect data about Andrews University alumni and their social media use. The goal was to explore these practices and to better understand how their usage could inform alumni operations. An online survey was distributed to all contactable alumni by email. Email addresses for alumni were retrieved from Banner, Andrews University’s alumni database. The study concluded that social media allows humanizing stories of students and alumni of institutions which could create loyalty between them. This is supported by Qualman, (2013) who postulated that such meaningful engagement is the currency of social media. Alumni who were most involved and in touch with their alma mater, were also more likely to be future donors. This study, therefore, provided insights on how schools use external communication such as social media to enhance alumni participation.

In a study with Journalism alumni, Tsao, (2005) highlighted that the respondents preferred direct mail by a considerable margin compared to phone solicitations. However, those alumni confirmed that if they were contacted by phone they preferred to interact with other alumni, former classmates, or current students. These alumni were also more receptive to donating after they learned that only half of the university’s budget was funded by the state and that 13.2% came from tuition and other fees.

The study results revealed that in the case of this particular group of alumni, the majority felt that a phone call in relation to their former school would only be satisfactory to them if the caller was a fellow alumni or current student, and not school personnel. Anything to do with solicitation was to be communicated through direct mail. This implies that the sender of the message needed to factor in the receiver’s preferred way of receiving such communication, through research and observation of patterns, in order for them to communicate effectively. The study is an indication that sometimes alumni may prefer to be contacted in a certain manner as opposed to being subjected to an imposed particular method of communication. Also, that alumni upon being given the required information are able to make informed decisions regarding whether to provide support, or not. The study, therefore, gave insight into some factors that influence schools to use a particular external communication method when communicating with alumni.

A study was conducted to survey members of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) to help determine social media usage in their schools, colleges and universities. When asked how social media was most successful for their institutions 57 percent responded that it increased engagement with their target audiences (*Slover-Linett*,

2012). Further, studies were conducted to assess the engagement of alumni in school activities and the most used media for communication. The top three preferred media platforms reported included 96 percent Facebook, 80 percent X, and 68 percent LinkedIn. Blogs also scored high at 55 percent. The primary audiences communicating with these tools were 95 percent alumni and 81 percent friends and supporters. According to Wankel, (2011), social media provides new avenues to reach out to people, connect with them, engage in conversations, and foster relationships. Therefore, social media is an important tool to help schools increase engagement with alumni.

The above study has given insight into the most preferred method of external communication by alumni as well as that external communication such as X, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube are the most used by schools to reach out to former students to enhance alumni participation.

Afolayan, (2012) conducted a study to examine communication and solicitation preferences at a Public University in North Carolina. The study used a quantitative study design. A survey was developed and distributed to a representative sample of alumni donors with valid e-mail addresses. The alumni who made contributions to the university between 2001 and 2011 were included in this study. The Chi-Square Test of Independence was utilized to determine whether there were significant differences based on demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, education and income levels in relation to alumni communication and solicitation preferences. Resultant data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The Chi-Square Test of Independence revealed an association between alumni solicitation preferences and age. There was also a significant association related to the preferred frequency of communication and the independent variables of age, gender, and income.

This study gave us insight on the benefits of alumni engagement, further providing the reasons as to why public secondary schools in Zambia, need to become the drivers of the alumni engagement agenda.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study incorporates three key theoretical perspectives which are, the Shannon Weaver Communication Model, the Westley and MacLean Model of Communication and the Media Richness Theory. These theories offer valuable insight into need for conveying communication, which is free from distortions, is context appropriate, accurate and thus, effective in attaining the desired response. The Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver model was developed in 1948, and identified the sender, encoder, channel, decoder and receiver as being the main elements of the communication model. The model was the first to consider noise as one of the factors that affected the effectiveness of the process of communication. It explained that the sent message could be distorted by the presence of noise in the channel such as external sounds, wrongly spelled words, static in signal, to mention but a few. In the current study, the theory was applied to assess factors that influenced the selection of the mode of communication to use when communicating with

alumni. It created awareness on the need to consider the presence of barriers of communication when selecting the type and medium of communication to use when communicating with alumni. The Bruce Westley and Malcolm S. MacLean Jr model of communication which was developed in 1957 covers two contexts of communication, namely, interpersonal and mass communication. Differentiating the two contexts is the aspect of feedback, which is direct and immediate in interpersonal interactions, and indirect and slow in the case of mass communication. The model suggests that communication begins when someone responds to messages from the environment and not when someone starts speaking making it interactive. In relation to the current study, this theory seeks to explain that the type of feedback from recipients of communication largely depend on the context of the communication. The Media Richness theory explores how forms of media suit different purposes of communication. Developed in 1986 by Richard Daft and Robert Lengel, the theory is based on four pillars which are capacity for immediate feedback; capacity for the medium to have a personal focus; capacity to transmit multiple cues; and Language variety. The richness of media is based on these pillars, and it further argues that media that are rich are best for resolving equivocal issues with high complexity, while lean media are best for communicating simple, certain and unequivocal messages. According to the theory, face-to-face communication is by far the richest medium because it carries a variety of information through both verbal and non-verbal cues and allows for immediate feedback which is also just as rich as the received message. By applying the insights from this theory, we aimed to highlight the importance of appropriate selection of media depending on whether the message was easy to interpret, in which case lean media would be used, or whether the message needed much clarification, in which case rich media would be applied, in order to attain desired feedback.

Based on the research objectives and reviewed literature, the conceptual framework and hypothesis below were developed for the study.

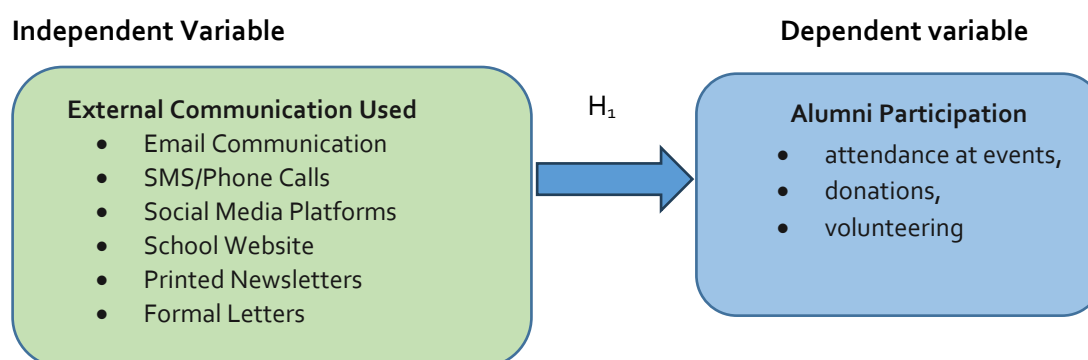


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Author, 2024

The following research hypothesis was developed. The alternative hypothesis suggested that external communication modes positively influenced alumni participation outcomes,

while the null hypothesis suggested that external communication modes have no influence on alumni participation outcomes.

H₁: External communication modes positively influence alumni participation outcomes.

H₀: External communication modes have no influence on alumni participation outcomes.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This research employed descriptive survey design with quantitative methods. Descriptive research involves conducting surveys and fact-finding inquiries to provide a detailed description of the current situation (*Khan et al, 2023*). The approach allows for collection of numerical data which can be statistically analysed.

Sample Size

A sample size of 51 public secondary schools was calculated from a population of 58 schools using the Krejcie and Morgan formula $n = \frac{x^2 NP(1-P)}{e^2 (N-1) + x^2 P(1-P)}$. The target population included one administrator from each public secondary school who held the position of Head Teacher, Deputy Head teacher or Senior Teacher. Simple random sampling technique was used to determine the sample size. This is because this sampling method allows individual members of a particular population an equal opportunity to be selected (*Noor, 2022*).

Data Collection and Analysis

A structured questionnaire which consisted of closed ended questions, each with answers in the form of options to be selected by the respondent. The questionnaire was physically administered to respective school administrators and data was collect. From a total of 51 questionnaires, 47 were returned, translating to a response rate of 92% for the study. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Validity and Reliability Test

To test the validity of the structured questionnaire, the researcher conducted a pre-test involving a small sample drawn from the main study population. Pretesting helped determine whether the questions effectively captured and measured the concepts aligned with the research objectives. Feedback from the pre-test was used to refine ambiguous or unclear items, enhancing face validity.

Additionally, content validity was ensured through expert review. The questionnaire was examined by professionals at the Ministry of Education to assess whether the items comprehensively covered all relevant aspects of alumni engagement and external communication. To establish construct validity, the researcher compared patterns in responses with expected theoretical outcomes, ensuring that the questions were consistent with established communication theories and alumni engagement frameworks.

In terms of reliability, which refers to the consistency and stability of measurement over time, the study employed the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which produced a value of 0.710, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Split-half reliability was also considered, where the questionnaire items were divided into two halves and the correlation between the scores from both halves was analysed to confirm consistency. These combined efforts ensured that the instrument used was both valid and reliable, providing credible and dependable data for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study prioritized ethical considerations to prevent harm to participants, who were from public secondary schools in Lusaka district. Researchers ensured that questions were non-invasive and respectful, and that participants' privacy and autonomy were protected. Ethical approval was obtained from the university and school authorities, and informed consent was secured through clear communication about the study's purpose and procedures. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and data was used solely for academic purposes, shared only with authorized university personnel.

Results and Discussion

The demographic analysis of the study presents a clear profile of the respondents based on various attributes, shading light on their characteristics. With regards to gender, the sample size consisted of 48% males and 52% females, with females being the majority. This distribution indicates a slightly higher participation rate of females in the study, which may impact the interpretation of gender-related results. Regarding age, the dominating age group was within the range of 30 to 39 years, with a total of 31%, followed by 50 years and above (28%), then 40 to 49 years (26%), and below 30 years (15%). The age groups demonstrate the combined effects of younger and older participants among those running public secondary schools in Lusaka District. These may sometimes be influenced by their own preferences and strategies of external communication. Nearly half of all school administrators (41%) were found to have 5-10 years of prior service within public secondary schools of Lusaka District. Against this backdrop, it is safe to say that these school administrators were able to comprehend the developments and history of the institutions in terms of alumni affairs. However, those with less experience, annually, were around 29%. New administrators would likely be introducing fresh and innovative ideas in communication with alumni. Concomitantly, only 10% declared having served for over 15 years, inferring from their fixed tenure that long-term institutional memory of administrators appeared slim. The limited number of long serving administrators presents one challenge that could impact beneficial exploitation with long-term alumnus relationships. Regarding whether there was an alumni association at the respondents' schools, results revealed that 66% of the secondary schools in Lusaka district had alumni associations, the remaining 34% did not. These associations whether created by former

students or by the school, could provide an avenue of communication efforts to encourage alumni participation, thus, should be encouraged to effectively fill the gap among the group of schools, notably in the deficiency of alumni associations. Refer to table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic Analysis

Demographics	Attribute	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	24	48
	Male	27	52
Age	30 – 39 years old	16	31
	50+ years old	14	28
	40 – 49 years old	13	26
	-30 years old	8	15
Years of Service	5 – 10 years	21	41
	-5 years	15	29
	11 – 15 years	10	20
	15+ years	5	10
Alumni Association at the School	Yes	34	66
	No	17	34

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Preferred Modes of External Communication

Responses were also obtained regarding the preferred modes of external communication at public secondary schools in Lusaka district. It was revealed that social media platforms, at 27%, was the most utilized mode of external communication. This result showed a preference for modern, accessible, and interactive communication tools. This implied that direct, personalized communication effectively captured the attention of alumni. SMS/Phone Calls at 19% were the second most preferred mode. The level of preference of email communication mode was third, at 17%. On the other hand, school websites indicated less frequency at 15%, followed by printed newsletters at 12%, and formal letters at 10%. This probably indicated that these methods were considered less effective or required more resources. Refer to table 2 below.

Table 2: Mode of Communication

Mode of Communication	Percentage (%)	Frequency (f)
Social Media Platforms	27	14
SMS/Phone Calls	19	10
Email	17	9
School Websites	15	8
Printed Newsletters	12	6
Formal Letters	10	5

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The Most Effective Mode of Communication in Reaching Alumni

Table 3 below, breaks down the most effective mode of communication to reach alumni according to the respondents. Results revealed that social media platforms was the most preferred mode of reaching alumni, with 34% of the total respondents indicating preference for its use. Placed second was the use of phones through SMS/Phone calls at 23%, while Email was the third preferred representing 19% of respondents. As for the conventional methods, school websites were favoured by only 10%, printed newsletters by 8%, and formal letters by 6%.

Table 3: The most effective mode of communication in reaching alumni

Mode of Communication	Percentage (%)	Frequency (f)
Social Media Platforms	34	17
SMS/Phone Calls	23	12
Email	19	10
School Websites	10	5
Printed Newsletters	8	4
Formal Letters	6	3

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Factors Influencing the Selection of Communication Modes

Table 4 below represents the respondents' level of agreement with five statements pertaining to factors influencing each school's choice of communication mode for alumni engagement.

Table 4: Factors Influencing the Selection of Communication Modes

Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Accessibility of communication tools to alumni	4.60	1.323	-0.527	0.766
Cost of communication	4.46	1.218	0.625	-0.732
Reliability of the mode	4.53	0.420	0.681	0.841
Speed of message delivery	4.55	-0.713	0.650	0.693
Availability of alumni contact details	4.68	0.769	0.715	0.781
Technological infrastructure	4.35	0.687	0.735	0.667

Source: Author (2024)

In relation to factors that influenced the selection of communication modes, respondents generally agreed on most of the important factors that influenced the choice of communication modes for alumni engagement as per the mean scores ranging from 4.35 to 4.68. The highest rated was the availability of contact details for alumni, with a mean of 4.68 and a standard deviation of 0.769, indicating its crucial place in effective communication. Limited alumni databases can negatively affect a school's long-term sustainability by reducing fundraising opportunities, as it becomes difficult to reach

potential donors and secure financial support for development goals. Alumni engagement also suffers, leading to missed opportunities for mentorship, volunteering, and community building. Accessibility of communication tools to alumni and speed of message delivery also scored highly, with means of 4.60 and 4.55, respectively, reflecting their huge impact on the effectiveness of communication. Cost of communication, though scoring slightly lower, had a mean of 4.46, which still indicated its relevance for consideration before selecting the mode of communication. The values of skewness indicated that, majority of responses agreed or strongly agreed, with no extreme asymmetry. A skewed data set is characterized by a data curve that's asymmetrical and skewed to the left or right side of a graph (*Indeed Editorial Team, 2025*). Skewness is less than zero when most data values are concentrated on the right side of symmetry in a graph, whereas skewness is greater than zero when most data values are concentrated on the left side of symmetry. A normal distribution has a skewness of zero. Similarly, the kurtosis values indicated a generally normal distribution of responses, with minor deviations. Kurtosis is a statistical measure used to describe a characteristic of a dataset (*Kenton, 2024*). Kurtosis indicates how tall and sharp or flat and wide the distribution curve is. High kurtosis is represented by a graph which is tall with a sharp peak, while low kurtosis is represented by a flat and spread-out graph. Medium kurtosis is represented by a normal distribution.

The Challenges Faced by the School in Alumni Communication

Respondents were asked to rate the challenges faced when communicating with alumni, and table 5 below highlights the responses.

Table 5: The challenges faced by the school in alumni communication

Challenge	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Lack of up-to-date alumni contact information	39	20
Insufficient funding for communication efforts	22	11
Limited internet access or poor connectivity	18	9
Lack of staff dedicated to managing alumni communication	11	6
Other	10	5

Source: Author (2024)

As seen in table 5, the majority respondents (39%) claimed that their schools did not keep updated contacts of their alumni. This defeated the ability of these schools to reach out for and engage their alumni effectively. The table shows that there are challenges at public secondary schools in Lusaka District regarding utilizing external communication for promoting alumni involvement. This deficiency in recordkeeping regarding alumni

databases calls for the creation of a structured system for recordkeeping and updating of contact lists. Other than that, 22% of respondents identified insufficient funding of communication efforts. This reflects possible financial constraints that limit schools in the adoption or sustainability of various effective and efficient communication channels, such as email campaigns or professional social media management. Lastly, 18% of respondents reported limited access to the internet or poor connectivity, hence limiting schools from adopting modern methods of communication, particularly, the digital platforms which are cost-effective and widely available. The lack of staff dedicated to managing alumni communication at 11% as well as other unspecified challenges (10%), further exacerbating these challenges by suggesting a lack of organizational prioritization or capacity to sustain alumni relations.

Effects of External Communication on Alumni Participation

Respondents were requested to indicate whether alumni engagement improved since adopting specific communication strategies and results were as shown in table 6 below. The results indicated that 59% of the respondents believed that alumni engagement increased with the adoption of specific strategies. This implied that, external communication methods played a key role in boosting participation. The majority suggested that Lusaka District schools had taken advantage of emails, SMS, social media, and other communication means to reunite with their alumni, resulting in higher event attendance, donations, and volunteer drives. However, the 27% that reported no improvement, and the 14% who were not sure, underscore the possibility that some strategies were either not implemented, incompletely implemented or inconsistently implemented.

Table 6: Effects of External Communication on Alumni Participation

Response	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Alumni engagement increased with the adoption of specific strategies	59	30
No improvement in alumni engagement	27	14
Not sure about improvement in alumni engagement	14	7

Source: Author (2025)

Inferential Statistics

The relationship between the Independent Variable – External Communication and Dependent Variable – Alumni Participation

The regression analysis was carried out to assess the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to estimate how well the independent variables predicted the single outcome variable.

Table 7: Multiple regression analysis results

Model	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.841 ^a	.701	.3302

a. Predictors: (Constant), External communication modes

b. Dependent Variable: Alumni Participation Outcomes

Source: Author (2025)

The analysis of the data in the table above, indicated that there was a strong relationship between the usage of external communication modes and alumni participation outcomes at public secondary schools in Lusaka District. The R Square of the model stands at 0.841, indicating that 84.1% of the changes in alumni participation are explained by the schools' adopted external communication modes. This is a significant result, showing the level at which communication strategies play a determinant role in alumni participation. Besides, the Adjusted R Square of 0.701 suggests that the model is highly reliable even when adjusted for the number of predictors, accounting for 70.1% of the explained variance. The Standard Error of the Estimate, 0.3302, is relatively low, showing that the model is fairly accurate, and its predictions of alumni participation outcomes are reasonably congruent with the observed data. These results demonstrated that effectiveness in external communication modes, such as emails, social media, and phone calling, contributed much to alumni involvement with events at school, making donations, or volunteering.

The Overall Significance of the Model

In this study, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the overall significance of the model. The ANOVA results indicated a significant relationship between the external modes of communication and alumni participation outcomes in public secondary schools in Lusaka District. This regression model had a sum of squares of 47.984, with a mean square of 7.694, and an F-value of 75.023, which is statistically significant at $p = 0.001$. This low p-value showed that the alumni participation outcomes were highly influenced by the external modes of communication used by schools.

Table 8: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p-value
Regression	47.984	1	7.694	75.023	0.001 ^b
Residual	16.815	46	.363		
Total	64.799	47			

a. Predictors: (Constant), External communication modes

b. Dependent Variable: Alumni Participation Outcomes

Source: Author (2025)

Regression Coefficient analysis to show the relationship between external communication modes used as well as show Hypothesis Test Results

Regression Coefficient analysis was done to show the relationship between external communication modes used, and participation by alumni at public secondary schools in Lusaka District. The analysis revealed a positive and significant association. From the unstandardized coefficient, $B = 0.612$, for every unit increase in the effective utilization of the external modes of communication, participation of alumni is increased by 0.612 units, if all other things are held constant. With a standardized beta coefficient of 0.512, the strong influence of external communication on alumni engagement is further underscored, revealing that in this study, it is one of the key predictor variables. The statistical significance at $p = 0.003$ also justifies that this is not a chance relationship.

Table 9: Regression Coefficient analysis results

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	.550	.308		1.259	.000
External communication modes	.612	.013	.512	7.653	.003

Source: Author (2025)

Hypothesis Results

The result in the above regression coefficient analysis which indicates the strong influence of external communication on alumni engagement rejects the null hypothesis (H_0), in favour of the alternative hypothesis (H_1). Thus, the analysis, as has been outlined in the table below, has proven that indeed external communication modes positively influence alumni participation outcomes.

Table 10: Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	Test	Result	Interpretation
H_1 : External communication modes positively influence alumni participation outcomes.	Regression Analysis	$p = 0.003, \beta = 0.512$	The hypothesis is supported, showing a statistically significant and positive relationship.
H_0 : External communication modes have no influence on alumni participation outcomes.	Regression Analysis	Rejected	The results indicate that communication modes significantly impact alumni participation outcomes.

Source: Author (2025)

Results in Relation to Theoretical Framework

The study results were in tandem with the selected underpinning theories which are, the Shannon Weaver Communication Model, the Westley and MacLean Model of

Communication and the Media Richness Theory. As earlier alluded to, the three theories offer valuable insight into need for conveying communication, which is free from distortions, is context appropriate, and accurate for the desired feedback. Limited internet access as cited by 18% of respondents and technology infrastructure with a mean of 4.35 are some examples of the presence of barriers of communication. Social media platforms with their ability to reach wide audiences and are interactive in real time thus presenting with the aspect of personalised communication on alumni, is an example of the effectiveness that comes with the use of appropriate media, be it rich or lean, to attain desired feedback. This is confirmed by 59% of respondents who attested to the fact that alumni engagement increased with the adoption of specific strategies as well as 23% who preferred SMS/phone calls, suggesting an inclination towards more interactive and personalised means of communication.

Conclusion

In Relation to the Empirical Literature

The study assesses the influence of external communication by public secondary school administrators in Lusaka district on alumni participation, with findings that align with existing global research on alumni engagement. The impact of external communication on alumni participation reflects findings from Clark, (2021), showing that social media was the most preferred communication mode with e-mail and links to online giving topping the list. The research showed that 27% of the respondents as well as 34% said that social media was the most preferred and most effective tool for alumni interaction at public secondary schools in Lusaka District. This is consistent with the study conducted by Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010) who pointed out that the role of social media had increasingly gained importance in engaging people because of its characteristics and its coverage. These findings reflected a general trend toward social media and mobile-based channels of communication, reflecting a growing inclination towards ease of use and accessibility which is mostly attributed to social media and mobile technologies. 59% of respondents also attributed the increase in alumni engagement at their schools to the adoption of specific strategies, highlighting the need for tailor made communication for varying categories of alumni for the best results. This implied that the more integrated the communication was, the more positive feedback from alumni. Relatively lower reliance on traditional methods such as printed newsletters (15%) and formal letters (10%), might have meant that some sections of alumni did not use digital platforms, hence a call for mixed communication strategies in order to be all-inclusive.

The results demonstrated that different factors significantly influenced the selection of communication methods for alumni involvement in public secondary schools. It was found that the most important factor influencing communication among alumni was the availability of contact information, with an average score of 4.68. This is in line with the research of Selingo, (2018), who stated that new alumni contact details are the cornerstone of alumni relations plans, allowing for more targeted communication and personal

relationships. Cost of communication, though scoring slightly lower, had a mean of 4.46, which still indicated its relevance for consideration before selecting the mode of communication. These findings highlight that schools should focus on accessible, effective, efficient and affordable communication strategies strongly supported by robust technological infrastructure to further improve alumni engagement. Cost of communication, though scoring slightly lower, had a mean of 4.46, which still indicated its relevance for consideration before selecting the mode of communication.

The findings of the survey indicated that against 27% of respondents who indicated that the modes had no effect, and 14% who were unsure, 59% of respondents believed that adoption of communication tools had improved the participation rate of alumni at their public secondary schools. McDearmon, (2023) identified social media, email, and similar platforms as crucial methods for establishing connections and encouraging alumni participation. The observed enhancements in event attendance, donations, and volunteerism.

In Relation to the Conceptual Framework

The analysis of the data indicated that there was a strong relationship between the usage of external communication modes and alumni participation outcomes in public secondary schools. The R Square of the model stood at 0.841, indicating that 84.1% of the changes in alumni participation were explained by the schools' adopted external communication modes. This was a significant result, showing the level at which communication strategies played a determinant role in alumni participation. Besides, the Adjusted R Square of 0.701 suggested that the model was highly reliable even when adjusted for the number of predictors, accounting for 70.1% of the explained variance.

The ANOVA results indicated a significant relationship between the external modes of communication and the alumni participation outcomes in public secondary schools in Lusaka District. This regression model had a sum of squares of 47.984, with a mean square of 7.694, and an F-value of 75.023, which was statistically significant at $p = 0.001$. Since the p-value was less than the common significant threshold of 0.05, it can be said that the null hypothesis had been rejected. This low p-value showed that the alumni participation outcomes were highly influenced by the external modes of communication used by schools. Regression Coefficient analysis was done to show the relationship between external communication modes used and the analysis revealed a positive and significant association. It was revealed that from the unstandardized coefficient, $B = 0.612$, for every unit increase in the effective utilization of the external communication modes, participation of alumni was increased by 0.612 units, if all other things were held constant. With a standardized beta coefficient of 0.512, the strong influence of external communication on alumni engagement was further underscored, revealing that in this study, it was one of the key predictor variables. The statistical significance at $p = 0.003$ also justified that this was not a chance relationship.

The result in the above regression coefficient analysis which indicates the strong influence of external communication on alumni engagement. Suffice to state, this regression coefficient result further aided the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0), which proposed that 'external communication modes had no influence on alumni participation outcomes', in favour of the alternative hypothesis (H_1), which proposed that 'external communication modes positively influenced alumni participation outcomes'.

In Relation to the Theoretical Framework

In conclusion, the study's findings align with the underpinning communication theories, demonstrating the importance of overcoming barriers, understanding context, and choosing appropriate communication channels. The results highlight the need to minimize barriers like poor internet connectivity in relation to the Shannon and Weaver model. The preference for personalized communication, as emphasized by the Westley and Maclean model, was supported by respondents who favoured invitations tailored to individuals. Additionally, the findings confirm the relevance of the Media Richness theory, with respondents showing a preference for more interactive and engaging communication methods such as social media and phone calls, depending on the nature of the message.

Recommendations

- **Invest in Robust Technological Structure:** With the growing reliance on digital platforms, public secondary schools should invest in robust technological infrastructure, such as reliable internet access, updated school websites, and social media management tools, which will allow for more efficient and interactive engagement with alumni.
- **Establish and Maintain Comprehensive Alumni Databases:** To enhance alumni engagement through effective external communication strategies at public secondary schools in Lusaka District, schools should prioritize the creation and maintenance of updated, comprehensive alumni databases. This will help ensure that alumni can be reached reliably, facilitating more effective and targeted communication.
- **Meeting the Cost of Communication Tools:** In terms of financial barriers, public secondary schools should seriously consider seeking partnerships, sponsorships, or grants to support their alumni engagement activities, ensuring the sustainability of these communication methods.
- **Build Staff Capacity for Alumni Relations:** It is also crucial for public secondary schools to invest in capacity building by training or hiring staff members dedicated to alumni relations and communications. This would ensure that alumni engagement efforts are consistently managed by individuals with the necessary expertise.
- **Adopt a Multi-Channel Communication Approach:** While social media, SMS, and email have proven to be the most effective modes of communication, public

secondary schools should also consider including traditional means of communication to expand their reach and maintain alumni involvement.

- **Creation of Alumni Associations:** Public secondary schools without alumni associations should be encouraged to establish them, as these associations provide a structured platform for engaging former students, fostering a sense of community, and increasing participation in events, donations, and volunteer efforts.
- **Craft Clear, Needs Based Messages Aligned with Alumni Preferences:** Having learned that communication tools enhance alumni participation, it is highly recommended that messages should be crafted to clearly express the needs of the school and relayed in accordance with preferences of the alumni to build engagement and participation.
- **Monitor and Evaluate Communication Strategies:** Schools should establish a system for regularly monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of their alumni engagement strategies, using surveys, feedback forms, and data analysis to assess which methods are most successful and identify areas for improvement.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of the current study, based solely on public secondary schools in Lusaka District, may not be easily generalized to other provinces due to variations in infrastructure and socioeconomic factors. To address this limitation, future studies could expand the sample size to include public secondary schools in multiple provinces, capturing a more diverse and representative view of the factors influencing alumni engagement across different regions. This approach would help to account for geographical disparities and provide a broader perspective on the effectiveness of external communication strategies in varying contexts. Additionally, the cross-sectional time horizon of the current study limits the ability to track changes over time and assess whether the use of external communication to encourage alumni participation at public secondary schools remains consistent. A longitudinal study design could offer a solution by tracking trends in alumni engagement over several years, allowing researchers to observe whether and how communication strategies evolve and their sustained impact on alumni participation at the said schools. This would provide a more dynamic understanding of alumni engagement, especially in the context of changing technologies and communication practices. The predominantly quantitative methodology used in this study, which relied heavily on surveys, also overlooks qualitative factors that could offer deeper insights into alumni engagement. Future research could address this gap by adopting a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative surveys and qualitative data collection techniques such as interviews, focus groups, or case studies. This combination would provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing alumni participation, capturing personal experiences and subjective views that surveys alone may miss while conducting the study.

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