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SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

Matthew L Bolinger, MS

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SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

Matthew L Bolinger

APPROVED BY

_____
Thomas Cothern, Ed.D., Chair

_____
Renée Lastrapes, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____
Amy Orange, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____
John Decman, Ed.D., Committee Member

RECEIVED/APPROVED BY THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION:

_____
Felix Simieou III, Ph.D., Interim Associate Dean

_____
Joan Pedro, Ph.D., Dean

Dedication

This dissertation work is dedicated to my amazing wife, Shannon. I could not ask for a more supportive partner who is always willing to take on any challenge. I am beyond grateful for your love and consistent encouragement. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my three wonderful children, Levi, Brooks, and Ella. You fill my life with happiness and make me smile on a daily basis. I sacrificed family time over the last few years to reach this accomplishment, and I look forward to making up for lost time.

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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Matthew L Bolinger
University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2022

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Thomas Cothern

This study utilized a sequential mixed-methods design to investigate the role of social media as a marketing tool for public schools. The quantitative portion applied content analysis to 18 elementary schools with Facebook accounts. Post types and content categories were coded and analyzed to determine their roles in social media posts and user engagement. Inductive thematic analysis was utilized in the qualitative portion to determine short-term trends from Facebook posts and attitudinal responses from user comments. This study suggests that public schools may be falling behind the private sector in some areas of marketing. Public schools used specific tactics excessively, such as *digital graphics* as a post type and frequent *announcements* such as parent reminders and multiple posts in one day. Posts are often directly informative content without integrating brand personality attributes on social media, resulting in lower engagement. Additionally, schools were not intentional in requesting user interaction and seemed to be under-responsive to user questions and comments on Facebook. Although, findings from this study suggest that public schools can generate higher levels of engagement. During the time of this study, schools posted many *celebration* posts. Results show that the *celebration* posts utilized more brand personality attributes, including photos, videos, and

school spirit, which led to more user engagement. When the schools directly requested user engagement, users were very responsive. Based on findings from this study, researchers and practitioners may be able to identify specific strategies and best practices to improve engagement from parents and other users on social media. This level of engagement is vital for public school leaders in direct competition with other organizations such as charter schools.

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

The National Commission on Excellence in Education set America's public education system into a series of reforms and challenges with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, sharply criticizing the education system in place at that time (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Public education continues to be challenged today on many fronts, mainly due to competitors in education that emerged on the scene over 25 years ago (Ausbrooks et al., 2005; Verger et al., 2017; Verger et al., 2020). Many states approved to apply public funds towards non-public schools. For instance, several states approved the use of school vouchers, which allows students to attend non-public schools using public monies (Carnoy, 2017). An example of the voucher system is Wisconsin, where vouchers are utilized under the Milwaukee Parental Choice Plan (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2018). The School Choice movement has opened the door for "students to attend non-public schools at the expense of taxpayers" (Brimley et al., 2020, p. 292). Charter schools have taken advantage of this opportunity, as attendance at these institutions has risen dramatically (David & Hesla, 2018). A high percentage of charter schools are in urban school districts and target low-income, urban students (Brimley et al., 2020; Carnoy, 2017; Jewell, 2004). Public education is facing a predicament where funding could be reduced due to a lack of student enrollment in a marketplace that has become competitive. In an environment where many public schools are already not adequately funded, school districts now have the task of learning how to effectively market their product to demonstrate the quality of their services to students and families. It stands to reason that marketing will become more prevalent in public schools to maintain enrollment.

Texas currently allows for open-enrollment charter schools, which have grown in popularity and media coverage since 1995 (Ausbrooks et al., 2005). One study highlights a perception gap where charter schools are viewed as superior, even though this may not be accurate (May, 2007). Public schools, in contrast, often seem to be the target of negative publicity based on how the media has framed and addressed public schools as "failing" in America (Frenkiewich & Onosko, 2020). Parents may assume that charter schools provide a better education due to consistent negative media coverage of public schools. Contrary to this notion, most public schools provide a wealth of opportunities to their local communities and offer many positive deliverables to their consumers, typically outperforming private or charter schools in most areas (Pettinga et al., 2015). The general public has experienced growing levels of distrust towards the media and news outlets, due in part to concerns and perceptions of biased and unfair reporting (Ardèvol-Abreu & De Zúñiga, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati, 2003). Nonetheless, the responsibility falls on school districts to share their successes and accomplishments. Public school districts can benefit from being intentional in their marketing plan as they share successes, accomplishments, progress, and goals with their communities (May, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

Research Problem

School districts need adequate funding to meet the educational and social needs of their communities effectively. Some research suggests that utilizing public funds for nonpublic education exacerbates the inequities that currently exist in our society, especially as it relates to minority and low-income students (Brimley et al., 2020; Riel et al., 2018). When public funds get diverted to other organizations, such as charter or private schools, the monies intended to help provide an adequate education for all students are no longer available, especially for the underserved (Brimley et al., 2020;

Carnoy, 2017). Most states provide funding to public schools based on student enrollment. Public schools are typically not required to compete for tax dollars in the past, but due to the emerging competition in K-12 education, districts are thinking outside of the box to compete for funds (May, 2007; Olson Beal & Beal, 2016). Utilizing a strategic marketing plan may be a tool that will assist public school districts in attracting and retaining students (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

Most school leaders are not currently prepared or equipped to create and implement a proper marketing plan (Pettinga et al., 2015). Studies as recent as 2015 indicate that most school or district teams do not use reliable marketing research or feedback from stakeholders when making marketing decisions for their organization (James & Phillips, 1995; Oplatka, 2002; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Pettinga et al., 2015). While it is true that most school districts have a public relations department that develops messaging and branding, they have not needed to market their product competitively like the business sector. It appears that most K-12 public school systems apply marketing tactics based on intuitive, unreliable methods rather than using a systematic plan (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). However, the concept of school marketing may become a critical technique for today's public school leaders (Le Feuvre et al., 2021). A strategic marketing plan can provide a roadmap for public schools to improve their brand, enroll and retain more students, strengthen community engagement, and ultimately improve stakeholders' trust (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Texas is a traditionally conservative state with politicians who may support the School Choice movement and openly criticize public schools, evidenced by the fact that it is an active charter school state (Hanushek et al., 2007; Villanueva, 2019). Due to this type of climate, the state has experienced an increase in charter or private schools. While school vouchers have not come into law to date in Texas, education funding bills have included

school vouchers during past legislative sessions. In Texas, public school leaders have most likely felt the pressures of increased school accountability and political rhetoric touting that public schools are failing, despite data that may indicate otherwise (Bettinger, 2005; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Pettinga et al., 2015). There is not an abundance of research that examines strategic marketing in public schools. Research in this area may provide school leaders with the necessary tools to effectively communicate the quality of services to their local community and improve public perception and trust.

Public school districts may be able to learn from colleges and universities how to implement and manage a marketing plan in education. Effective marketing and branding tactics that attract students directly impact the success of higher education institutions. (Foskett, 2012; McGrath, 2002). Funds are dedicated to marketing, recruiting, and branding at colleges and universities (Anctil, 2008; Munsch et al., 2019). Furthermore, many higher education schools devote resources to social media marketing (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Due to higher education's evolving nature, such as more online university options and rising interest from international students, many colleges and universities have become more targeted in their marketing approach (Foskett, 2012). As the landscape in K-12 public education continues to change, public school marketing teams may benefit from higher education's marketing research and strategies.

Public schools can improve their marketing by using research-based social media marketing tactics. A strategic marketing plan in most, if not all, sectors will involve social media (Stelzner, 2017). Consumers have become accustomed to interacting and sharing positive and negative experiences on a variety of online platforms using social media. Many school districts currently use social media and websites to share various content with their school families; however, school leaders may not understand how to perform proper marketing methods with this platform (Pettinga et al., 2015). Social

media can target various audiences in a customized manner (Stelzner, 2017). Audiences for school districts may include students, families, business leaders, and community members. Adults may use Facebook or Twitter when considering the audience, while students may be more likely to use Instagram or Snapchat (Salomon, 2013). All relevant platforms within social media are opportunities for school districts to target a given audience for marketing and engagement purposes. Social media can improve stakeholder engagement and loyalty if marketing tactics are effectively applied (Peruta & Shields, 2017). It is also worth mentioning that aggressive marketing strategies may backfire with specific audiences if perceived as invasive, nonpersonal, or overbearing (McCoy et al., 2007; Peruta & Shields, 2018). To date, there is little research on the effectiveness of social media marketing tactics in public school districts.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of a school is to provide an excellent education to students and prepare them for future success, based on mission statements throughout public education (Schafft & Biddle, 2013). In addition to this, they offer many services to the local community that extends beyond the classroom. Public schools provide local sporting events, band and orchestra concerts, family nights, parenting classes, shared facilities with local organizations, college information events, career fairs, military recruitment seminars, and more to their local community. In return, citizens contribute tax dollars for public schools' services. It is the responsibility of the school or district to communicate this return on investment with their local community effectively. Research that highlights the effectiveness of social media as a marketing strategy for public schools may provide insight that will assist school officials in showcasing school accomplishments, progress, and successes with community members. A strategic marketing plan that includes social media marketing tactics may help schools improve communications and public relations

(Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). In this study, the researcher hopes to identify current social media utilization as a marketing and communications tool in public schools. The researcher also hopes to analyze the messaging trends of schools on social media and the attitudinal responses of parents and other users on social media.

Research Purpose and Questions

This study aims to examine how current social media utilization in selected Texas public schools. This study also seeks to understand how schools and end-users, such as parents, communicate and engage with each other via social media. This study will address the following research questions.

Quantitative

1. How do schools utilize social media as a marketing and public relations resource?
2. Is there an association between social media post content, post type, and user engagement?
3. Is there an association between social media activity and school demographics?

Qualitative

4. What are the short-term communication trends of schools on social media?
5. What are the attitudinal responses of parents and other users towards schools?

Definitions of Key Terms

Branding: The names or symbols that marketers have introduced to make product differentiation concrete and different from those offered by competitors (Silk, 2006).

Content Engineering: the intentional development of ad content on social media to improve user engagement and reach marketing goals (Lee et al., 2018).

Customer Relationship Management (CRM): The ability to provide two-way information exchanges through human action and information technology between the business and

customer, which strengthens customer trust and loyalty while generating added value for the business (Gummesson, 2012; Itani et al., 2020).

Engagement Marketing: A marketing approach that directly engages consumers to actively be involved in the production and co-creation of marketing programs, at the same time developing a relationship with the brand (Gordan et al., 2012).

Facebook: A social media platform that allows user to develop a personal profile, post content via text, photos, and videos, and engage, react, and share content with other users. Facebook is the most popular social media platform to date with over 2.74 billion active users (Houghton & Hodder, 2021).

Marketing: The process via which a firm creates value for its chosen customers (Silk, 2006). Organizations are able to create value using marketing tactics such as advertisements, promotional events, publications, branding, social media, and networking.

Marketing Function: how the marketing strategies are applied or executed. The marketing function plays a key role in managing a product or company (Putsenteilo et al., 2018).

Marketing Mix: A list of the important elements or ingredients that make up marketing programs, which typically includes product, price, place, and promotion (Borden, 1964; Pettinga et al., 2015).

Marketing Perspective: Determining the needs and wants of target markets to satisfy them through the design, communication, pricing and delivery of appropriate and competitively viable programs and services (Kotler & Fox, 1995).

Marketing Plan: A product-specific or organizational plan that describes activities involved in achieving specific marketing objectives or outcomes within a set timeframe (May, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Rust, 2020).

Post Content: The message or message category of the social media post. Organizations such as colleges and universities may include content that is specific and common to these institutions (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Social media content for public schools may include event announcements, informational announcements, student celebrations, staff celebrations, or family recognitions.

Post Frequency: The number of social media posts within a specific time period. Post frequency may positively contribute to brand awareness (Chen, et al., 2017). In addition, excessive daily posts on social media may result in less engagement due to over-posting (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

Post Type: The media category that is included in a post, such as a photo, video, or digital graphic. Posts can also only include texts. Previous research has indicated that certain post types yield more user engagement (Kwok & Yu, 2013; Peruta & Shields, 2018).

Public Relations: The ability to manage strategic relationships using various methods, such as communicating, advocating, image building, and partnering with internal and external stakeholders (Hutton et al., 2001). Social media has the potential to impact public relations and serve as a relationship building tool (Kent & Li, 2020).

Relationship Marketing: The theory that emphasizes marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges. This theory places a strong emphasis on the quality of customer experience and long-term, ongoing relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Steinhoff et al., 2019).

Social Media: Web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by

others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Pettinga et al., 2015; Willis & Exley, 2018).

Total Engagement: the total sum of likes, comments, and shares per social media post (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

User Engagement: The actions that people take involving a social media post or ad. Post engagement indicates that a post is relevant to a target audience, which helps the post perform better. Post engagements include post reactions, comments, shares, clicks, and video or photo views (Facebook, 2020).

Video Views: The number of views that a video receives (Facebook, 2020).

Conclusion

As public education evolves in a climate where competition for students becomes the norm, social media marketing strategies may be in high demand as schools strive to demonstrate their services and successes to the local community. Schools that have developed a marketing plan may have an advantage in engagement and support (Pettinga et al., 2015). Social media may potentially impact student enrollment, stakeholder perception, and school funding when used as a marketing tool. Public school leaders must understand social media marketing strategies and metrics to effectively implement a marketing plan that strengthens engagement and organizational branding. Chapter II will review existing literature that highlights the importance of marketing planning and research, the marketization of public schools, current education marketing practices, and the importance of social media as a marketing tool.

CHAPTER II:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Marketing Research

Marketing Defined

Marketing is a vital component of almost every successful business. According to Silk (2006), marketing is "the process via which a firm creates value for its chosen customers" (p. 3). Businesses can create value for their company or products using a variety of marketing tactics such as advertisements, promotional events, publications, branding, social media interactions, and relational networking. Effective marketing focuses on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Relationship Marketing (RM), where the business partner and customer have developed a level of trust, loyalty, and satisfaction with the outcome or transaction (Gummesson, 2012). In the age of technology, digital and online marketing has become a staple in almost all organizations and has dramatically altered or even disrupted traditional marketing strategies (Dash et al., 2021). Modern-day marketing platforms include digital marketing, social media, and influencer marketing (Backaler, 2018; Morzhyna et al., 2019). Marketing function is how the marketing strategies are applied or executed and play a key role in managing a product or company (Putsenteilo et al., 2018). The marketing function of a company may vary substantially, depending on the logistics and operations of the organization. For example, a non-profit or school district will have a vastly different marketing function than a restaurant or retail store. Marketing functions are driven by several factors, such as customer satisfaction, and will help determine the implementation of the marketing plan (Rust, 2020).

Strategic Marketing Planning

There is a vast difference between implementing marketing tactics based on intuition or reaction versus strategically planning a campaign using research-based marketing strategies. Effective marketing typically includes strategic planning, where each tactic is considered in the plan (Kabeyi, 2019; Kalva, 2017). Company and school leaders must make marketing decisions that include campaign design, budget, target audience, branding, data collection, and measurable outcomes or goals (Alvarez-Milán et al., 2018; Davies & Ellison, 1997; Zollo et al., 2020). Organizations must implement marketing management to navigate the highly saturated marketing landscape and use marketing strategies that work (Yaneva, 2020). Strategic social media marketing should be integral to the marketing plan, as it is becoming a non-negotiable tool for current marketing, branding, and public relations (Vinerean, 2017). Educational marketing, which is the focus of this study, should consider factors such as demographics, traditions, stakeholder input, brand identity, competition and threats, opportunities, and future goals of the district (Hung, 2020; Piercy & Giles, 1989; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). In addition to leading instruction and managing school operations, today's school leaders are tasked with strategic planning, marketing, and public relations (Mestry, 2017; Starr, 2009).

Marketing Mix

Borden (1964) coined the phrase Marketing Mix (MM), which identifies the marketing methods combined to help form a marketing plan. The MM calls for a strategic approach to marketing, where multiple strategies and tactics connect customers to the organization (Thabit & Raewf, 2018). The MM is a framework often used in a strategic marketing plan. (Baker, 2016; Pettinga et al., 2015). Initially, the MM was defined as *Product*, *Price*, *Place*, and *Promotion*, also known as the four *P*s (Borden, 1964; Baker, 2016). For service organizations such as public schools, the MM has been extended to the

seven *Ps*, adding *Process*, *Physical Environment*, and *People* (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). *Product* is the item or service that is provided. In addition to providing an education to students, schools typically offer other services such as athletic programs, fine arts programs, state-of-the-art facilities, college-level courses, career industry certifications, social-emotional resources, employment opportunities, and technology. *Price* is the cost of the item or service. Citizens pay school districts in the form of taxes for the educational services provided to the local community. In the state of Texas, the Interest and Sinking (I & S) tax rate, considered debt services, and the Maintenance and Operations (M&O) tax rate will impact the total tax rate charged (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, n.d.). *Place* refers to the location where a service is delivered. The location of a city or town can impact the services and opportunities the district provides. Factors such as local economy, industry, housing, city parks, retail, entertainment, and future development may impact the marketing plan. *Promotion* includes paid advertisements, promotional materials, social media tactics, and publications (Pettinga et al., 2015; Ravangard et al., 2020). *Process* refers to how the service or product is delivered to the consumer. Process can impact how quickly and consistently the service is delivered, impacting the customer's overall experience and loyalty (Othman et al., 2019; Ravangard et al., 2020; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016;). Educational marketing may involve school leaders reflecting on processes to ensure that families are satisfied with the educational experience. *Physical environment* refers to a facility's location, aesthetics, architecture, and physical appearance (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). The physical environment of a facility can impact perception, pride, and loyalty to the organization (Tarihoran et al., 2020; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). Many school districts may develop long-range facilities plan to ensure that school buildings are equitable in meeting the community's educational needs (Lavy & Bilbo, 2009). *People*, arguably the most crucial

element in the MM, refers to all stakeholders involved in the organization (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). Students, staff, parents or family members, and community members make up this element for schools. Staff interactions can significantly impact customer satisfaction (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016).

Relationship Marketing

A significant component of marketing is creating value and developing strong, personal interactions with the customer (Silk, 2006; Garrido-Moreno et al., 2018). Likewise, public schools strive to build positive relationships with staff, students, families, and community members. Relationship Marketing (RM) "refers to all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22). Customer relationships, according to RM, play a central role in the marketing of a product; hence, this theory places a strong emphasis on the quality of customer experience and long-term, ongoing relationships (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Steinhoff et al., 2019). Foskett (2012) asserts that effective marketing includes managing many relationships from all stakeholders, which involves effective partnerships and communications. Most service industry businesses will benefit significantly from RM tactics due to the nature and complexity of relationships that may exist between the business and customer when services are provided over time (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Steinhoff et al., 2019; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016).

The Marketization of Schools

Politics and School Reform

In the last 20 years, public schools have experienced a shift in how they, along with the teaching profession, are generally viewed (Goldhaber & Özek, 2019; Sampayo & Leichtman, 2021). State accountability and high-stakes testing have created a situation

where public school performance is on display, for better or worse, and educators feel demoralized (Foskett, 2012; Goldhaber & Özek, 2019; Sampayo & Leichtman, 2021). Regardless of if the accountability standards are an accurate predictor of educational performance or student success, many schools experience the negative pressures from high stakes testing, which may influence public perception and parental satisfaction (Goldhaber & Özek, 2019; Verger et al., 2020). Public education has become a polarizing topic in United States politics, and funding for public education has gradually experienced a decrease over time, even though the cost of education has become more expensive (Brimley et al., 2020). It seems that more than a few politicians have made it a point to promote school choice alternatives as a solution to "failing" public schools, as determined by changing accountability standards and high-stakes testing. School vouchers and tax incentives have been adopted in several states to allow parents to send their children to non-public schools using public funds (Brimley et al., 2020). Politics and high-stakes accountability have produced a competitive market in K-12 education. Today's public school leaders have begun using marketing tactics to stay competitive with charter schools and private schools (Angelov et al., 2020; Lubienski, 2007). Case in point: public school districts in Texas are developing specific marketing strategies, which showcase certain benefits and services to attract more families (Hill, 2018). Similar to the marketing climate in higher education, many K-12 schools in the United States now face a highly competitive marketplace, as many parents have begun to view education as a consumer-based product (Angelov et al., 2020; Kirp, 2004; Lubienski, 2007).

School Choice Movement

Recent school reforms and state legislators have brought about an opportunity for non-public schools to compete with public schools (Hill, 2018). This competition is believed to improve the quality of education in both the public and private sectors

(Foskett, 2012). School competition, in theory, will allow effective schools to generate more student revenue and cause low-performing schools to close down (Foskett, 2012; Lubienski, 2007). As a result, the number of charter schools in the United States has grown to over 7,500 as of 2018-2019, while Texas houses over 830 charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2021). Parents now have options when it comes to educating their children. In addition to charter schools, parents may consider magnet schools, private schools, open-enrollment schools, virtual schools, or homeschool as an alternative to public education. Several states have provided tax credits or vouchers to help fund these education alternatives. Advocates argue that funding formulas for non-public schools should be allowed because many parents are not satisfied with public education and believe it is their right to select alternative educational options using tax funds (Brimley et al., 2020).

The Need for Public School Marketing

The School Choice movement has created a need for public schools to apply marketing strategies (Hill, 2018; May, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). For this purpose, public schools should consider developing strategic marketing plans to effectively market their services to families (DiMartino & Jessen, 2016; Foskett, 2002; Oplatka, 2007). Research has indicated that, indeed, school districts have changed their marketing approach within the last five years to better relate to students and parents (Hill, 2018). Educational marketing can meet several needs in the school and community. Marketing student accomplishments and program offerings allow schools to recognize students and showcase services that attract and retain families (DiMartino & Jessen, 2016). Effective branding can help build a sense of loyalty and pride amongst students and staff (Foskett, 2002; Oplatka, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Effective marketing may also help schools become more intentional about listening and responding

to specific concerns in the community (Lumby & Foskett, 1999; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016).

Educational Marketing

Common School Marketing Strategies

Educational marketing is effectively applied when schools, districts, colleges, or universities analyze current data, plan a marketing campaign based on clear outcomes, and implement marketing tactics with targeted goals (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Manea & Purcaru, 2017; Tahir et al., 2017). Many school districts do not use a strategic marketing plan based on marketing research; however, most school districts use marketing tactics in some method or manner (James & Phillips, 1995; Oplatka, 2002; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). One of the most common strategies used by school districts is promotion tactics. Promotion tactics may include press release and non-press release stories or features. Promotion tactics can increase the amount of attention an organization receives, positively defining or enhancing an institution's brand (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Samokhvalova, 2017). For example, a school may feature the unique qualities of an education program at the elementary school on social media or as a press release to the local media outlets.

A traditional marketing strategy found in the public school system is brochures and print publications (Khan & Qureshi, 2010; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). School brochures provide relevant information and attractive visuals that highlight the positive attributes of a school or business (Khan & Qureshi, 2010). Many principals perceive brochures as an effective marketing tool for their schools (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Brochures can provide information about a school district to families new to the area and can be distributed to applicants at job fairs.

Studies show that many schools and universities actively engage in branding (Alam et al., 2019; Oplatka, 2002). Branding in the form of logos, mascots, signs, slogans, templates, and themes helps provide meaningful recognition and distinctive value for schools (Alam et al., 2019; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Branding can create a sense of identity and loyalty from staff, parents, students, and community members (Alam et al., 2019; Foskett, 2002; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Many school districts make it a point to use a consistent logo and slogan on buildings, clothing, and print publications.

While websites are vital for gathering information, they should also be utilized as a primary marketing tool where the services and programs are featured (McCabe & Weaver, 2018; Smith, 2007). Almost all public schools have websites that provide information about the school and usually include news, stories, photos, and videos. It has been shown that most schools have similar content and photos compared to one another, suggesting that school leaders might not see the marketing potential of websites (Smith, 2007).

Social Media

Social media is a free tool that schools can use with their staff and families for communications, public relations, and family engagement (Pettinga et al., 2015; Willis & Exley, 2018). Social media allows users to engage and respond to posts, which gives schools the ability to interact with their community in real-time (Pettinga et al., 2015). This approach is very different from traditional marketing tactics that have typically contained a one-way messaging system. Various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, provide unique content to their users. Social media has become a massive disrupter in marketing and has transformed how businesses connect with customers (Appel et al., 2020; Sheth, 2018). As of July 2021, approximately

4.48 billion people using social media spend over 2 hours per day on average on social media platforms (*Kepios*, 2021*).* Sheth (2018) notes that 94% of marketers now utilize Facebook, the largest social media platform globally, to attract consumers. Social media allows organizations to easily share photos, videos, digital images, and informational text with their audience.

Social media pages can accumulate fans, allowing others to follow and see their postings. Facebook, for example, operates in a manner where if a person likes the page, he or she will begin to see updated posts in the news feed. However, previous research has shown that a meager percentage of Facebook fans engage on an organization's Facebook page (Lee et al., 2018). Therefore, it may be necessary for schools to understand which strategies typically yield higher levels of engagement and interaction. For example, photos receive more user engagement than other post types (Kwok & Yu, 2013; Peruta & Shields, 2018). Directly informative content is more likely to result in low levels of engagement (Lee et al., 2018). On the contrary, content that integrates brand personality results in higher levels of engagement. Brand personality content may include emotions, humor, or inspiration in the post (Lee et al., 2018). For this reason, it is necessary to consider content engineering, where content is specifically designed to help improve user engagement and interaction on social media (Lee et al., 2018). There are various levels of user engagement on social media platforms. Platt et al. (2016) developed a spectrum to demonstrate the various levels of user engagement. At low levels of engagement, users observe the social media post. The next level of engagement is when the user *likes* the post. Further up the spectrum, users explore the post by clicking on photos or videos. At higher levels of engagement, the user comments on the post, share the post, or converses on the post and interacts with other users or the organization (Platt et al., 2016). Posts that intentionally strive for higher levels of engagement, such as

encouraging comments and asking questions, may increase opportunities for community users to interact with the organization (Platt et al., 2016). Social media strategies promoting multi-way engagement can help organizations access the missing social opportunities from traditional media platforms (Platt et al., 2016).

Organizations have several options for expanding their social media reach. A post on social media has an organic reach based on the platform's algorithm, meaning that some of the organization's followers will see the post on their social media feed. The organic reach will increase in exposure as more users engage with the post (Peruta & Shields, 2018). The organic reach of a given post has declined compared to previous years on Facebook, which means that social media posts only reach a limited percentage of an organization's followers (Cooper, 2021). Organizations can pay money to boost a Facebook post, which allows the post to reach more people as paid content (Facebook, 2020). For example, a school may opt for paid content on Facebook and boost a critical post. The frequency of posts can impact user engagement. One study has shown that posting more than two times a day can reduce fan engagement, most likely due to excessive content from one company or organization (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

Limitations in School Marketing Strategies

Although most public school districts use marketing tactics at some level, research suggests that there are limitations in public education marketing practices (Angelov et al., 2020; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Pettinga et al., 2015). As previously mentioned, schools typically do not solicit feedback or input from parents or students when making marketing decisions; instead, they either assume they know what stakeholders need or gather feedback informally (James & Phillips, 1995; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). It has been shown, for instance, that school leaders typically do not use formal methods of environmental analysis when determining marketing needs.

They may, however, gather information through parent conversations and personal observations (Oplatka, 2002; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). This lack of systematic input gathering may negatively affect the planning and implementation of educational marketing (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

Another limitation found in traditional educational marketing in public schools is the lack of strategic planning. Schools typically have a reactive marketing approach by increased competition from local charter or non-public schools (Dimartino & Jessen, 2016; Foskett, 2002; Oplatka, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). This type of marketing practice contrasts with a proactive approach that strategic planning would foster (Dimartino & Jessen, 2016; Foskett, 2002; Oplatka, 2007). While most administrators and school leaders may see the value of marketing, most have not adopted a market orientation mindset (Angelov et al., 2020; Pettinga et al., 2015). School administrators or district staff may use marketing tactics in the form of a checklist to show marketing activity, but what is missing is systematic planning using the key ingredients of a Marketing Mix, as previously mentioned (Pettinga et al., 2015). In addition, school districts do not tend to evaluate marketing performance or results (James & Phillips, 1995; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

Summary of findings

The public education landscape has changed over the last few decades due to increased pressure from state accountability systems and rising competition from charter schools. Given these challenges, school leaders need knowledge and skills in educational marketing to effectively connect and engage with parents and community members (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Eger et al., 2019). Kotler and Fox (1995) explain that having a marketing perspective means listening to the customer's needs and responding with customized services. Most school leaders appear to have a limited understanding of

this type of marketing orientation (Angelov et al., 2020; Pettinga et al., 2015). They may view marketing as a one-way tool for communication or promotion but do not view marketing as something that can meet the needs of stakeholders through value exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Pettinga et al., 2015). Schools have the opportunity to communicate the value they provide to students, parents, and the community in exchange for the time, tax support, and local pride that comes from community stakeholders (Angelov et al., 2020; Pettinga et al., 2015). Schools should consider adopting a customer-oriented marketing approach and focus more on relationships, service, and partnerships (Eger et al., 2019; Foskett, 2012).

Based on the literature review, it seems that the current approach to public school marketing lacks strategic planning and the application of a MM. Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2012) note that there is a "lack of coherent, systematic marketing process in schools" (p. 23). As a result, schools may overutilize traditional or promotional tactics and underutilize current marketing practices (Angelov et al., 2020; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Pettinga et al., 2015). A few studies highlight the need for schools to implement a MM (Eger et al., 2019; Pettinga et al., 2015). As public schools conduct marketing research and gather input from stakeholders, they can implement a MM to provide a more balanced and relevant marketing plan.

While several studies on the utilization of social media for marketing colleges and universities, there seems to be limited research on how public schools utilize social media as a marketing tool (Clark et al., 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2017; Peruta & Shields, 2018). Indeed, social media is currently considered one of the most popular and effective marketing services to customers (Sheth, 2018). Research on social media may include variables such as preferred social media platforms, target audiences, frequency of posts, post content, and post engagement. While social media marketing studies from colleges

and universities may not necessarily transfer to other educational settings, it is worth investigating these findings' results and considering how they might pave the way for educational marketing in public schools. Thus, this study will investigate how public schools currently use social media as a marketing tool. Furthermore, this study explores the attitudes and opinions of Facebook fans, including parents, family members, and staff, on the Facebook pages of public schools.

Theoretical framework

Relationship Marketing (RM) (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016) are an applied focus of this study. Service organizations, such as public schools, tend to thrive when they can build deep levels of loyalty and trust with their customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). Effective social media practices may help improve parental engagement and trust. The RM/CRM viewpoint will be used to analyze the data in this study. This study also considers the application of the MM for public schools (Pettinga et al., 2015; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). Specifically, social media may serve as a critical ingredient in the MM and may help improve school image, branding, and public relations within a competitive marketplace. Previous research has shown that a university's Facebook community, for example, may help improve brand awareness, engagement, and trust with the university's community (Nevzat et al., 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2018). Likewise, this theory would suggest that the social media presence of a public school may help promote or improve family engagement, interaction, and communications in general.

Conclusions

Public education faces increased competition due to the rapid spread of charter and private schools. As a result, school leaders may have to increase their marketing knowledge and skills. Marketing theories such as RM/CRM may help public schools

improve communication efforts and strengthen engagement with their families. In addition, school leaders may benefit from using social media as an essential marketing tool. The literature suggests that social media provides clear advantages in marketing. Based on this research, social media may be a critical factor in helping public schools build more positive connections with their parents and community. The following chapter on methodology will define the research used in this study.

CHAPTER III:

METHODOLOGY

Using a mixed-methods approach, the researcher attempted to identify current practices regarding the use of social media in public schools. The researcher analyzed social media tactics from various elementary schools near a major city in Texas using content analysis, which allowed the researcher to review social media posts and code the information into categories, themes, and concepts (Lai & To, 2015). Analysis of Facebook posts looked for frequency, total engagement, post type, and post content. Post content was categorized to help determine what information schools are communicating to parents via social media. In addition, an analysis of Facebook comments was conducted to identify attitudinal responses and themes from the school community. Descriptive and inferential statistics were analyzed for the quantitative portion, while patterns and themes from posts and comments were identified and reviewed for the qualitative portion of this study. This chapter explains the methodologies of this study.

Overview of the Research Problem

Public education is entering a consumer-driven sector where it must compete for students and tax dollars, partly due to the widespread rise of charter schools that seek to tap into the funds that have been set aside for public schools (Brimley et al., 2020). Most school districts have a communications director or public relations department that engages in marketing and branding. There is typically someone responsible for marketing and public relations at the campus level, such as the principal, assistant principal, or librarian. Historically, many school leaders do not have the knowledge or skills to market their schools because they have not had the requirements to apply proper marketing research (Oplatka, 2002; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Pettinga et al., 2015). Educational marketing in higher education institutions may provide public schools insight

into how to effectively implement marketing tactics in the education sector. Colleges and universities have always competed for students, and as a result, they tend to be more experienced in their marketing and branding efforts (Anctil, 2008; Foskett, 2012; McGrath, 2002; Peruta & Shields, 2018).

Social media platforms may be low-hanging fruit for public schools interested in improving marketing and public relations. Many marketers are taking advantage of social media and online advertising as an effective and affordable marketing tactic (Sheth, 2018; Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Social media marketing is valuable because it allows businesses and consumers to interact in a quick, inexpensive manner (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Social media can help schools strengthen their branding and communications efforts with parents by sharing positive school experiences online (Brech et al., 2016). Though public schools may use social media already, prior research indicates that school leaders may not know how to effectively apply effective marketing tactics (Pettinga et al., 2015). School leaders can strengthen community engagement and build trust when they effectively apply marketing tactics with their audience (Brech et al., 2016; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Stelzner, 2017).

Operationalization of Theoretical Constructs

Social media is defined as online platforms that allow participants to engage and interact with shared content in real-time or afterward; interaction and engagement are not dependent on physical location (Brech et al., 2016; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Sheth, 2018). Social media allows most communication and interactivity to be visible and open to the public with an opportunity to react and engage with the content or post (Brech et al., 2016). Facebook is the largest social media platform with over 2.5 billion users per month (Brech et al., 2016; Facebook, 2020). Due to the volume of Facebook users, social media marketing has become a staple in strategic marketing (Brech et al., 2016; Sheth,

2018). Various metrics can be measured to determine if social media posts increase user engagement. For this study, social media will be operationalized as posts on Facebook by schools. This study will consider several social media variables, including frequency, post content, and post type.

Post Frequency

Post frequency is operationalized as the number of posts during a specific time window. Post frequency can impact user engagement. For this study, excessive post frequency, defined as three or more posts in one day, can result in more infrequent user reactions or engagement (McLachlan, 2021; Peruta & Shields, 2017). The infrequency of social media posts will reduce communications and overall exposure. For this study, the infrequency of social media posts is defined as not posting content for four or more weekdays.

Post Content

Post content is operationalized as the actual message, or message category, shared with the audience. Schools may post informational content about student report cards being sent home or upcoming events such as parent night. Schools may also post student recognition, staff recognition, or program accomplishments. For example, if the high school football team wins, then the high school may post a celebratory picture of the scoreboard or team photos. Schools may also post content meaningful for parents but not directly related to the school. For example, a school may share a local city Facebook page post concerning an upcoming election. Companies and organizations may create a post with a *call to action* in the content (Peruta & Shields, 2018; Vahl, 2015). This marketing strategy asks the users to respond in a specific way. For example, social media posts may include a click option to “learn more” or “call now.” For this study, eight content categories were identified using content analysis. Four of the eight content categories

were coded as *announcements,* and the other four content categories were coded as recognitions or *celebrations.* The *announcement* content categories are as follows: informational announcements, event announcements, fundraiser announcements, and shared announcements. The *celebration* content categories include student celebrations, staff celebrations, family celebrations, and business or partnership celebrations.

Post type

Post type is operationalized as the format or media included with the social media message and is categorically defined as photo, video, digital graphic, or text only. Post types may also include specific status updates, such as updating one's profile picture or checking in to a specific location. Schools have the ability to post photos or videos of staff and students. Schools can also use the *Facebook Live* feature, a live feed of an event in video. This feature is interesting because the user reactions and engagement also occur in real-time, creating a situation where two-way communication can occur spontaneously. Schools can utilize various digital graphics tools to create digital images for specific posts. For example, a school can create a graphic with the message, "We are hiring!" The digital graphic can include artwork, colors, and designs to make the content more attractive. Schools can also post a text-only message. For example, a school may need to send social media messages, such as "yearbooks are on sale in the library." This message may not include additional photos, videos, or digital graphics.

Economically Disadvantaged

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) identifies the count and percentage of districts and schools with students identified as economically disadvantaged (Texas Education Agency, 2021, April 14). The percentage of economically disadvantaged students is identified based on the combined number of students who qualify to receive free meals, reduced-price meals, and "other economic disadvantaged." The economically

disadvantaged percentage is reported in multiple places from TEA, impacting state accountability scores and comparisons to other schools and districts.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how elementary schools near a major city in Texas use social media as a tool for marketing and communications. Furthermore, this study seeks to explore communication trends on social media from schools and attitudinal responses from parents or community members on social media. Many higher education institutions utilize one or more social media platforms for branding and marketing purposes and Facebook typically serves as the central social media channel for colleges and universities (Peruta & Shields, 2018). In addition, it has been shown that more public schools are now operating in a marketized environment, which may require a marketing response similar to institutions of higher education (Kirp, 2004; Lubienski, 2007). This study aims to learn more about social media as a marketing tool for public schools. This study will address the following research questions:

Quantitative Research Questions:

1. How do schools utilize social media as a marketing and public relations resource?
2. Is there an association between social media post content, post type, and user engagement?
3. Is there an association between social media activity and school demographics?

Qualitative Research Questions:

4. What are the short-term communication trends of schools on social media?
5. What are the attitudinal responses of parents and other users towards schools?

Research Design

In order to better understand the research problem, a mixed-methods design was applied to this study. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used,

allowing the researcher to collect and analyze quantitative data in the first phase and then collect qualitative data afterward to help further explain the study's results (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this investigative study, content analysis was used to identify social media content and engagement from various elementary schools near a major city in Texas. This data was reviewed and analyzed to understand better how schools use social media for marketing and communications.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research design technique that allows the researcher to make inferences based on information within a given context (Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis has both quantitative and qualitative qualities. It attempts to describe the various content categories within specific content or analyzed messages (Krippendorff, 2018). The researcher can systematically identify specific patterns and characteristics from the content (Lai & To, 2015). Once a topic and sample have been selected, the researcher will define what will be counted and then create categories and coding forms (Lai & To, 2015). Content analysis procedures were adapted for this study based on the work from Peruta and Shields (2018). Peruta and Shields (2018) individually coded at the individual post level for content category and format. A word or phrase that identified the post's subject was used to help group posts into meaningful categories. Their research used content analysis to determine which social media content and format yielded the most user engagement from colleges and universities (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Inter-coder reliability should be considered in content analysis, which may require other coders to be trained when data is collected (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

For the context of this study, social media content analysis is advantageous in that it allows the researcher to observe natural interactions between a school and its parents or stakeholders (Lai & To, 2015). Social media can provide data from the real world from a

wide range of users without researcher interference (Andreotta et al., 2019). In addition, social media content analysis allows the researcher to analyze posts that participants have already completed; this technique may help reduce bias from respondents because it does not actively recruit participants as one might do with a survey or interview (Andreotta et al., 2019; Lai & To, 2015).

Content analysis allowed the researcher to analyze the message content and types of posts from the school's Facebook page. After collecting and analyzing quantitative data, the researcher performed content analysis to examine qualitative data. The researcher collected qualitative data from social media posts to better understand communication trends amongst parents and other stakeholders. Facebook comments made by parents and other audience members were categorized and then analyzed to help detect attitudinal responses towards social media posts from schools. This research design allowed the researcher to integrate both quantitative and qualitative data from the content analysis, hence providing a deeper understanding of how social media is being utilized for marketing and communications in public schools.

Population and Sample

The targeted population for this study is medium to large schools near a major city in Texas. From this population, the sample included a purposeful selection of 18 elementary schools from eight school districts in similar proximity and location to a large city in Texas. The location and proximity of schools to a large city may help to eliminate confounding variables based on school location, demographics, or community type. Only schools with active Facebook accounts were selected for this study. The proximity of selected schools ranged from 14 to 29 miles with a median distance of 24 miles. All schools in the sample could be considered urban or suburban based on location, and none of the schools are rural. The eight school districts included in the sample ranged from

approximately 6,000 students to approximately 52,000 students, with a median population of approximately 22,500 students (Texas Education Agency, 2021). The sampled schools ranged from 451 to 1,140 students, with a median size of 670 students (Texas Education Agency, 2021). The economically disadvantaged status of the schools was also considered in this study. The highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students was 94.0%, while the lowest percentage of economically disadvantaged students was 18.3% within the sample. The median percentage of economically disadvantaged schools was 75.3% (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over three weeks in early fall by reviewing Facebook posts from 18 elementary schools. This window of time was selected because all schools had begun their school year at this point, and schools that utilized Facebook would most likely be posting content starting the first day of school. The researcher reviewed posts, reactions, comments, and shares from each Facebook page beginning on a Monday and ending on a Friday three weeks later. Posts were viewed at least five days after the actual end date to allow users to engage or respond to the posts. Post content from the schools was coded and categorized to help identify the school's communication trends. User comments were coded and categorized to help identify attitudinal responses from parents or users to the school's Facebook posts.

Quantitative Data Collection

For this study, page level and post level data were first collected from each school's Facebook page to verify the social media account. Page level data included each school's profile picture and the number of followers. Post level data includes the following for each Facebook post during the selected time window: post creation date, post message, post or media type, number of likes, number of comments, and number of

shares. The researcher coded each post for content categories and post type. Following a category coding process similar to the study by Peruta and Shields (2018), the researcher used open coding to define the content categories in this study. The researcher reviewed 20 Facebook posts from public schools not included in the study to help identify common themes and patterns. Posts were summarized using a word or phrase that applied to the purpose of the post. This process was repeated to ensure that most posts fall into one post type and one content category. As a result of this process, the researcher developed four post types and eight post content categories. The researcher did not place a post in more than one content category or post type. The data was stored in Microsoft Excel and then imported to SPSS-28 for evaluation based on statistical analysis.

Interrater Reliability

An independent reviewer coded 30% of the posts for content categories and post type for this study. The researcher provided the four post types and the eight content categories identified through the initial coding process. The reviewer was asked to complete an independent review of Facebook posts using these post types and content categories. The independent reviewer was provided 62 random Facebook posts from the study to code. Interrater reliability (IRR) was calculated by taking the total agreements (TA = 58) divided by the total ratings (TR = 62), then multiplied by 100, which provided an IRR = 94%.

Qualitative Data Collection

Once the quantitative data was collected, all Facebook posts and user comments were collected for the qualitative portion of this study. The researcher identified and collected each post during the three weeks for the 18 schools. Posts were copied from Facebook and inserted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. In addition, posts that included comments were identified, and all comments were also copied and inserted into a

Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. All comments were unedited and included photos, emojis, and replies from the school or other Facebook members. In total, 197 comments were collected during the study.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed quantitative and qualitative data for this study. Research questions 1, 2, 3 were answered using statistical data provided by social media posts during the time period of the study. Qualitative thematic analysis (TA) was used to answer research questions 4 and 5, where themes were developed from school posts and user comments on social media.

Quantitative

The data was stored in Microsoft Excel and then imported to SPSS-28 for evaluation based on statistical analysis. The first research question asked how schools utilize social media as a resource for marketing and relations. For this question, descriptive statistics were used to evaluate social media activity from the public schools according to post type and content categories. The second research question asked if there was a relationship between post content, post type, and user engagement. First, descriptive statistics were used to identify which post type yielded the most user engagement and which post content category yielded the most user engagement. Second, inferential statistics were applied to help determine if the observed categorical data matched the expected results. Chi-square test of association revealed if any associations existed between post content categories, post type, and user engagement. Statistical significance or p-value of .05 was used to determine statistical significance between post content, post type, and user engagement. Cramer's V was used to determine the strength of the association. The third research question asked if an association existed between social media activity and school demographics. A chi-square test of association was

applied to help determine if the school's economically disadvantaged percentage influences frequency and user engagement. Cramer's V was used to determine the strength of the association.

Qualitative

Once the quantitative data was collected, all Facebook posts and user comments were analyzed for the qualitative portion of this study. Qualitative thematic analysis (TA) was used to help the researcher identify distinct topics and themes in the qualitative data (Andreotta et al., 2019; Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to search for common themes and patterns regarding the communication trends of schools and attitudinal responses of users towards schools on social media. This technique allowed the researcher to identify themes and interpret the content based on the research question, including the social context and underlying meaning of Facebook comments that may exist. The researcher modified an approach to TA based on Andreotta et al. (2019) study to answer the fourth and fifth research questions. The fourth research question asked about the short-term communication trends of schools on social media. Thematic analysis was used to help answer this question. All Facebook posts were reviewed according to the two major content categories: announcement-based and celebration-based categories. Keywords or phrases were then identified and used as initial codes. The researcher grouped the data according to similar post topics or features. Themes were generated based on the analysis of these topics. The fifth research question asked about the attitudinal responses of parents and other users towards schools on social media. First, all comments were read according to the post content categories, which allowed the researcher to see comments grouped according to these categories. Keywords or phrases in the comments were then identified and used as initial codes, which allowed the researcher to group the data according to similar topics or features. These categories

allowed the researcher to search for themes that directly pertained to the research question (Andreotta et al., 2019). Peers independently reviewed comments and topics for validity purposes. The topics were then analyzed, and themes were generated. The researcher then followed the same process according to the emotional nature of the comments. The researcher read all comments and grouped them according to keywords or phrases related to positive emotions, neutral or non-emotions, or negative emotions. These emotion-based topics were then analyzed, and themes were generated. The common themes generated from both the content and emotion-based categories helped the researcher determine the attitudinal responses of users towards schools on social media.

Qualitative Validity

Qualitative validity was established using a peer-review process and triangulation. Peers independently reviewed all user comments and topics to ensure the validity of selected topics and the organization of comments. Peer reviewers have experience in social media marketing and public schools. A variety of data sources were used for triangulation. Specifically, the results from the qualitative portion were compared to the results from the quantitative portion of this study to help strengthen the validity and ensure a more comprehensive understanding of social media as a marketing tool for public schools.

Privacy and Ethical Considerations

Steps were taken to ensure that privacy was maintained throughout this study. All social media data is available to the public, and it is not private or confidential. No personally-identifying information was kept or stored, and all data was anonymized to protect the schools in this study. The data were collected and kept on a password-protected computer, and only the researcher has access to the password. All data will be

destroyed three years after the time of the study. Actual Facebook profile names were not used in this study to ensure the privacy and protection of all participants. Approval from the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL) Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) was obtained before collecting data.

Conclusion

The field of education is evolving into a marketplace where public schools need to market their services. Schools may benefit from applying a marketing plan similar to the business industry to improve public relations, communications, and branding with parents and community members. Research has indicated that social media has become a vital marketing tool for most sectors. The CA provided the researcher with data and insight regarding how public schools currently use social media as a tool for marketing and communications. Thematic analysis of Facebook comments provided additional insight on the attitudinal responses of parents and other users towards schools on social media. The applied mixed-methods approach allowed the researcher to examine various social media angles in today's public schools.

CHAPTER IV:

RESULTS

This study examined how schools currently use social media as a marketing and communications tool, as well as investigated attitudinal responses from parents and community members on public school social media sites. The chapter aims to review and analyze social media data from public schools for the quantitative portion of this study and examine social media posts and user comments for the qualitative portion of this study. Based on the findings from content analysis, the research questions will be answered according to the results of this study.

School Demographics

This study included 18 suburban elementary schools near a major city in Texas: all schools owned an active Facebook page. The Facebook pages were reviewed during three weeks in Fall 2021. Descriptive statistics and frequency tables were calculated based on demographic data from the Texas Education Agency (Texas Education Agency, 2021). This data was entered in Microsoft Excel and imported into SPSS-28. Table 1 summarizes school and district demographics, which include approximations for district population, student population, Facebook followers, and campus low socio-economic (SES) percentages. Based on these data, it was revealed that the district student population ranged from approximately 6,000 to 52,000 students with a median of 32,500 students (n = 8). The school student population ranged from approximately 450 to 1,000 students, with a median of 671 students (n = 18). The range of Facebook followers was approximately 275 to 1940 followers, with a median of 623 followers (n = 18). The range of economically disadvantaged percentage was approximately 15% to 95%, with a median of 72%.

Table 1

District and Campus Demographics

	N	Percentage (%)
District Student Population		
Under 10,000	1	12.5%
10,000-20,000	3	37.5%
20,000-30,000	2	25%
30,000-40,000	0	0%
40,000-50,000	2	25%
Over 50,000	1	12.5%
School Student Population		
Under 500	1	5.5%
500-600	2	11.1%
600-700	8	44.4%
700-800	5	27.8%
800-900	1	5.5%
900-1000	1	5.5%
Facebook Followers		
Under 500	4	22.2%
500-750	9	50%
750-1250	2	11.1%
1250-1750	1	5.6%
1750-2000	2	11.1%
Economically Disadvantaged Percentage		
Under 30%	4	22.2%
30% - 50%	3	16.7%
50% - 70%	2	11.1%
70% - 90%	5	27.8%
Above 90%	4	22.2%

The qualitative portion of this study involved content analysis of Facebook posts from the 18 elementary schools. Posts were analyzed for topics and features using TA. User comments from these Facebook posts were also analyzed via TA to identify topics

and unique features. Due to the nature of Facebook posts and user comments, individual demographics were not investigated for review. It appeared that the majority of user comments were generated from parents or family members who attended the elementary school. In addition, it seemed that staff members also provided comments to these Facebook posts. Several posts and user comments were written in Spanish, indicating that at least a portion of the users in this study were Hispanic or bilingual.

Research Question 1

Research question one asked, *how do schools utilize social media as a marketing and public relations resource?* Descriptive statistics were applied to the collected data to answer this question. Table 2 shows the frequency of posts from the 18 schools during the three-week window. The first week contained 53 total Facebook posts, the second week contained 74 Facebook posts, and the third week contained 81 Facebook posts. In total, the 18 schools placed 208 social media posts on Facebook. Two schools did not post any content on Facebook during the first week, and all 18 schools posted at least once during the second and third week. The maximum number of posts during one week from one school was 11. During the three-week study, the fewest number of Facebook posts from one school was three, and the greatest number of posts from one school was 24. The average number of Facebook posts from a school during the three weeks was almost 12 (M = 11.56; Mdn = 12). Regarding the frequency of posts, it was noted during this portion of the study that there were 17 instances where schools posted three or more times on the same day. One-third of the schools posted four or more times in one day during the study, and one school posted seven times in one day. Also worthy of mentioning is that there were instances where the consistency of posts was lacking. For example, there were 15 instances where a school would not post on Facebook for four or more days, not including the weekends.

Table 2

Frequency of Facebook Posts

	Schools	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median
Week 1 Posts	18	53	0	10	2.94	2
Week 2 Posts	18	74	1	9	4.11	4
Week 3 Posts	18	81	1	11	4.50	3.5
Total Posts	18	208	3	24	11.56	12

This study identified four basic *post types* used in the school's social media posts. Social media typically includes media, or post types, to promote or augment the post content, such as a photo, video, or digital graphic. Certain post types can increase user engagement (Kwok & Yu, 2013; Peruta & Shields, 2018). The researcher was interested in how public schools use post types in social media content. Table 3 shows the frequency of post types during the study, sorted from highest to lowest frequency.

Table 3

Frequency of Post Types

	Schools	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median
Digital Graphics	18	106	0	12	5.89	7
Photos	18	82	0	8	4.56	5
Text Only	18	11	0	3	0.61	0
Videos	18	9	0	3	0.50	0

The post type with the highest frequency was *digital graphics*. A *digital graphic* is an electronic image that may include color, art, text, and images in the graphic design. For example, a school can create a digital graphic with the message, "We are hiring!" This image may include specific colors, fonts, and art to help the message stand out on social media. Out of 208 Facebook posts, digital graphics were included in 51% (N = 106) of the posts. Seventeen of 18 schools used digital graphics as a post type at least one time during this study. The maximum usage of digital graphics came from three schools, which used digital graphics in their Facebook postings 12 times during the three weeks. Schools used digital graphics an average of almost 6 posts per school (*M* = 5.89; *Mdn* = 7). *Photos* had the second-highest post type frequency in the study. Schools used photos in 39% (N = 82) of Facebook posts. Similar to digital graphics, 17 of the 18 schools used a photo as a post type at least once during the timeframe. The most usage of photos came from two schools, which posted photos eight times during the study. During this study, the average use of photos as a post type was almost five posts per school (*M* = 4.56; *Mdn* = 5). *Text only* and *video* post types had the lowest frequency in this study. Schools posted *text only* content on Facebook 11 times during the study. Eleven of 18 schools did not have a text only post, while seven schools posted *text only* at least once. The maximum number of *text only* posts from one school in this study was three. *Videos* were the least used post type in this study (N = 9). Similar to text only posts, 12 schools did not post a video, while six schools utilized video at least once during this study. The maximum number of videos from a school was three posts. Figure 1 demonstrates how each school utilized each post type.

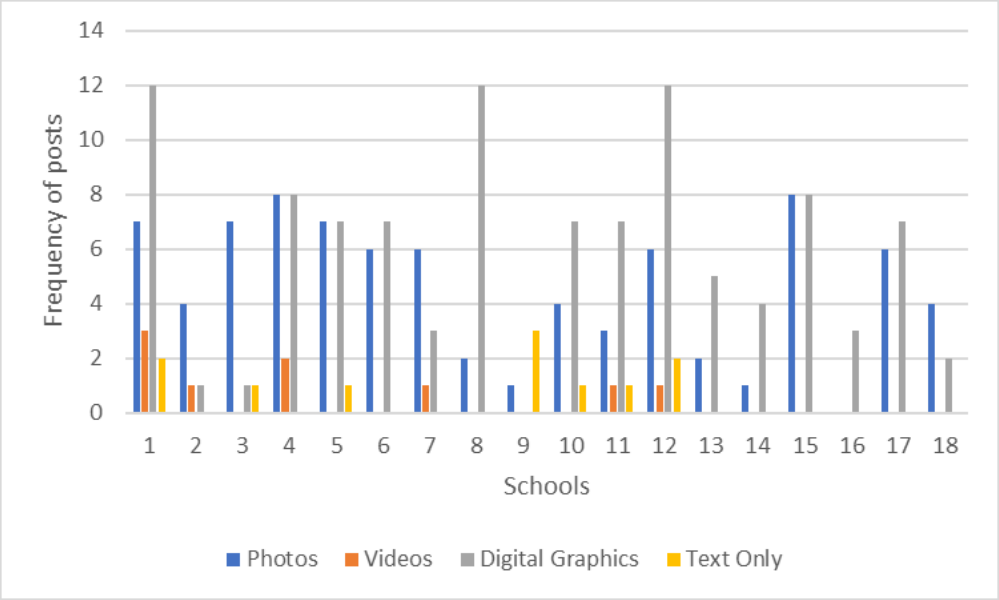

Figure 1. Frequency of post type by school. This figure demonstrates the frequency of each post type by school.

Eight content categories were identified and coded through the CA process. These categories were then organized into two major groups: announcement-based posts and celebration-based posts. Four announcement-based categories were identified and coded within the *announcement* group: informational announcements, event-related announcements, fundraiser announcements, and shared content from other Facebook sites. Informational announcements included content that the school considered important for parents and families. For example, one school posted information about the lunch menu for the week. Another example included a Facebook post reminder about an upcoming school holiday. Event-related posts announced an upcoming event for students or families. Several schools posted upcoming parent meetings on social media, including the date, time, location, and topic. During the three weeks, special events for parents, grandparents, or community members were also posted. The third category included announcements about fundraisers. Several schools announced fundraising opportunities on social media, including a themed shirt to purchase or a schoolwide benefit for a specific cause. The last announcement-based category was shared content. Some schools shared Facebook posts from another page to the school community. For example, a

school shared a Facebook post from the school district's Facebook page about district COVID safety protocols. Four celebration-based categories were identified and coded within the *celebration* group: student celebrations; staff celebrations; parent or family celebrations; and celebrations that acknowledged a business or community partnership. Many schools posted content on social media that celebrated and acknowledged students who received special recognition or awards. Schools also celebrated students involved in a program or a classroom that was being highlighted. When schools recognized staff members on social media, these posts were coded as staff celebrations. For example, several schools showcased teachers who received weekly or monthly recognition. Another example would include featured staff for participating in a thematic spirit day at the school. The third celebration-based content category was parent or family celebrations. Schools posted content that featured parents or families on Facebook during the study. Several schools posted photos of parents or family members who had recently participated in a program or event at the school. The fourth celebration-based category is content that celebrates a business or school partnership. For example, one school recognized a local business for providing student incentives to the school. Table 4 shows the frequency of posts according to content categories during the time of the study, which is sorted from highest to lowest frequency.

Table 4

Frequency of Post Content Categories

	Schools	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median
Announcement Post-Informational	18	59	0	8	3.28	3
Celebration Post-Students	18	40	0	5	2.22	3
Announcement Post-Event	18	37	0	8	2.06	1
Celebration Post-Staff	18	24	0	6	1.33	0.5
Announcement Post-Fundraisers	18	22	0	5	1.22	0
Celebration Post-Family	18	9	0	2	0.50	0
Announcement Post-Shared Information	18	9	0	3	0.50	0
Celebration Post-Business/Partnership	18	8	0	2	0.44	0

Informational announcement posts had the highest frequency (N = 59) of all eight content categories. Within the announcement-based group, event-related announcement posts had the second-highest frequency (N = 37), followed by fundraiser announcements (N = 22) and shared posts (N = 9). Student celebrations had the highest frequency of posts in the celebration-based group (N = 40). Staff celebrations were posted 24 times, while parent or family celebrations included nine posts. Posts that recognized businesses or community partnerships had the lowest frequency of posts for all content categories (N = 8). Figure 2 identifies the number of announcement posts that each school made, and figure 3 shows the number of celebration posts that each school made.

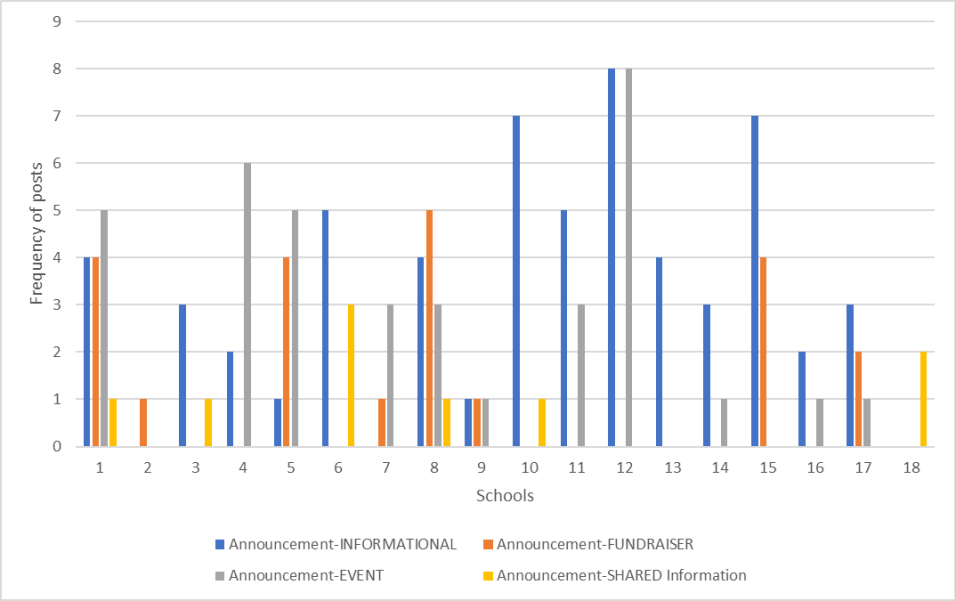

Figure 2. Frequency of announcements. This figure demonstrates the frequency of announcement content categories by school.

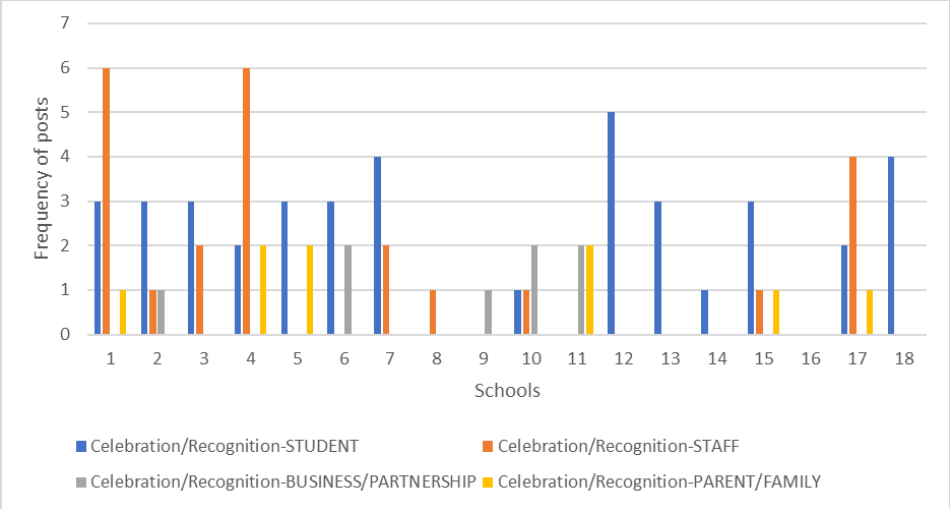

Figure 3. Frequency of celebrations. This figure demonstrates the frequency of celebration content categories by school.

Based on descriptive statistics, schools utilized certain post types at a much higher rate than others. Specifically, schools applied *digital graphics* and *photos* more than other post types during this study. Out of 208 Facebook posts, *digital graphics* were included in 51% (N = 106) of the posts. *Digital graphics* and *photos* together comprised 90.4% (N

= 188) of all posts during the study, while *text only* and *videos* post types together comprised 9.6% (N = 20) of the posts. This study also revealed that schools used certain content categories more than others. Schools in this study tended to use social media for announcements about information, events, and fundraisers more than celebrations during the study. Out of 208 Facebook posts in this study from 18 schools, 61% (N = 127) were coded as announcement-based posts. Celebration-based posts made up 39% of total posts during the study (N = 81). Posts about information and student celebrations were the most frequent, whereas shared content or business celebrations were the least frequent.

Research Question 2

Research question two asked, *Is there an association between social media post content, post type, and user engagement?* CA was used to identify and code content categories and post types to answer this question. Descriptive and inferential statistics were then applied to determine the association between content categories, post type, and user engagement. As previously mentioned, four post types were identified in this study through CA: photos, videos, digital graphics, and text only. Facebook posts were coded according to post type, and engagement data was collected for each post and post type. The total engagement was calculated for each post per post type, which combined the total likes, comments, and shares for each post. Table 5 shows the combined frequency, total engagement, and total engagement mean per post type for all schools in this study. Table 5 is sorted from the highest to lowest total engagement mean. The *videos* post type had the lowest frequency (N = 9) and the highest total engagement mean (M = 47.6). The *photos* post type had the highest total engagement (TE = 2,190) of the four post types and the second-highest total engagement mean (M = 26.7). The total engagement mean for the *text only* post type was over seven times lower than *video* and four times lower than

photos (*M* = 6.4). The *digital graphics* post type had the highest frequency (N = 106) and the lowest total engagement mean (*M* = 6.0) of the four post types.

Table 5

Total Engagement of Post Types

	N	Total Engagement (TE)	Total Engagement Mean
Videos	9	428	47.6
Photos	82	2190	26.7
Text Only	11	70	6.4
Digital Graphics	106	638	6.0

Content analysis was used to identify and code content categories for the Facebook posts from schools. Each post was coded according to the content category, and engagement data was collected. The total engagement was calculated in the same manner as post type. Table 6 shows the combined frequency, total engagement, and total engagement mean per content category for all schools in this study. In addition, Table 6 shows the combined frequency, total engagement, and total engagement mean for announcement-based posts and all celebration-based posts. Table 6 is sorted from highest to lowest total engagement mean per content category. Event-related announcements had the highest total engagement mean in the *announcement* group (*M* = 9.3). Followed by *announcements* about general information, fundraisers, and shared information from all Facebook pages, respectively (*M* = 6.3; *M* = 4.3; *M* = 1.9). Table 6 also shows the combined data for all announcement-based posts (*N* = 127; *M* = 6.5). Celebration posts about staff members received the highest total engagement mean of all content categories (*M* = 39.9). Celebration posts about businesses or local partnerships had the lowest

frequency and second-highest total engagement mean of all posts (*N* = 8; *M* = 36.0). Celebration posts about students had the highest frequency in the *celebration* group and the third-highest total engagement mean of all content categories (*N* = 40; *M* = 26.2). Celebration posts about family members had a relatively low frequency compared to other content categories and the lowest total engagement mean in the *celebration* group (*N* = 9; *M* = 24.9). All celebration-based posts are combined and reported in table 6 (*N* = 81; *M* = 31.0). There are clear differences in frequency and total engagement when comparing all posts in the *announcement* group to all posts in the *celebration* group. In this study, schools posted *announcements* over 50% more (*N* = 127) than they did about *celebrations* (*N* = 81). However, users engaged in *celebration* posts 476% more (*M* = 31.0) than they did with *announcement* posts (*M* = 6.5). One interesting finding is that the category with the second-highest total engagement mean, celebrations about businesses or partnerships, had the lowest frequency of all categories.

Table 6

Total Engagement of Content Categories

	N	Total Engagement	Total Engagement Mean
Announcement Post-Event	37	345	9.3
Announcement Post-Informational	59	370	6.3
Announcement Post-Fundraisers	22	94	4.3
Announcement Post-Shared Information	9	17	1.9
All Announcement Posts	**127**	**826**	**6.5**
Celebration Post-Staff	24	957	39.9
Celebration Post-Business/Partnership	8	288	36.0
Celebration Post-Students	40	1046	26.2
Celebration Post-Family	9	217	24.1
All Celebration Posts	**81**	**2508**	**31.0**

Inferential statistics were then applied to examine the relation between post type and content category. A chi-square association test was performed to examine if post types and content categories were associated according to the frequency of posts. For example, specific content categories, such as celebration posts, may be associated with specific post types more frequently, such as digital graphics or videos. The null hypothesis for this chi-square test stated that the frequency of content categories is not associated with post types. Table 7 shows the results of this chi-square test.

Table 7

Chi-Square Test of Association for Frequency

			Column				
			Photos	Videos	Digital Graphics	Text Only	Total
Rows	Celebration	Count	68	7	5	0	80
		Expected Count	31.4	3.5	36.9	8.2	80.0
	Announcement	Count	12	2	89	21	124
		Expected Count	48.6	5.5	57.1	12.8	124.0
Total		Count	80	9	94	21	204
		Expected Count	80.0	9.0	94.0	21.0	204.0

According to the data, the relationship between these two variables were statistically significant, X^2 (3, N = 204) = 134.8, p = <.001. Specifically, there appeared to be an association between the celebration posts and *photos*. In addition, celebration posts were

not likely to utilize *digital graphics* or *text only* as a post type. Results also revealed a significant relationship between announcement posts and *digital graphics*. Announcement posts were not likely to be associated with *photos* in this study. Cramer's V was reported as the effect size for this test, >.8, which indicated a large effect size. The null hypothesis was rejected according to the data results.

Another chi-square association test was performed to examine the relationship between content categories and post types according to total engagement. *Photos* and *digital graphics* had the highest frequency of post types by far (see Table 5). These two post types were used for this chi-square test. The total engagement mean for each variable was included in the chi-square test. The null hypothesis stated that there is no relationship between post type and content categories based on total engagement. Table 8 shows the results of this chi-square test.

Table 8

Chi-Square Test of Association for Engagement

			Column		
			Photos	Digital Graphics	Total
Rows	Celebration	Count	29	27	56
		Expected Count	33.0	23.0	56.0
	Announcement	Count	17	5	22
		Expected Count	13.0	9.0	22.0
Total		Count	46	32	78
		Expected Count	46.0	32.0	78.0

The results showed that the relationship between post types (photos and digital graphics) and content categories (announcement and celebration) were marginally significant, X^2 (1, N = 78) = 4.2, p = .045 Phi was reported as the effect size for this test, .23, which indicated that the effect size was small. There did not appear to be a relationship between celebration posts and photos or digital graphics based on user engagement. Specifically, celebration posts received a higher level of engagement on average when photos were used; however, the difference did not appear significant. Announcement posts with photos received more engagement than announcement posts with digital graphics. This difference was marginally significant. Based on this finding, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Research Question 3

Research question three asked, *What is the association between social media activity and school demographics?* Both descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to the data to answer this question, similar to research question two. First, the schools with the lowest and highest economically disadvantaged percentages were identified. One-third or 6 of the schools with the lowest economically disadvantaged percentages (i.e., the more affluent schools) were placed in the *low ED* group, and one-third or 6 of the schools with the highest economically disadvantaged percentages were placed in the *high ED* group. The *low ED* group had economically disadvantaged percentages from approximately 18% to 45%. The *high ED* group had economically disadvantaged percentages from approximately 88% to 94%. First, frequencies for post type were compared between the two groups. This data is demonstrated in Table 9. Schools in the high ED group had 83 posts compared to 62 low ED schools. High ED schools posted nine *text only* posts, while low ED schools did not use this post type for any posts. Overall, there were few significant findings from the post type frequencies.

Table 9

Frequency of Economically Disadvantaged Schools

	"Low ED schools" frequency	"High ED schools" frequency
Photos	26	26
Videos	1	5
Digital Graphics	35	43
Text Only	0	9

Frequencies for content categories were then compared. This data is demonstrated in Table 10. With the exception of posts about upcoming events, where *high ED* schools

posted at a rate three times higher than *low ED* schools, there were no significant differences with the frequency of posts according to content categories.

Table 10

Frequency of Content Categories

	"Low ED schools" frequency	"High ED schools" frequency
Announcement Post-Informational	16	23
Announcement Post-Fundraisers	12	9
Announcement Post-Event	8	22
Announcement Post-Shared Information	3	1
All Announcement Posts	**39**	**55**
Celebration Post- Students	13	14
Celebration Post- Staff	8	6
Celebration Post-Business/Partnership	0	3
Celebration Post-Family	2	5
All Celebration Posts	**23**	**28**

Total engagement was then calculated for each post per post type for both economically disadvantaged groups. Table 11 shows the total engagement mean per post type for low and high ED group schools in this study. The *videos* post type had the highest total engagement mean for low and high ED groups (M = 121; M = 52.4). The *photos* post type had the second-highest total engagement mean for low and high ED groups (M = 24.6; M = 26.7). It should be noted that the low ED group posted one video compared to five from the high ED group. Total engagement was higher in all post type categories for high ED schools, except for the videos post type.

Table 11

Total Engagement of Economically Disadvantaged Schools

	Low ED schools Total Engagement Mean	High ED schools Total Engagement Mean
Photos	24.6	26.7
Videos	121	52.4
Digital Graphics	4.8	8.3
Text Only	0	6.2

Total engagement was then calculated for each post per post content category for the economically disadvantaged groups. Table 12 shows the total engagement mean per content category for this study's low and high ED groups. In addition, the total engagement mean was calculated for all announcement posts and all celebration posts according to both ED groups. The high ED schools had a higher mean for all announcement posts than the low ED schools (M = 7.5; M = 5.2). The high ED schools also had a higher mean for all celebration posts than the low ED schools (M = 34.4; M = 31.5). Overall, there were no descriptive differences between the two groups.

Table 12

Total Engagement of Content Categories

	Low ED schools Total Engagement Mean	High ED schools Total Engagement Mean
Announcement Post-Informational	4.3	7.1
Announcement Post-Fundraisers	4.2	4.4
Announcement Post-Event	10.5	9.5
Announcement Post-Shared Information	0.3	2
All Announcement Posts	**5.2**	**7.5**
Celebration Post-Students	25.6	23.4
Celebration Post-Staff	42.5	68.8
Celebration Post-Business/Partnership	0	25
Celebration Post-Family	25.5	29.2
All Celebration Posts	**31.5**	**34.4**

A chi-square association test was performed to examine the association between content categories and economically disadvantaged groups according to total engagement. The total engagement mean for each variable was included in the chi-square test. The null hypothesis stated that there is no relationship between economically disadvantaged schools and content categories based on total engagement. Table 13 shows the results of this chi-square test.

Table 13

Chi-Square Test of Association for Engagement

			Total Engagement Mean		
			Announcements	Celebrations	Total
Economically Disadvantaged Groups	Low ED %	Count	5	32	37
		Expected Count	6.1	30.9	37.0
	High ED %	Count	8	34	42
		Expected Count	6.9	35.1	42.0
Total		Count	13	66	79
		Expected Count	13.0	66.0	79.0

The results showed that the relationship between economically disadvantages schools (low ED and high ED) and content categories (announcement and celebration) were not significant, X^2 (1, N = 79) = .438, p = .56. Phi was reported as the effect size for this test, .074, which indicated that the effect size was minimal. Based on this finding, the null hypothesis was not rejected. Schools categorized as low economically disadvantaged seemed to experience similar user engagement levels as schools that were categorized as high economically disadvantaged. In summary, there appears to be little to no association between social media activity and school demographics according to economically disadvantaged percentages for this sample.

Research Question 4

Research question four asked, *What are the short-term communication trends of schools on social media?* This question was answered via qualitative analysis of Facebook posts from the 18 elementary schools. First, all 208 posts were transcribed into Microsoft Excel and organized according to the content categories based on coding from content analysis. Inductive thematic coding was then applied to answer this research

question. Four topics or themes subsequently emerged from the thematic analysis coding process. The first theme centered on posts about *local sports, events, and businesses*. The second theme related to posts about *family engagement.* Third, various posts from many schools related to individual or group *staff recognitions*. The fourth theme, *student development and success,* emerged as schools posted various student-centered content on their social media platform. Aliases for schools, businesses, and people were inserted in direct quotes to help ensure confidentiality. In addition, some of the direct quotes have been slightly altered for the same purpose.

Local Sports, Events, and Businesses

Schools posted content about local businesses, sports, and special recognition days or events in approximately 14% of the total posts during the timeframe of this study. These posts typically referenced a local sporting event, or a special day of recognition and featured students dressed in spirit wear. These posts also acknowledged local businesses that provided a donation or service to the school. These posts included photos with business representatives, students, and school staff.

Local Sports

One subtopic noted in this theme was specific celebrations about sports teams. One post from an elementary school wished the high school football team "good luck tonight" with photos of elementary students wearing spirit shirts supporting the football team. This post included two emojis representing the high school mascot and hashtags. The emojis added visual content, and the hashtags provided labels for specific content or themes. Two schools provided several posts about a national sports team, which featured photos of students with sports attire. These posts included sports-themed emojis and heart emojis. One post stated, "don't forget to wear your bears gear tomorrow!" about a sporting event that was being celebrated schoolwide.

Special Recognition Days

Several schools posted content about special recognition days. In order to help maintain confidentiality, the specific days are not mentioned in this section. However, examples of special recognition days might include breast cancer awareness month, Veterans Day, or teacher appreciation week. During this study, two schools posted photos of students wearing specific colors, recognizing a special day of remembrance. Another school posted photos of students writing letters to recognize a special day. Other schools posted content that thanked community members who were being recognized that day throughout the nation.

Local Events

Another subtopic in this theme was posting district or community events content. Several schools posted content related to city or county training provided to community members. For example, one post shared information about a parent workshop that the city was providing. Another post shared information from the county about a child safety program. A few schools shared content to support children's events and activities from outside organizations. One school, for example, posted content about a children's after-school program for a non-profit organization. This post included a link for parents to register and attend an informational session. Schools also posted shared content from the city or county relevant to the school community. One school shared information about a donation opportunity hosted by the city. Another post shared a story from the county Facebook page that addressed a local matter involving the Sheriff's department.

Local Businesses

Schools appeared to utilize Facebook to recognize or celebrate local businesses and organizations in this study. Several schools posted recognitions for businesses that donated supplies and incentives to students. One post read, "thank you ACME Services

for student supplies and backpacks." This post included photos of students, staff, and business representatives at the school. Another post thanked the organization's leader for the masks and safety supplies donated to the school. The masks were donated for students and staff to wear due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This post also included photos of students, staff, and business representatives. Another example included the school thanking a local business for providing their staff with lunch. This post included photos and hashtags. A few of these posts involved the local city or police department in a positive manner, which may have indicated a community partnership.

Family Engagement

Parent and family engagement is a characteristic that can contribute to positive school culture and climate (Lehr & Christenson, 2002). Several posts from the qualitative data indicated that schools in this study used social media as a possible tool for engaging families. Several subtopics were identified when Facebook posts were examined.

Reminders and Instructions

Schools frequently posted content that provided reminders and instructions to parents. Almost 50% of all posts in this study fell into this subtopic. Many of these were reminders about upcoming events. Several schools hosted events and sent timely reminders on Facebook. Examples include, "hope to see ya'll at 6:00 tomorrow for our PTA meeting!" and "donuts with the principal is tomorrow." Many of these reminders addressed upcoming open house and title I parent meetings. Several schools used a digital graphic as a reminder about these events. While most reminders were short and to the point, a few schools included a reminder video or more detailed explanation of the event. For example, one school posted, "Are you getting phone calls/text from the district to update your student's information but don't know how? Then this training might be for you." This message was also translated in Spanish as "¿Está recibiendo llamadas

telefónicas / mensajes de texto del distrito para actualizar la información de tiene dificultades con la información de inicio de sesión? entonces este entrenamiento podría ser para usted." In this theme, it was noted that several schools provided Spanish translation for Facebook posts. Schools also sent reminders and instructions on purchasing merchandise for fundraisers. These posts included content such as, "The last day to order spirit shirts will be Tuesday. Please make sure to visit the Singh Elementary page to order. Thank you." Fundraiser posts to parents sometimes mentioned the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) as the organizer, which indicated a partnership between the school and PTO or PTA. Other fundraiser reminders mentioned book fair dates and spirit nights at designated restaurants. Several posts in this subtopic provided specific directions or instructions for parents to follow or consider. Schools posted information about free or reduced lunch applications, with instructions on how to complete the process. One school posted directions for parents to teach their child to remember their ID number as they need it to purchase or receive a meal in the cafeteria. One school posted directions and reminders for student drop-off and tardy bell times. The purpose of this post was to instruct parents to arrive during a specific time window and to ensure that parents knew when students would be tardy. This post, in particular, was five sentences and ended with the following: "Please make sure your student arrives on time. Thank you for helping us get our day started right!"

Parent Gratitude and Recognition

Another family engagement subtopic was parent gratitude and recognition content. Several schools included in the study provided content that thanked parents on an individual or group basis. One parent was thanked on Facebook for entering and winning a contest. All parents were thanked for entering the contest, and this parent, in particular, was congratulated by name. Another school thanked a parent by name for

organizing a school event. Several schools showed gratitude for their PTO. One school posted, “We LOVE our PTO. Thanks to everyone who came to our first meeting.” Posts in this subtopic expressed gratitude to parents who attended school events. One school recognized parents for attending a parent meeting and stated how grateful the school was for their support. The post ended with, “We love our Lennon Elementary family!” Another example in this subtopic included a school that thanked parents for bringing their child to an after-school reading event.

Call to Action

The final subtopic that emerged in the family engagement theme involved a call to action. Several schools posted content that asked the parent or family member to perform a task. Several instances where schools asked parents to click on a link to complete an application, join the PTO, or visit the school store. Other posts asked parents to become a volunteer. One post, written in English and Spanish, stated, “(School Mascot) Parent Volunteers Needed! ¡Se necesitan padres voluntarios de (School Mascot)!” This post included a button that could be selected, which linked the parent to the volunteer application. One school asked parents to RSVP to an event. Two posts specifically asked the user to engage with the social media post. One post was made on a national recognition day for the military and stated, “Use the react button to show support for our soldiers!” Another post asked parents to post photos of their grandparents and student from a recent school event that celebrated grandparents. This post was also made in Spanish. Interestingly, this post received the most comments of all posts in the study. Most of these comments featured the grandparent and child participating in an activity from the school event.

Staff Recognitions

The third theme that emerged was posts that recognized staff members. All posts in this theme provided a recognition or positive message about various school staff. Some of these posts recognized individual staff members, and others recognized larger groups or departments.

Individual Staff Recognitions

One school recognized a teacher on Facebook each week by posting photos or videos of the staff member being surprised with the recognition. One school posted, "Congrats to Mr. Marshall. He is the recipient of our 2nd Comet Award! Each week a different teacher is nominated by their coworkers." About half of these posts included emojis that represented the school mascot. Another school celebrated two of their substitute teachers using a photo and this message "Quality elementary has the BEST daily substitutes in the world!! We love you Mr. Rogers and Ms. Estaire!!" Other posts recognized individual teachers for using an instructional strategy in the classroom or implementing a social-emotional learning tool. For example, one school recognized a teacher by name for implementing a positive behavior support strategy.

Group Recognitions

Several schools posted content that recognized larger groups, such as departments or the entire staff. One school recognized its cafeteria staff and included a photo in the post. Another school bragged on their paraprofessionals who worked on a schoolwide project. Schools also posted general staff recognitions with positive messaging. For example, one school posted, "We love our teachers and staff!!" Another school posted, "In case you didn't already know it, the Woodwork Elementary Staff is…" and included a digital graphic below that read, "The Best!" A few posts celebrated smaller groups of

staff, such as teachers who were eating lunch with students and appeared to be building positive relationships.

Student Development and Success

Almost 20 percent of posts in this study included student development and success content. This theme featured content that highlighted schoolwide incentives, student learning in action, and character development.

Student Recognitions and Incentives

One subtopic in this theme involved posts about general student recognition or incentives. One school, for example, posted a message listing classes that earned free dress for the week for good attendance. This message concluded with, “Who will win free dress next week?!?! #AttendanceMatters.” Another post recognized specific classes that met the attendance goal for the week and received special dress incentives. Another post read, “great start to the school year” and included photos of students.

Learning Outcomes

Another subtopic in this theme was posts about specific lessons or learning outcomes. Several of these posts were about students in specific classes or grade levels. One post stated, “hands on learning in 2nd grade. Way to go Mr. Martinez!” Another example was a post that said, “Great day for 4th and 5th grade small group instruction here at Smallville Elementary!” Other posts in this subtopic addressed specific learning activities or lessons. One school posted content and photos about third-grade students participating in science labs. Other learning activities posted from multiple schools included student choice activities, use of literature, place value applications, scientific observations, and use of technology in the classroom. A few of these posts included emojis, such as a person in a lab coat, hearts, or handclaps. Some of these posts recognized student products that were being created. Examples included students who

created shapes for the librarian, catapults in math class, artwork in the halls, and student visuals for classroom expectations. While some of these posts were specific to lessons or learning, other posts were broad and generic. One post read, “go big hawks.” Another post stated, “Our 2nd grade students are learning so much!” Another school posted, “Dolphins finished out the week strong! Getting smarter every day.”

Character Development

Several schools posted content about character development on social media. Due to post similarities from various schools in this subtopic, schools followed a state standard or outline related to character development and social-emotional learning. Various schools highlighted a specific character trait, and student photos were included in some of these posts. Schools also posted about student events, such as a character assembly or character café. One example included a post that stated, “A Couple of Positive Panthers at Oak Elementary. Always willing to offer a helping hand to their classmates.”

Conclusion

Based on Facebook posts in this study, it seemed that schools demonstrated several communication patterns and trends on social media. Notably, schools provided content intended to generate positive responses about local businesses, parents, family members, staff, and students. Schools seemed to take advantage of special recognition days to highlight school participation or individuals in the community. In addition, schools posted content to showcase learning and character development while spotlighting teachers in the process. Many posts recognized staff members in this study. Schools frequently posted announcements, which included many reminders for parents about instructions or upcoming events. Schools posted a call to action at times, which asked parents to perform a task like completing a volunteer application or RSVP to an

event. It was rare for a school to ask parents to engage or respond to a specific post during this study.

Research Question 5

Research question five asked, *What are the attitudinal responses of parents and other users towards schools?* Qualitative analysis was applied to answer this question. When users respond or comment on Facebook posts, it is considered a higher level of engagement (Platt et al., 2016). All comments in this study were transcribed into Microsoft Excel and organized according to the content categories based on CA coding from the quantitative portion of this study. Inductive thematic coding was then applied to develop topics and themes. The emotional content was also coded on a fundamental level to help identify and interpret the sentiment of Facebook users. Each comment was coded as emotionally positive, emotionally neutral, or emotionally negative. Examples of positive emotions are happy, proud, excited, and grateful. Examples of negative emotions include angry, disappointed, regretful, or sad. Comments that were coded emotionally neutral did not exhibit positive or negative tones. These comments were typically questions and answers about a post. Four themes emerged from inductive thematic analysis. The first theme to emerge during this analysis was *compliments*. Many comments were provided to schools, businesses, or staff members in the form of compliments. The second theme included comments about *personal child acknowledgments,* where parents or family members identified their child in the post. Third, many comments provided general or specific *expressions of applause.* The fourth theme contained comments that were considered *personal interactions and responses*. This theme included comments directed to specific individuals and sometimes involved two-way or even multi-way interactions between users. This theme also included responses to previous comments from individuals, businesses, or schools.

Compliments

Several users wrote compliments in response to Facebook posts. Several of these compliments were directed to the school. For example, in response to a school post about student activity, one user commented, “I absolutely love this!!! You are all so amazing.” Other comments of this nature appreciated to the school for hosting an event or featuring an activity. One parent commented that she loved how the event was set up this year and stated that grade levels on different days made it more special and memorable. Another parent commented, “what an awesome science experiment!” in response to a post featuring a science lesson. Some comments were brief and general, such as “thank you Jones Elementary,” or “thanks for having parent night.” There were a few comments that complimented or thanked staff members. One comment, responding to a post about the school staff, shared that she was grateful for Yale Elementary staff. A parent commented that her son had a wonderful experience at a school event and thanked a staff member by name for her contributions. Several comments were compliments given to a local business for their gifts, donations, or involvement with the school. Most of these compliments were brief, such as “Thank you!” or “Great Job!!!” Businesses were typically mentioned by name or tagged in these comments.

Personal Child Acknowledgments

Many users provided comments on Facebook posts that acknowledged their child. Often, the parent or individual would post a comment about her child being featured in the photo. One parent stated that her boy was in the photo, and the emotional tone appeared to be positive and proud. Other comments said, “my baby!” or “Aww, that’s my girl!.” In response to a post about a class learning in science, one parent stated that this was her daughter’s new classroom and tagged the teacher. In another post, students were eating lunch with the principal, and the parent stated, “Mary loved it and cannot wait to

do it again!" Many comments in this theme originated from one particular post that asked parents to post photos from a recent school event. Many users responded to this post with photos of their child and the grandparent. This post received the most comments out of all posts in the study. Most of the user comments from this post included a photo, student name, grandparent name, and teacher name. For example, one comment shared a photo with the message, "Ella Garcia in Mrs. Coffey's 2nd grade class." Several comments included in this theme were written in Spanish.

Applause

Users provided many comments in response to the Facebook posts about student or staff celebrations. These comments were often expressions of congratulations and applause towards the staff member or student who was recognized.

General Expressions

Several comments in this theme were general expressions of gratitude or congratulations. One post that recognized a teacher for receiving a weekly recognition award received many comments congratulating the teacher. Comments included the words "*congratulations," "way to go," "awesome,"* and "*muchas felicidades.*" Several comments mentioned the staff member by name. A few comments did not have any text but included emojis, such as a shape of a heart or confetti, meant to express appreciation or celebration. Other users posted humorous or congratulatory Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs) in the comments section. A GIF is an animated image meant to express a specific sentiment or message. For example, one user posted a GIF of a person doing a congratulations dance in the comments. Many comments in this theme were brief and general. A particular post that featured students engaging in a fun activity yielded comments such as "Too cute!!!" with heart emojis and "Super cute." Emojis were used frequently in this subtopic, such as hearts, animal faces, smiley faces, smiley faces with

heart eyes, fire, and clapping hands. The sentiment behind the emojis seemed to convey applause, congratulations, and happiness.

Personal Expressions

A large section of comments in this theme expressed congratulations and applause on a more personal level. In response to a teacher receiving recognition, one user stated, “Congratulations, Mrs. Ramos! A big hello from Marcus Alvarez.” In a similar post, another user stated, “Yay!!! Mr. David awesome!!! I love your energy you deserve it!” Posts such as these allowed users to send a message directly to the recognized individual, assuming he or she is a Facebook user. Other comments stated that they missed the staff member. These comments appeared to be from parents who previously had children in the teacher’s class or staff members who had previously worked with the person. These posts provided an opportunity for users to share their sentiments and interact with those associated on the post.

Interactions and Responses

Various comments appeared to encourage interaction with others on Facebook. These comments often “tagged” or identified another person on Facebook to gain their attention. Comments such as these are considered higher levels of engagement, as they provide an opportunity for two-way or multi-way communication and interaction (Platt et al., 2016).

Interactions with Others

Some of the comments in this theme were directed at staff members. One parent commented that her daughter says hello to the teacher, mentioning her name. Other comments appeared to be parents interacting with one another. For example, one user tagged a parent because her daughter was in the Facebook photo. The tagged parent replied, “My baby! Thank you for tagging me” and included a smiley emoji. Another user

tagged an individual and commented that seeing her at the school event was great. In a seemingly humorous fashion, one mother commented to another mother that they need to go on a date after they drop their "crazies" off at school to catch up.

Questions

Other comments in this theme included questions asked either to the school or to other Facebook fans. One post received several questions regarding an RSVP request for a school event. Users asked if it was too late to RSVP and "what time does the event begin?" One school announced a dress code incentive for classes that met the weekly attendance goal. This post generated several questions from users. One parent asked if her child qualified for the incentive because he was present during the entire week. Another person asked if a special education program was included in the incentive. Someone also asked for clarification on what day the dress incentive begins. Another example is when a school posted about an upcoming virtual parent meeting. Several parents responded that they did not receive the virtual meeting link to attend. Some of the questions were responses to posts about fundraisers. Users asked about the cost of the fundraiser item and payment method. It was noted in this theme that there was not a consistent pattern of schools responding to questions. A few schools responded to these questions, while many schools did not respond in the comments sections. In one case, another user answered a question directed at the school.

Replies to Comments

Several users replied to posts or previous comments. These comments seemed to provide further opportunities for social interaction on Facebook. Comments in this subtopic sometimes involved the school responding to questions. Some of these responses were emotionally neutral and answered questions in the comments, such as "all volunteer spots are filled for this week" or "cash only." Other school responses were

emotionally positive, such as a comment that thanked parents for taking time to attend an event after other users commented on the post. In general, it appeared that schools were not overly responsive to comments or questions based on the posts examined in this study. Comments also came from individuals responding to a post or previous comment. Several teachers responded when recognized on Facebook. One teacher replied, “thank you so much!” in response to a post and subsequent comments about her recognition. Another teacher responded to the school’s post, “thanks for helping me shine with all of the support I get.” One teacher commented to another teacher, “We know you are doing wonderful things in third grade!!!!” In one instance, a local business tagged responded that they “love our City Elementary family!”

Conclusion

Based on examining comments from this study using thematic analysis, there appeared to be several notable attitudinal responses from Facebook users. Many comments were expressions of applause to the school or staff member being recognized. Parents seemed eager and proud to acknowledge their child when the school featured them in Facebook posts. Parents also seemed willing to interact and respond to each other’s comments, indicating a sense of community or camaraderie. Many comments in this study were expressions of applause to the school or recognized staff. The vast majority of comments were coded as emotionally positive in this study. Several comments, such as questions about an event or fundraiser, were coded as emotionally neutral. Very few comments were coded as emotionally negative. These were regretful or disappointing comments from users about missing an event or not being aware of an event. These types of comments were rare in this study. One comment that was coded as emotionally negative was a parent who strongly disagreed with the mask policy at the school and district. This parent expressed disappointment that masks were not being

mandated during a pandemic. Due to the emotionally-charged nature of this topic during the time of writing, the researcher expected to witness more comments of this nature. However, they were not present in this study, with the exception of one.

CHAPTER V:
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how Texas public schools currently use social media as a marketing tool. This study also explored potential short-term communication trends of schools on social media and attitudinal responses from parents and other Facebook fans. This chapter discusses the major findings of this study in connection with literature on social media engagement tactics, relationship marketing (RM) theory, marketing mix (MM), and strategic marketing planning. This chapter also discusses implications for school leaders to consider when developing or improving a marketing plan and practical applications for school leaders related to social media engagement. At the end of this chapter, recommendations for future research and limitations to this study are presented. This chapter provides discussion and recommendations for practitioners and future researchers.

Summary of Findings

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used to determine how public schools use social media as a marketing tool. For the quantitative portion of this study, CA was used to examine social media content and engagement from various elementary schools near a major city in Texas. Data was collected, coded, and then quantified for analysis to understand better how schools use social media for marketing and communications. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to show how schools use social media for marketing and public relations and to examine the relationship between social media post content, post type, and user engagement. In addition, descriptive and inferential statistics demonstrated if an association might exist between social media activity and school demographics. The qualitative portion of this study applied inductive thematic analysis to explore the short-term communication trends

of public schools on social media. Qualitative analysis also helped the researcher examine the attitudinal responses of parents and other users according to the Facebook comments.

This study provided several key findings that may benefit researchers and practitioners. Overall, the results suggested that public schools lag behind the private sector when it comes to social media marketing. Most private industries compete with other companies for goods and services; hence, many use research-based marketing strategies and best practices on social media to optimize customer engagement and interaction (Appel et al., 2020; Sheth, 2018). It was striking to find that schools in this study did not seem to utilize social media in this manner. This is particularly important for school leaders in direct competition with other organizations such as charter schools. First, this study showed that schools used certain tactics excessively, such as *digital graphics* as a post type, frequent *announcements* such as parent reminders, and multiple posts on the same day. These results were not particularly surprising, as schools have an abundance of information to send to parents throughout the school year. It can be convenient to post these announcements with basic messaging tactics. However, these social media practices almost always resulted in reduced engagement levels. Schools often posted directly informative content without integrating brand personality attributes on social media, such as school spirit, inspiration, photos, or videos, which resulted in lower engagement. The use of brand personality attributes can be an effective marketing strategy for increasing engagement and interaction (Lee et al., 2018). Furthermore, schools were not intentional in requesting interactions from their audience and seemed to be under-responsive to questions and comments. This was surprising to the researcher. Due to the highly interactive nature of social media, most companies pay close attention to being responsive and engaging with customers to promote positive *word of mouth* on

social media (Appel et al., 2020; Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012; Sheth, 2018).

Results also showed that schools could generate higher levels of engagement based on findings from this study. For example, schools posted many *celebration* posts during the study. Results showed that schools typically used more brand personality attributes in *celebration* posts, including photos, videos, inspiration, and school spirit. This outcome was expected, as these types of posts generate higher levels of engagement due to the positive emotions and sense of community that is typically involved. In addition, certain posts generated higher levels of engagement and interaction in the comments section. For example, when schools directly requested user engagement, the audience seemed more than willing to respond. This aligns with previous research showing that social media is highly interactive and has a network effect on users (Appel et al., 2020; Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012; Sheth, 2018). Based on findings from this study, researchers and practitioners may be able to identify specific strategies and best practices to improve engagement and interactions from parents and other users on social media.

Social Media Engagement Tactics

Previous studies have shown that specific social media tactics typically yield higher levels of engagement and interaction. The discussion below outlines which strategies resulted in more engagement in this study. Overall, photos, brand personality attributes, requests for engagement, and timely responses from schools yielded more user engagement and interaction.

Photos

It has been shown that photos tend to receive more user engagement than other post types in other organizations (Kwok & Yu, 2013; Peruta & Shields, 2018). Results

from this study seem to confirm this finding for public schools, at least in part. Table 5 shows the results of total engagement according to post type. *Photos* had the highest total engagement by far and the second-highest total engagement mean of all post types (N = 2,190; *M* = 26.7). *Videos* had the highest total engagement mean in this study (N = 428; *M* = 47.6). Results from this study also show that *text only* (N = 70; *M* = 6.4) and *digital graphics* (N = 638; *M* = 6.0) received significantly less engagement from users. This is consistent with previous research (Kwok & Yu, 2013; Peruta & Shields, 2018). Many *digital graphics* identified in this study were messages that included colors, art, and text. However, the *digital graphics* did not usually include brand personality attributes, such as photos, videos, humor, inspiration, or school spirit. Schools should consider integrating more school-generated photos into *announcement* messages, which may help increase engagement on these posts. In addition, it seemed that *videos* were drastically underutilized by schools in this study despite receiving very high levels of engagement. Though *videos* typically take more time to create than a *digital graphic*, schools may consider creative ways to implement short *videos* into social media posts. As suggested below, Facebook has unique features, including live videos and short video clips.

Directly Informative Content

Previous research with other organizations and companies has shown that directly informative content is more likely to result in low levels of engagement, while content that integrates brand personality results in higher levels of engagement (Lee et al., 2018). Brand personality attributes may include unique features of the school, such as organic photos, videos, humor, inspiration, and school spirit. The researcher was interested in whether this finding applied to public schools. Table 6 shows the total engagement mean for all eight content categories coded with CA. Four of the eight categories were coded as *announcement* posts and the other four coded as *celebration* posts. Combined

announcement posts yielded much less total engagement (*M* = 6.5) than combined *celebration* posts (*M* = 31.0). Table 7 shows the results of a chi-square test of association for frequency using *post type* and *content categories*. Results show that *announcement* posts were more likely to include *digital graphics* or *text-only* post types, whereas *celebration* posts were more likely to include *photos* or *videos* post types. These results were significant according to the results from the chi-square test. *Digital graphics* and *text only* post types include more messaging, text, and informational content than *photos* or *videos*. As a result, *announcement-based* posts in this study using *digital graphics* or *text only* post types would most likely be classified as directly informative content. *Photos* and *videos* are more likely to feature brand personality attributes such as student recognition, teacher recognition, school spirit, and family engagement activities. Table 8 shows the chi-square test results for user engagement according to two post types (*photos* and *digital graphics*) and content categories (*announcements* and *celebrations*). Results show that *announcement* posts that used *photos* yielded more engagement than expected (*M* = 17), while *announcement* posts that used *digital graphics* yielded less engagement than expected (*M* = 5). This study substantiates previous research on directly informative content, brand personality attributes, and user engagement (Lee et al., 2018; Platt et al., 2016; Sheth, 2018). In this study, schools generated more engagement and interaction when brand personality attributes were included in the posts. Schools interested in improving engagement and interaction should consider how to include more brand personality attributes in *announcement* posts and avoid posting directly informational content.

Engagement Levels

Previous research has identified various levels of user engagement on social media platforms. Lower levels of engagement may include observing or *liking* posts,

while higher levels of engagement involve the user commenting, sharing, and interacting with other users (Platt et al., 2016). Organizations can engineer content and design posts on social media that promote higher engagement levels. Examples include encouraging or requesting comments, asking questions, requesting answers, and posting a call to action to increase user interaction (Platt et al., 2016). Previous research has also suggested that governmental entities may use social media more authoritatively instead of encouraging mutual interactions (Hand & Ching, 2011). Based on this study's qualitative analysis of Facebook posts and comments, only two out of 208 posts specifically requested user engagement from the audience. One of these posts requested users click the react button to show support, while another requested that parents post photos of a recent school event in the comments. While the average number of comments per post in this study was .95, the specific post that requested photos yielded the highest number of comments in the study (N = 36). This suggests that posts can be engineered in a manner that encourages higher levels of social media engagement and interaction. This study revealed that schools typically do not post social media content specifically for higher engagement levels. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that government agencies may not encourage mutual interaction on social media (Hand & Ching, 2011). Schools should consider posting content that encourages user interaction and engagement, as this practice will help customers feel valued and empowered to engage at higher levels.

Relationship Marketing Theory

Relationship Marketing (RM) is based on the idea that marketing should be directed towards establishing and maintaining long-term, ongoing relationships with customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Steinhoff et al., 2019). According to RM, decision-makers should have a marketing mindset that

encourages customer input and feedback so that services are tailored to meet their needs. This study identifies opportunities for schools to use social media for this purpose.

Customer Feedback

Results from the qualitative analysis portion of this study revealed that social media posts from public schools, at times, generated social interaction and feedback from parents and other users. In response to many of the *celebration* posts, many individuals provided compliments, personal expressions of applause, and comments that encouraged interaction with others. Parents seemed very apt to identify and recognize their child when schools posted photos of students. Almost all comments in this study were coded as positive, which indicated that parents were happy to respond and interact with others on the school's social media page. According to this study, social media may be an ideal platform to encourage interaction and collect feedback from parents, staff, and other users. Schools can use social media to establish further relationships between families and the school district over time. Many parents have multiple children in the school district, and the length of public school service can extend up to 20 years or more for some families. School districts interested in developing long-lasting relationships with families may consider social media as a tool to acquire parental feedback and interaction. Depending on how social media is utilized within the school district, including middle school and high school, social media could serve as a primary system for customer feedback and interaction throughout the district.

Responding to Customers

As previously mentioned, social media has gained popularity and many organizations have recognized it as a tool for branding, advertising, and marketing. Research has shown that expectations have risen, and customers expect companies to respond to questions and comments on social media (Davis et al, 2014; Labrecque, 2014).

In addition, research suggests that customers have a stronger sense of brand loyalty when organizations provide feedback to customers (Davis et al, 2014; Labrecque, 2014). The qualitative portion of this study analyzed Facebook posts and user comments. When posts were analyzed using thematic analysis, it was noted that schools rarely asked parents to engage or respond to a specific post during this study. In addition, when users asked questions in the comments section, the schools did not answer a large percentage of these questions. Organizations on Facebook can monitor comments and respond to questions or concerns promptly. Facebook provides notifications to account managers when a comment is posted on their page. This notification system allows organizations to respond to users promptly. It seemed that many schools were not overly responsive to questions on their Facebook page, nor did they post content that requested higher levels of engagement. Previous research has suggested that school leaders may not have an RM mindset, where customer feedback guides the marketing design (Angelov et al., 2020; James and Phillips, 1995; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Pettinga et al., 2015). These findings confirm the idea that school leaders may not understand or embrace a marketing mindset built on RM. Schools are more likely to generate a greater sense of brand loyalty with parents and other users when they consistently respond to comments and questions on social media.

Economically Disadvantaged

Results from this study suggest that social media can engage parents and staff, regardless of economically disadvantaged status. Table 9 shows the frequency of post type according to *low ED* schools and *high ED* schools. Table 10 shows the frequency of content category according to *low ED* schools and *high ED* schools. Based on these results, both groups posted content on social media in a very similar manner. In addition, descriptive and inferential statistics reported in Table 11, Table 12, and Table 13 suggest

that engagement levels from parents and other users in both groups are not significantly different. Based on this finding, social media could serve as an equalizer for high economically disadvantaged schools when engaging with families. Schools that fall into this category can celebrate student and staff success using social media at the same level as low economically disadvantaged schools. In addition, if parents or family members work long hours and cannot attend school events in person, schools can provide online alternatives using social media and allow parents to participate and engage in this setting.

Marketing Mix

The Marketing Mix (MM) framework provides a strategic approach to marketing, where multiple tactics are used to improve marketing and customer relations (Thabit & Raewf, 2018). Chapter II mentions that the MM includes *Product*, *Price*, *Place*, and *Promotion*, also known as the four *P*s (Baker, 2016; Borden, 1964). The MM has been extended to the seven *Ps* for service organizations, adding *Process*, *Physical Environment*, and *People* (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). According to MM, these seven tactics should be carefully considered in any marketing plan. While this study did not specifically investigate the seven *Ps*, it is essential to note that the MM framework emphasizes a balanced and comprehensive marketing approach. Based on findings from this study's quantitative and qualitative portions, several post types and content categories seemed to be used excessively, while others appeared to be underutilized.

Post Types

Table 3 shows the frequency of post type from the 18 elementary schools. In total, *digital graphics* had the highest frequency of all post types, as it was used in 106 or 51% of posts. The *videos* post type was collectively used in nine or 4% of posts, the lowest frequency of all post types. Furthermore, Table 5 shows that *digital graphics* received the lowest total engagement mean of all post types (M = 6.0), while *videos* received the

highest total engagement mean of all post types (*M* = 47.6). These findings suggest that schools used *digital graphics* excessively and underutilized *videos* as post types. Based on this finding, schools should consider reducing the use of *digital graphics* and increasing *videos* in social media posts. Schools in this study used *digital graphics* more than any other post type despite it being the least effective method for engagement. On the other hand, *videos* yielded the highest engagement rate, even though it was the least used post type.

Content Categories

Various content categories in this study may apply to some of the tactics found in the MM framework. Posts about staff, students, business partners, and family members would apply to *People.* Posts that feature locations where school services are provided, such as classrooms, libraries, and football fields, would apply to *Place*. Facebook posts about celebrations and recognitions may fall into the *Promotion* tactic. According to the MM framework, tactics can be combined to serve customers' needs best. Table 4 shows the frequency of content categories from the 18 elementary schools. The *announcement-informational* category had the highest frequency of all content categories (N = 59), followed by *celebration-students* (N = 40) and *announcement-events* (N= 37). The categories of *celebration-family* (N = 9), *announcement-shared* (N = 9), and *celebration-business/partnership* (N = 8) had the lowest post frequency. Based on these results, schools in this study frequently shared informational content on social media. According to the qualitative analysis portion of this study, many of the *announcement* posts were reminders and instructions to parents. These posts typically received very few likes, comments, or shares. Schools also frequently recognized students and staff on social media in this study. These posts tended to receive significantly higher levels of engagement. Table 6 shows that the *celebrations* content categories (students, staff,

business/partnerships, and families) all received much higher levels of engagement than the *announcement* content categories (informational, event, fundraisers, and shared). These findings suggest that schools posted informational content excessively and underutilized posts that recognized families and business partnerships. Based on this information, schools should consider reducing the amount of informational content posted on social media, such as announcements, reminders, and instructions. Parents and users did not typically engage with these posts, due to excessiveness or lack of engaging content. Instead, schools should consider a "less is more" approach when posting announcements and think about improving the quality of these posts through the integration of brand awareness attributes, as previously mentioned. Schools should also consider not missing opportunities to celebrate local businesses, partnerships, and families. As stated, schools did not typically post celebrations about families and businesses/partnerships. However, these posts received a very high level of engagement when they were posted. Schools should make it a point to balance the different types of celebrations so that families and businesses/partnerships are not neglected.

Strategic Marketing

Previous research has indicated that public schools have a more substantial need than ever before to strategically plan for marketing due to increased competition from entities such as charter schools (Hill, 2018; May, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Strategic marketing requires planning and organization to deliver meaningful content to customers using various marketing tactics (Kabeyi, 2019; Kalva, 2017). Some of the findings in this study indicate that schools are not using social media in an organized or strategic manner.

Post Consistency

This study suggested that schools do not seem to have a clearly defined or organized strategic marketing plan when using social media. This study indicated that schools are not always consistent in posting content for their audience. Table 2 shows the frequency and range of Facebook posts over three weeks for the 18 schools. While some schools in this study posted consistently during this time, one-third of the schools posted three or fewer times per week. In addition, 50% of the schools went at least four weekdays between posts at some point during the study. This lack of consistency could negatively impact brand awareness and school communication.

Excessive Posts

Previous research has shown that the frequency of posts can negatively impact user engagement and posting more than two times a day can reduce engagement due to excessive content (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Several schools seemed to post excessively on the same day. Eleven of 18 schools, for example, posted on Facebook three or more times on the same day at least once during this study, with the highest being a school that posted seven times on the same day. This lack of consistency or organization on social media may suggest that schools do not have a strategic marketing plan for providing consistent content on social media. This data might also suggest that schools are not operating with a marketing mindset but rather more intuitively or reactively.

Implications for Practice

Research on educational marketing shows that school leaders have changed their marketing approach within the last five years to better relate to students and parents (Hill, 2018). This is undoubtedly due to the rise of charter schools, school choice, and other threats to public education. Due to the vast numbers of people who use social media platforms, it is currently considered one of the most effective methods for marketing

services and interacting with customers (Sheth, 2018). This section provides several implications for school leaders interested in using social media as a marketing and public relations tool.

Using Social Media

During the sample selection process at the onset of this study, it was observed that a large number of schools within the population area did not have an active Facebook account. This suggests that some schools do not consider social media a beneficial tool for marketing and public relations, despite its popularity. Most marketers seem to agree that social media should be included in a marketing plan for branding and public relations (Sheth, 2018; Vinerean, 2017). School leaders who are not utilizing social media for marketing or public relations are missing an opportunity to engage and interact with parents, staff, and community members.

Relationship marketing theory emphasizes the importance of seeking customer input and developing solid, personal interactions (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2018; Silk, 2006). Findings from this study reveal that social media may provide a platform for schools to receive input and feedback from parents and community members. Qualitative analysis showed that parents, staff, and other users engaged in posts, sometimes at high levels, via comments and replies. Social media is different from traditional marketing tactics in that it allows for two-way or multi-way interactions (Pettinga et al., 2015). Schools can design post content in a manner that may generate more user interactions and feedback. This could be important for schools interested in implementing RM tactics resulting in more positive, loyal relationships with parents. This study suggested that schools underutilize the ability to promote user interactions and feedback specifically.

Professional Development

School leaders may wish to significantly impact social media for marketing, communications, and brand awareness. Results from this study can provide leaders with possible strategies for best practices. Social media account managers may benefit from professional development related to social media as a marketing tool. Furthermore, effective social media practices may help improve parental engagement and trust. The discussion in this section outlines how findings from this study might be used for professional development.

Avoid Directly Informative Content

Previous research has shown that a meager percentage of Facebook fans engage on an organization's Facebook page (Lee et al., 2018). In addition, directly informative content on social media is more likely to solicit low levels of engagement (Lee et al., 2018). However, directly informative content that includes brand personality content typically results in higher engagement levels (Lee et al., 2018). This study indicated that schools frequently use directly informative content, as seen in informational reminders, event announcements, and digital graphics as post types. Schools need to consider integrating brand personality attributes when posting informational or announcement-based content. As previously stated, school brand personality attributes may include student or staff photos, videos, humor, inspiration, Facebook live videos with school leaders, and displays of school spirit. Schools can learn to engineer social media content to include more brand personality attributes (Lee et al., 2018). Some high schools may offer classes related to communications and social media. If this is the case, school districts could use their students in these classes to design relevant and engaging content for students. Ideas such as this provide student voice and ownership in the branding, leading to more creative and engaging content.

Levels of Engagement

Results from this study showed that schools did not often ask parents to engage or respond to a specific post. Based on the levels of engagement framework from Platt et al. (2016), high levels of engagement include commenting, sharing, and interacting with posts. Schools may consider engineering posts in a manner that asks users explicitly to engage in some way. This may include asking parents to post their photos from a recent event, as one school did in this study. It may also involve the school asking for specific feedback on an important topic, posing a question to parents, and taking an informal poll. For example, schools could post a poll on Facebook about a decision that requires parental input. Schools can creatively design strategies such as this to target more interaction amongst users.

Timely Responses

Results from this study suggested that schools may not be responsive to user comments and questions on social media. The qualitative analysis portion of this study identified several questions in the comments section that went unanswered. When a parent asks a question on social media, this is an opportunity for the school to respond in a timely and positive manner publicly. Other users will be able to see the school's response, which may be helpful for others with the same question. Another best practice for schools to consider is responding to comments from previous posts (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). During this study, there were a few occasions when schools responded to a thread of comments. Schools can continue interaction and engagement by acknowledging comments using the reaction buttons, or frequently replying to parents' comments on the school's social media. Schools should consider implementing a monitoring system to ensure all comments and questions are reviewed and receive a timely response.

Balance and Consistency

Results from this study show that schools may post excessively about informational content or announcements. Results also show that schools may overutilize *digital graphics* and underutilize *videos. Digital graphics* received far less engagement in this study than *photos* or *videos.* As a best practice, school leaders may consider using an organizer or template to ensure that social media content is not one-sided. Schools have several options for posting content on Facebook, including live videos, temporary photos that scroll in a series called *stories*, short video clips called *reels*, behind-the-scenes content, and more. As mentioned, schools can also solicit student input and develop student-centered ideas for the school's social media.

The researcher found that some schools post content excessively at one time, which can reduce fan engagement (Peruta & Shields, 2018). This study also found that some schools go days without posting any content. Schools need to consider utilizing a content calendar for social media to ensure that content is consistently applied. Some organizations, for example, may choose to post at least one time a day and schedule these ahead of time.

Strategic Planning

Strategic marketing can improve how public schools showcase their services to families (DiMartino & Jessen, 2016; Foskett, 2002; Oplatka, 2007). Previous studies highlight the lack of strategic marketing from school leaders (Dimartino & Jessen, 2016; Foskett, 2002; Oplatka, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). School leaders may consider using organizational tools for social media to help design a marketing plan. For example, many organizations use a content calendar template or program for planning social media activity. There are various templates online to help users identify meaningful content within their organization, select dates for postings, and include photos, videos, links, and

tags. Tools such as this help organizations to be more proactive, organized, and balanced in their marketing approach. Planning and organizing social media content can also be extended to other marketing tactics within the school. For example, schools can plan for a staff recognition event on social media, and this content can also be featured on the school website or in the school newsletter. In addition, social media platforms such as Facebook provide analytic and demographic data to organizations. For example, *Facebook Insights* allows the account administrator to review page reach, likes and reactions, comments, shares, link clicks, and more (Facebook, 2021). This data is easily accessible and allows individuals to measure various performance metrics. Tools such as this provide meaningful feedback to schools seeking to improve their marketing and branding efforts.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined questions about social media as a marketing tool for public schools. This topic has previously been studied in more detail in fields outside of public education. Based on these findings, there are several recommendations for future research to learn more about the role of social media in public schools. One area of future study to consider is using a larger or more diverse population. For example, schools with different grade levels may yield different findings. The current study examined social media activity from elementary schools. Future studies could investigate how middle schools or high schools use social media for marketing purposes and whether family engagement occurs across schools and children within a family. Future studies could also select schools located in an urban or rural community. This study selected schools located near a major city in Texas, and most or all of the locations would be considered suburban communities. In addition, this study could be expanded to examine activity on school district social media platforms. Another recommendation is to repeat this study using a

different time window. This study reviewed three weeks of social media activity in the early fall semester. Social media activity and engagement may look different depending on the time of year. Future studies may also consider qualitative data gathered through subject interviews. It may be interesting to interview school personnel responsible for posting content on social media. Future studies could also investigate different social media platforms that include student-level interactions such as TikTok, Instagram, or Snapchat. These platforms tend to involve a younger audience, and some schools may be using these platforms to interact and engage with students. Various platforms could also be compared to each other to determine similarities and differences in post content and user engagement.

Limitations

This researcher attempted to examine how elementary schools near a major city in Texas use social media as a tool for marketing and communications. This researcher also aimed to show the attitudinal responses of parents and other users towards schools on social media. Several limitations were identified in this study. First, the generalizability of this study may be limited to certain schools. The sample size is restricted to 18 schools near a major city in Texas. The findings may not apply to other schools or school districts in other regions of the state or country. For example, these findings may not apply to schools in the inner city or rural regions, or schools outside of Texas. In addition, all schools in the sample were elementary schools. These findings may not be relevant to secondary public schools. A second limitation to this study is the time window for collecting the data. Social media posts were captured during a three-week window in early fall. The findings may not represent the full scope of social media activity throughout the school year. Depending on the events and circumstances of a given time window, social media activity may be particularly high or low. During the selected time

window for this study, the researcher was unaware of any known events or circumstances that may cause social media activity to increase or decrease dramatically. Nonetheless, the selected time window may limit the applicability of this study to other times during the year. A third limitation to this study is the presence of response bias on social media. Social media comments and responses in this study are limited to those who use social media and follow the Facebook page of the selected schools. Comments from this study were specific to social media posts from schools. Therefore, there may be a limited application of findings based on this smaller scale of respondents. There may be other parents or family members who have differing thoughts and opinions but did not share these on the school's Facebook page for various reasons.

Conclusion

Social media is a tool that many organizations currently use to market products, strengthen brand awareness, and engage customers. Public schools are in a position where marketing is becoming more common due to competition that did not previously exist. This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to determine how public schools use social media as a marketing tool. Based on the findings from this study, there are numerous applications for school leaders. This study suggested that public schools may need to consider using best practices for social media marketing tactics to increase user engagement and interactions. This study indicated that schools often posted directly informative content without brand personality attributes on social media, which usually resulted in low levels of engagement. This study also suggested that schools did not frequently request specific interaction or engagement and did not typically respond to parent questions on social media. School leaders may benefit from developing a marketing mindset grounded in relationship marketing theory. Furthermore,

school leaders may consider using the marketing mix framework and marketing tools to help provide a more comprehensive strategic marketing plan.

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