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Social Media Practices of School Administrators: The Time is Now

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted educational practices; overnight schools shifted from traditional classroom settings to fully online delivery. Suddenly administrators, teachers, staff, students, and families were untethered from their campuses. Equitable, timely, and broadly distributed communication became critical if school personnel were to sustain education. Morning announcements and take-home folders became non-existent; buildings were closed and hallways were deserted. As a whole society has become more infused with technology and the demand for how organizations provide information has shifted (Greenberg, 2010). The pandemic shutdown accelerated this shift; making digital communication the dominate method for information sharing (Robbins, et. al., 2020). Communities expect organizations, such as school districts, to provide information using a variety of information and communication technology (ICT), including social media, to receive messages and communicate in the stakeholders' preferred format (Cox & McLeod, 2013, 2014; Greenberg, 2010; Kelly, 2009; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012); post COVID, these expectations are needed to ensure home-school communication (Huck & Zang, 2021). Accelerate this demand with the notion that the millennial generation has grown up with technology-based communication, now as they become parents, the demand for organizations to utilize ICT tools to engage in two-way communication and more transparency has increased (Luthra, 2020). Remote learning during COVID-19 amplified the “expectation for instant communication and feedback” (p. 1). Moreover, as leaders of organizations struggling for resiliency, school administrators looked to engage in activities to bridge the gaps between standard operating procedures and moving toward the potential of the new environment (Decman et al, 2021).

While technology advancements have opened new gateways for school administrators to communicate and develop shared understandings with stakeholders, the shift to fully online communications during the pandemic highlighted the need for effective use of technology to provide timely and essential communications (Fotheringham et al., 2021). Suddenly it was imperative for school administrators to take a proactive approach and use technology, notably social media, to forge positive relationships, provide information, and actively seek input to build social capital and ensure sustainability (Michela et al., 2022). In the midst of a turbulent world, school administrators were called upon to utilize an additional skillset to adapt to the ecological adversity (Decman et al., 2021).

Social media can provide a valuable gateway for school administrators to connect with stakeholders and build relationships (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012; Saraih et al., 2022). Cox and McLeod's (2014) study of 12 superintendents found that the school leaders felt social media communication facilitated stronger relationships with stakeholders and increased decision-making transparency, thus enhancing stakeholder bonds and trust in the district. Post COVID-19 studies have provided strong support for these findings (Michela et al., 2022; Saraih et al., 2022). Building relationships is essential to developing rapport with educational stakeholders to promote student success (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Bolling, 2022; Cox & McLeod, 2014; Ni et al., 2018). Because social media altered communication trends, school administrators need to integrate these tools in school communication plans (Cox & McLeod, 2013, 2014; Pollock, 2020; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015). School administrators influence initiating changes in communication and connecting with stakeholders (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Kelly, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Richardson et al., 2015). Considering school administrators' powerful influential position and the rapidly

growing ICT integration, notably social media, administrators could better facilitate ICT integration with best practices grounded in research (Kelly, 2009; Pollock, 2020; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012).

School administrators are in a position to influence campus culture and relationships with all stakeholders (Anderson & Dexter, 2005; Leithwood, et al., 2020; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012; Richardson, et al., 2015). They have the opportunity to impact how stakeholders perceive the school as well as to enhance public buy-in of campus practices and future endeavors (Kelly, 2009; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012). Advances in technology have revolutionized the methods leaders can utilize to collaborate with stakeholders in order to disseminate information and develop rapport (Cox & McLeod, 2013, 2014; Doğan & Çevik, 2021; Kelly, 2009).

In business literature, there are six themes that equip organizations to adapt to "funding" changes and other disruptive challenges: commitment to the mission, improvisation, community reciprocity, servant and transformational leadership, hope and optimism, and fiscal transparency (Paluszak et al., 2021; Witmer & Mellinger, 2016;). Resiliency is a term often used in organizations with more formalized job descriptions, primarily for-profit organizations, in which roles and job descriptions are clearly defined. According to Decman et al., public schools tend to be less structured (2021). The authors further identify a gap in literature about resilient nonprofit organizations; seeking pathways to address this gap.

In interviews with 56 school-related personnel, including parents (other in-progress paper), a prevalent theme across the publics was that of hope, optimism, and communication for external communication. Teo, in 2017 research, discusses leaders engaging in mindful communication across new networks to promote positive communication. This "positive communication" then enables the

organization to engage in a collective process of "meaning-making." It is in this light that the use of social platforms by positional school leaders is relevant.

Research Purpose

This study explored the perceptions of elementary school administrators' regarding the use of social media to communicate with stakeholders and explored recommended social media communication practices. The study investigated the social media tools elementary school administrators use to communicate with stakeholders and their level of comfort in use of those tools. Perceptions regarding effectiveness, benefits, and concerns were examined.

Methods

Participants

Texas elementary principals and assistant principals were solicited to take the *Social Media as a Tool to Effectively Communicate with Stakeholders Survey*. After data from the survey results were analyzed, a purposeful sample of Texas elementary school administrators were solicited to participate in interviews. School administrators who were selected indicated use of social media to communicate with stakeholders in their survey responses; therefore, additional data regarding recommended best practices were sought through interviews.

Instrumentation

The *Social Media as a Tool to Effectively Communicate with Stakeholders Survey*, developed by Hampton (2016) through rewording of items from studies conducted by Cox (2012) and McCutcheon (2013). The instrument consisted of 14 items to collect demographic information and data about how school administrators use and perceive the effectiveness of social media to communicate with stakeholders, including the social media tools used to communicate, school administrator comfort level using social media, effectiveness of social

media to communicate with stakeholders, benefits and concerns of using social media to communicate, and the degree of social media communication upon improving communication with stakeholders. An expert panel of school administrators reviewed the original questionnaire to determine validity. To determine instrument reliability the Hampton pilot tested the survey with 17 participants. For the purpose of this study, three of the social media tools on items 7, 8, and 9 were modified to reflect current tools used today.

Data Collection

Participants accessed a link to the survey through either an administrator professional organization's email newsletter or a direct email sent to all elementary principals in Texas; 104 elementary school administrators participated in the survey; 79.8% of the participants were principals while 20.2% were assistant principals. Of these, 76.7% were females and the remainder were males. The 11 participants volunteered for interviews. 10 standard questions guided information collection with a focus on participants' perceptions of social media use. Interviews ranged in length from 30-45 minutes. They were digitally recorded and transcribed after each interview.

Data Analysis

The survey data was categorical, using a 5-point scale ranging from Not at All to 6 to 7 Days Per Week. Therefore, data were analyzed using percentages and frequencies to identify school administrators' practices and perceptions regarding social media tool use, level of comfort, effectiveness, benefits, and concerns. Qualitative data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using Yin's (2016) recommended five analytic phases for qualitative data. This five-phased cycle included: compiling, disassembling, reassembling and arraying, interpreting, and concluding.

Results

Outcomes of the study indicated participants (elementary school administrators) most commonly used school web sites, electronic newsletter/e-mail announcements, and mass notification systems (MNS) to communicate with stakeholders (see Table 1). Additionally, Facebook, text messaging, and Twitter were highly reported with Instagram, blogs, YouTube, and “other” tools being the least recorded. Participants felt most comfortable with text messaging, MNS technology, electronic newsletter/e-mail announcement, Facebook, school web sites, and Twitter. The results show a nearly even split between *Not at All/Slightly Comfortable* and *Comfortable/Very Comfortable* for Instagram, blogs, other tools, and YouTube. Overall, participants perceived social media tools as effective means for communicating with stakeholders and believed social media improved stakeholder communication (see Table 2).

Table 1

Frequency of School Administrator Social Media Use for Stakeholder Communication (%)

Social Media Tool	Not at all	1 day per week	2-3 days per week	4-5 days per week	6-7 days per week
1. Blogs	84.6 (n = 88)	11.5 (n = 12)	2.9 (n = 3)	1.0 (n = 1)	0.0 (n = 0)
2. Twitter	33.7 (n = 35)	15.4 (n = 16)	22.1 (n = 23)	16.4 (n = 17)	12.5 (n = 13)
3. Facebook	22.1 (n = 23)	16.4 (n = 17)	24.0 (n = 25)	19.2 (n = 20)	18.3 (n = 19)
4. MNS Technology	12.5 (n = 13)	49.0 (n = 51)	24.0 (n = 25)	13.5 (n = 14)	1.0 (n = 1)
5. YouTube	78.8	14.4	3.8	2.9	0.0

	(n = 82)	(n = 15)	(n = 4)	(n = 3)	(n = 0)
6. Electronic Newsletter/E-mail Announcement	14.4 (n = 15)	44.2 (n = 46)	21.2 (n = 22)	13.5 (n = 14)	6.7 (n = 7)
7. Instagram	77.9 (n = 81)	8.7 (n = 9)	8.7 (n = 9)	2.9 (n = 3)	1.9 (n = 2)
8. School Web Site (May Include Apps)	6.7 (n = 7)	34.6 (n = 36)	23.1 (n = 24)	16.4 (n = 17)	19.2 (n = 20)
9. Text Messaging	32.7 (n = 34)	24.0 (n = 25)	17.3 (n = 18)	16.4 (n = 17)	9.6 (n = 10)
10. Other	72.1 (n = 75)	13.5 (n = 14)	11.5 (n = 12)	2.9 (n = 3)	0.0 (n = 0)

Note. Percentages have been rounded and may not equal 100.0%.; *Other* identifies additional social media tools not included in the survey.

Table 2

School Administrator Perceptions of Social Media Effectiveness in Stakeholder Communication

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Highly Effective	41	39.4
2. Effective	48	46.2
3. Undecided	2	1.9
4. Somewhat Effective	11	10.6
5. Ineffective	2	1.9

Participants identified benefits of using social media to include increased communication with stakeholders, reaching stakeholders not previously reached, improving the school/district image, increased parental involvement, and increased feedback. Qualitative data

revealed participants perceived that stakeholders expect an option of social media communication and that technology affords the ability to immediately communicate with more stakeholders, allowing the administrators to positively promote the school/district image or to provide essential information regarding school issues as that information develops. A participant referred to the need to convey information quickly to parents, “It’s really about being right then and reaching more, and then people are able to spread the word quicker.” This activity, to a great extent, decreases the amount of misinformation that surfaces in public discussion. A participant stated, “...the better we share, the fewer questions we receive. Our front office fields fewer calls... we get fewer complaints.” One participant noted that parents had shifted in their preferred means of obtaining information, “They’re not reading a newsletter or going to your portal all the time. They need it on their device, ready to go.” Another participant shared that social media allowed parents to feel connected to the campus and their children, which could “could promote increased stakeholder buy-in.” Similar perceptions were shared by another administrator who noted, “It seems like it [using social media] gets more buy-in from parents, and more involvement from parents. It keeps the public informed of what’s going on campus, and what’s going on with the kids.”

Another theme from the qualitative portion of the study was the intentional utilization of social media to promote school activities and stakeholder buy-in. Participants discussed the impression that news media tends to report negative stories related to public education. One participant stated, “Public education has always been scrutinized. The new media loves to sensationalize anything negative about schools, so we need the positives out there.” Social media provides school leaders with an avenue to tell a different story, a vital story when so much that is reported is negative. A participant, when discussing this aspect, stated, “We really

have control over painting that picture.” A second commented, “We need the positive out there. There are a lot of great things going on, but they may not be considered newsworthy by a news channel.”

All participants believed using social media to communicate with stakeholders was necessary in the 21st century; a non-negotiable expectation. All of the participants that were interviewed agreed that social media provided an opportunity for schools to improve the school and district image, a benefit also reported in survey data. It appeared this benefit supported both stakeholders and schools in promoting stakeholder buy-in and strengthening the relationship between schools and stakeholders. “It [social media] sends out the image that we care about our school. It helps to build community connections, and then people want to live in your community,” Specifically, for parents, social media can provide a bridge between home and school. This connection can promote increased stakeholder buy-in. One participant noted, “It seems like it gets more buy-in from parents, and more involvement from parents. It keeps the public informed of what’s going on campus, and what’s going on with the kids.” During the COVID-19 shutdown stakeholder buy-in and communication provided the “building structure” that sustained instruction schools needed to remain intact. Moreover, especially during the pandemic, social media broadened the network through which school administrators were able to communicate with families. Information could be shared with grandparents and divorced parents who may or may not live in the area. These occurrences provided a gateway for more remote stakeholders to have increased engagement in the child’s school. One participant recalled, “I see when friends of parents like our page, I’m starting to feel an international presence. Technology allows a way for other stakeholders to know what’s going on in the kids’ lives.” Another participant commented that utilizing social media allowed the

school to reach a different group of people and provide additional support to the child's education.

Participants were not without concerns regarding social media, recommending school leaders start slowly practicing with social media tools, preferably one at a time, to increase comfort levels. One participant stated, "I started with one, Facebook, and practiced each day a little bit until I felt like I knew what I was doing." Another participant noted that taking time to practice was essential: "I think the steps are like with any new software or any new upgrade, it's just forcing yourself to sit down, go through the steps, and take the time to do it and then make sure everyone feels comfortable." Participants called for training during preparation programs and through professional development. Security and privacy issues were viewed as a primary concern by interviewees with a lack of training and knowledge in the use of social media seen as secondary concerns. Interviewees expressed concerns about negative and inappropriate social media posts from both external stakeholders and staff as well as privacy/security concerns. However, they believed that through experience these issues could be mitigated. Participants also suggested monitoring accounts. One participant commented, "Occasionally parents will try to post something negative on there, or something that's not accurate. I think it's important to monitor frequently for that reason." Ensuring accurate information sharing during the COVID-19 shutdown provided balance; offsetting the confusion and sense of panic created through the media. Establishing a safe and reliable communication pipeline that provided a sense of hope and optimism was key to sustainability.

Discussion

The results of this study contribute to the research and practices of elementary school administrators' use of social media for stakeholder communication. Results provide insights to

district and school leaders into best practice implementation plans that promote stakeholder communication that is effective and sustainable. Ensuring stakeholders buy in by providing information from schools and districts will promote the development of social capital and parental involvement.

School administrators are viewed as leaders in the development of stakeholder relationships; directly impacting social capital development. As preferred communication methods shift to technology integration, school administrators must be prepared to evolve to meet the needs of the community and forge positive relationships (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Michela et al., 2022). Communication is a core responsibility of campus leaders (Sauers & Richardson, 2015).

As a core responsibility for school administrators, there is a need to integrate the utilization of social media into preparation programs for school leaders. Obviously, with some, social media, as a topic, poses both positive and negative feelings, as topics can very quickly evolve and become negative. This is a source of fear for many administrator and potential administrators. Proper education on best practices and crafting professional responses to potentially negative situations in the social media world should be an intrinsic piece of effective communication practice that is both taught and utilized by school administrators.

Results of this study were consistent with previous research regarding benefits of social media communication, such as increasing communication and promoting a positive image, as well as concerns such as security/privacy. Additionally, results support previous research that social media is a tool to effectively communicate with stakeholders. Despite study limitations, research findings have implications for future social media communication practices by school administrators. Administrators should gain skills and knowledge of social media use during

their preparation programs and through professional development to increase comfort levels. Another means to increase comfort levels is for administrators to form peer groups and support each other in setting up technology applications as well as providing a safe place to ask questions, regardless of technology level. Mostly importantly, school administrators should practice using social media tools to improve their skills and to increase comfort levels. It is essential that school administrators to recognize and follow practices that support stakeholders' communication preferences and access to technology. Adopting a multimodal communication approach is recommended, a cohesive blending of traditional communication and social media. Implementing the appropriate communication means based on the situation is critical to success.