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Jennifer Hill
St. Cloud State University

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Midwest Elementary School Principals and the Use of Social Media

Jennifer C. Hill, Ed. D.
St. Cloud State University

Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine the use of social media among elementary school principals in Minnesota. It was part of a dissertation study conducted at Bethel University (Hill, 2016). The survey collected data from elementary school principals across the state of Minnesota gathering demographic information on age, years of service, presence of a district social media policy, gender, school location, school size, and school poverty level as defined by its free and reduced lunch rate. As a result of the study, it was found that a negative relationship exists between the number of years of service from an elementary school principal and their use of social media. Age, gender, school location, school size, and poverty level have no relationship with a principal's use of social media tools. A qualitative analysis was run on one open-ended question on the survey to determine its themes. Facebook was found to be the most popular tool for sharing information with friends and family while Twitter was cited as the most popular social media tool for professional development.

Introduction

Search the Internet and one quickly finds news stories reporting that Facebook now has over a billion users (Associated Press, 2012). YouTube has 4 billion visits daily (Wasserman, 2012) and Twitter posts 50 million tweets every 24 hours from its 175 million registered users (Golijan, 2013). It is now estimated that 93% of the people who live in the United States and own smartphones are using them as their primary device to access the Internet and communicate with others.

People from every generation are reported to utilize social media tools, but it is those who occupy the Millennial generation, that is, those who are 18–33 years old who are spending the most time online (Zickuhr, 2010, p. 2). In 2010, Hepburn gathered information on the demographics of Twitter users in the United States. He found that 47% were parents of children who attend school.

Consequently, many members of this generation are the parents of today's elementary school students. It is members of this cohort who are changing the way information is disseminated. Porterfield and Carnes, (2012) authors of *Why Social Media Matters: School Communication in the Digital Age* cited several distinctions in the way the Millennials and Generation X (those born between 1961 and 1981) prefer to communicate about their children with educators. Parents want to receive information as it happens, preferring to be updated continually as the day progresses instead of after the fact. Additionally, parents want to be directly involved in their child's education, and social media can be seen as a way to build a strong, transparent bridge of communication between home and school.

Conversely, research shows that many educational leaders are not as enthusiastic. According to Porterfield and Carnes (2012), the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) surveyed its members in 2009 and found that 20% were using social mediums to communicate. AASA conducted a focus group with superintendents two years later to determine their feelings towards social media. The study found, "superintendents wanted nothing to do with social media. They found it dangerous and intrusive" (pp. 6–7).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the use of social media by elementary principals working in Minnesota public schools. Two main research questions were addressed:

- What factors impact elementary principal use of social media for professional purposes?
- How are elementary principals utilizing social media to communicate?

Research Method and Design

Based on the work of Schmucki, Hood, and Meell (2010), this study was a mixed-method approach employing the use of a Qualtrics Survey to ask elementary school principals about their use of social media tools. There were 922 elementary school principals who were emailed a link to complete this survey during a 2-week timeframe. Exactly 145 principals chose to respond. This resulted in a response rate of 15.7%.

The majority of questions were quantitative in nature in order to gather demographic information about the school leaders being surveyed and the schools they serve. Quantitative questions were also asked about the number and nature of social media tools that were being used.

In order to gather additional information, respondents were given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions about their social media use. These questions were designed to gather in-depth information, determine trends across respondents, and provide an explanation for the quantitative responses given. Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical tests available in the most current version of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Qualitative data was analyzed by pasting open ended responses from the survey into an Excel document. Qualitative responses were read through a minimum of six times following the steps for qualitative analysis outlined by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) in order to determine their meaning. The initial reading was of all open-ended responses given in the survey to gain an overview of the information provided from the data. Initial impressions from the first reading were recorded on paper for future reference.

During the second reading, meaning units were recorded for each open-ended response and recorded in a column in the spreadsheet. The third reading involved coding the data. Saldana (2009) stated "To codify is to arrange things in a systemic order, to make something part of a system or classification, to categorize" (p. 8). Each unique meaning unit was assigned a code next to ideas or themes that were found within the text of the responses. During the subsequent fourth and fifth reading, it was determined if codes can be combined, separated, or placed into subcategories. The sixth read was to determine if the themes that emerged have sufficient supporting data to be identified as an independent theme. Additional reads were necessary in order to attain precise findings.

Finally, to ensure reliability of findings, interrater reliability was conducted. An additional person with background knowledge in schools and technology read through the data analysis. Discussion ensued until analysis.

The dependent variable in the survey was the categorical use of social media. All independent variables were either one independent variable with two levels of independent groups (e.g., gender, urban/rural setting) or one independent variable with two or more levels of independent groups (years of service, size of school, and age of principal.) Therefore, the Chi-Square Analysis was an appropriate statistical test to determine if a statistically significant relationship existed. Chi-Square analyses were run to test all five hypotheses.

The researcher attained approval from the Institutional Review Board prior to beginning her research to ensure that all activities were carried out in an ethical manner. All participants were given an informed consent document to review in the body of the email that was sent above the survey link indicating their understanding of the risks and benefits involved in the study, along with their voluntary agreement to participate. Finally, no names of principals, names of schools, or any other identifiable characteristics were collected, except for necessary demographic information. All responses were kept anonymous and confidential. Results and hypothesis are summarized in Table 1.

Respondents were asked an open-ended question to gain further insight about the use of social media. "Please share how you are using social media tools in new and innovative ways as an administrator." Of the 145 members of the sample, 63 responded. Themes are analyzed below.

School Promotion

"We use social media to send out announcements, to keep our community informed about exciting things that are taking place in our school."

School promotion was one of the four main themes emulating throughout the responses to how social media is being used in new and innovative ways as an administrator. One person wrote, "Facebook as the 'new' newsletter provides an opportunity to create and build culture and tell a school story (mission/vision connections with programming)." Principals are looking to harness the convenience and widespread availability of social media to tell others about their schools. Fourteen different statements fell into this category out of 63 for a total of approximately 22% of the responses. In this category, key words were used such as "communication and PR," "promotion," "fundraising," and "community members."

Sharing Information with Student's Family Members

"I find putting the info into the parent's hands is important. Any tool I can use that makes it go to the parent without having them have to go someplace else is my key."

Sharing information with students' family members was the second theme that emerged in this analysis. The word "families" was discussed at length between the researcher and the objective analyzer. At the elementary level, students may utilize information posted via social media through their parents. For example, if a due date of an assignment is listed or the date of an upcoming field trip, a parent or guardian may pass this information on to their child. It can also be noted that an elementary student may not live with parents or find that some information posted via social media is relevant to siblings, grandparents, or other extended family members. Therefore, the phrase, "student's family members" seemed to encapsulate all interested parties. Seventeen or 27% of all responses fell into this category. Key words or phrases included, "students and families," "information sharing," and "communicate with parents."

Contact or Meetings with Staff Members or District Administrators

"I use Google docs to collect teaching evidence in the classroom. Google+ for meetings with admin in other buildings…"

It became evident when analyzing the data that elementary school principals were using social media to communicate professionally both with the staff members in their school and other district administrators. This was sometimes happening through formal meetings. Participants made mention of both "Google+" and "Google Hangout" for this purpose. Communication was also happening through more informal methods such as a casual tweet. Two responses mentioned the use of Twitter during staff meetings, and one mentioned uploading a YouTube video for teachers to watch as part of their observation. Seven responses fell into this category or just over 11% of all responses. Key words included, "staff meetings," "teacher walk-throughs," "PLCs," and "meetings with admin."

Learning/Professional Development

"Twitter is hands down one of the best PD forums on the market today. It is heavily utilized."

Principals are either using social media tools in this category to learn something professionally about leadership, or to pass on instructional resources or knowledge to their teachers. One participant said, "I use Twitter to connect with my colleagues professionally." Another respondent added, "…for viewing current articles." In regard to passing ideas on to teachers, one principal said they are using Twitter, "to collect/share innovative ideas to enhance the student learning experience. (i.e., get the latest information and perspectives on current best practice, innovative tools, modular robotics, 3D printing, to crowd-source funding for digital technologies, etc.)." Not only are teachers and students given access to best-practice ideas, but their leaders are staying informed as well. Eleven, or 17.4% of responses fell into this category.

Key words or phrases included, "professional development," "educational conversations," "connect with colleagues," "Twitter chats," and "leadership forums."

Conclusions

Overall, demographic factors had little impact on a principal's choice of using social media to communicate. Based on experience in the field, it was expected that a negative relationship would exist between a principal's years of service and their use of social media. Meaning, the longer they have served as principal, the less likely they are to use social media. It was found that this negative relationship generally exists. As the years of service increased, the use of social media decreased. Principals serving 1–5 years represented 46.2% use of social media; principals serving 6–10 years represented 24.8% of the sample population, and those serving 11–15 years represented 13.1% of the sample population. The overall total percentage of principals who have served 16 years or more and use social media was 15.9% as compared to their counter parts. This is 2.8% more than those serving 11–15 years, and the only exception found in this trend.

The rest of the demographic factors: gender, school setting, school size, and school poverty percentage, showed no statistically significant relationship towards the use of social media by the principal. These results are consistent with the findings in McCutcheon's (2013) dissertation on *The Use of Social Media as a School Principal.* There is no suggestion that such a relationship exists.

This study did provide interesting insight into the second research question, "How are principals using social media to communicate?" The survey found that of the 145 respondents to the survey, the majority of principals are using social media at a reported rate of 78.6%. When asked what social media sites that principals were active members of, the top three were Blogger (65.5%), Vimeo (51.7%), and Pinterest (47.6%). These responses were not consistent with the public's marked saturation of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Recommendations for Further Research

While this study focused solely on school principals and their use of social media, further studies could be conducted to determine how teachers and students are using such tools and if their methods and motivations differ from those in school leadership positions. When analyzing the qualitative data for this study, this comment was made by one principal, "I use Twitter to host and moderate educational conversations (PD) and to collect/share innovative ideas to enhance the student learning experience." With over 80% of junior high students owning a mobile device according to Rideout et al. (2010), it would appear that there is room to discover how social media is impacting professional development and how it can be utilized by both teachers and students to "enhance the learning experience."

Parents are another population that could prove worthwhile to study when considering the educational use of social media. Porterfield and Carnes (2012) argue that when it comes to communication, "Today's parents refuse to be shut out of the education process" (p. 6). When principals in this study were asked how they were using social media, ten of them mentioned the use of social media to communicate with parents, wanting to share information with them whether through text, pictures, or video. Further study could be used to explore how to strengthen communication between home and school through the use of social media.

Table 1
Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Result
1st Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between the age of the principal and use of social media to communicate. 1st Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between the age of the principals and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (6, N = 142) = 12.495, p = .052 (two-sided). *p>.05* so we can accept the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between the age of the principal and use of social media to communicate.
2nd Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between years of experience being an elementary principal and the use of social media. 2nd Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between the years of experience being an elementary principal and the use of social media.	χ^2 (3, N = 145) = 15.327, p = .002 (two-sided). *P<.05* so we can reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between years of experience being an elementary school principal and use of social media to communicate. We can accept the alternative hypothesis that there is a relationship between the years of experience being an elementary school principal and the use of social media to communicate.
3rd Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between the gender of the principal and use of social media to communicate. 3rd Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between the gender of the principals and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (1, N = 144) = .216, ns. p = .642 (two-sided). *p>.05* so we are unable to reject the null hypothesis. There is no relationship between elementary school principal gender and use of social media to communicate.

Hypothesis	Result
4th Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between the setting of the principal's school location (metro or outstate) and use of social media to communicate. 4th Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between the setting of the principal's school location (metro or outstate) and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (2, $N = 145$) = 5.198, ns. $p = .074$ (two-sided). $p>.05$ so we are unable to reject the null hypotheses. There is no relationship between elementary school principal's school location and use of social media to communicate.
5th Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between principal's school size and use of social media to communicate. 5th Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between principal's school size and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (2, $N = 144$) = 1.861, ns. $p = .394$ (two-sided). $p>.05$ so we are unable to reject the null hypotheses. There is no relationship between elementary school principal's school size and use of social media to communicate.
6th Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between principal's school poverty percentage (as defined by free and reduced lunch percentage) and the use of social media to communicate. 6th Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between principal's school poverty percentage (as defined by free and reduced lunch percentage) and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (3, $N = 144$) = 5.466, ns. $p = .141$ (two-sided). $p>.05$ so we are unable to reject the null hypotheses. There is no relationship between elementary school principal's school poverty percentage as defined by its free and reduced lunch rate and use of social media to communicate.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Result
1st Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between the age of the principal and use of social media to communicate. 1st Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between the age of the principals and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (6, N = 142) = 12.495, p = .052 (two-sided). *p>.05* so we can accept the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between the age of the principal and use of social media to communicate.
2nd Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between years of experience being an elementary principal and the use of social media. 2nd Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between the years of experience being an elementary principal and the use of social media.	χ^2 (3, N = 145) = 15.327, p = .002 (two-sided). *P<.05* so we can reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between years of experience being an elementary school principal and use of social media to communicate. We can accept the alternative hypothesis that there is a relationship between the years of experience being an elementary school principal and the use of social media to communicate.
3rd Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between the gender of the principal and use of social media to communicate. 3rd Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between the gender of the principals and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (1, N = 144) = .216, ns. p = .642 (two-sided). *p>.05* so we are unable to reject the null hypothesis. There is no relationship between elementary school principal gender and use of social media to communicate.

Hypothesis	Result
4th Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between the setting of the principal's school location (metro or outstate) and use of social media to communicate. 4th Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between the setting of the principal's school location (metro or outstate) and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (2, N = 145) = 5.198, ns. p = .074 (two-sided). *p>.05* so we are unable to reject the null hypotheses. There is no relationship between elementary school principal's school location and use of social media to communicate.
5th Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between principal's school size and use of social media to communicate. 5th Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between principal's school size and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (2, N = 144) = 1.861, ns. p = .394 (two-sided). *p>.05* so we are unable to reject the null hypotheses. There is no relationship between elementary school principal's school size and use of social media to communicate.
6th Null Hypothesis: There is no relationship between principal's school poverty percentage (as defined by free and reduced lunch percentage) and the use of social media to communicate. 6th Alternative Hypothesis: There is a relationship between principal's school poverty percentage (as defined by free and reduced lunch percentage) and the use of social media to communicate.	χ^2 (3, N = 144) = 5.466, ns. p = .141 (two-sided). *p>.05* so we are unable to reject the null hypotheses. There is no relationship between elementary school principal's school poverty percentage as defined by its free and reduced lunch rate and use of social media to communicate.

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