STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A COMMUNICATION

AUDIT OF A MIDWESTERN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

School districts are complex organizations which require the use of strategic communication. Measuring the communication from school leaders to their various audiences for message content and alignment has the potential to illuminate the current reality of school communication practices as well as point to areas of needed improvement. The current study measures strategic communication by conducting a communication audit of the fastest growing school district in Iowa, by interviewing 10 school leaders and analyzing essential communication products including 26 web pages and 10 district newsletters. Guided by current research on school communication and branding by universities, the communication audit measures alignment between the perspectives of school leaders and the reality of school communications. Results suggest district communication products expressed brand themes of excellence, heritage, relationships, and innovation, but inconsistently across communication products. Implications for alignment are discussed along with suggestions for future communication studies in school systems.

Key words: strategic communication, communication audits, public schools, branding education

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

From their inception, American schools have been in a constant state of growth and change parallel to the evolution of communication and communication practices in our modern culture. In the new millennium, consumerism in the United States demands an array of goods and services made available with a click. Information lives at our fingertips and a world of knowledge flashes forth in an instant, stimulating a shoppers' market where consumers not only make purchases, but also "like," review, and evaluate the worth of everything from gadgets and restaurants, to people and services. Our digital environment presents an opportunity to interactively create perceptions of the worth, value, and quality of virtually anything. Digital communication even promotes the sale of "intangibles," goods and services such as learning and living experiences. Trending today is the practice of using digital communication and the internet to both buy and sell intangible products, including education. In public education there exists an increasing need for schools to promote their "intangibles" in order to survive and thrive. Attracting and keeping families and communities informed and connected to school requires purposeful communication, broadcasting what schools have to offer individual students and families navigating the options of school choice.

Education is a national value and priority for families. Credited for historically contributing to America's socio-political, economic, and technological development, education tops the list of America's fundamental values. Those values discussed with national voice as part of the common consciousness include national security, economic prosperity, technological advances, and education. The benefits of education contribute to healthy individuals and a strong nation. "Intellectual capital," is the sum of the knowledge and experiences leading to one's ability to make decisions and function as a productive worker, "determining social class, success

or failure in school, and even psychological or physical health" (Hirsch, 1996, p. 19).

Economists call this "human capital," inherent in American economic success (Aghion et al., 2009; Hanushuk et al., 2008). Human capital combines knowledge, experiences, and/or characteristics contributing to the development of productive workers (Acemoglue & Autor, Incomplete PDF.). Economists posit that education and training create job opportunity and earnings, the constructs of a strong economic system.

Schools are largely credited for fostering skills that generate human capital, a key factor in the economic, social, and political health of our nation (Young & Clinchy, 1992). Thus, strong schools create human capital necessary in ensuring national success; however, time spent in school does not necessarily result in increased human capital value. Quality and opportunities afforded as part of the educational process show correlation with higher human capital values (Hanushek et al., 2008). Schools have been charged with challenging the best and brightest as well as promising no child left behind. While public education is available for all students, schools are not created equal. Parents choose schools to meet the unique needs of their individual students, and as a result, schools need to communicate what they have to offer students in terms of environment, experiences, curriculum, and other "intangibles" that contribute to intellectual capital.

From its colonial conception and into the 21st Century, the United States has experienced phenomenal changes in its educational systems, adapting to the needs of families and the shifting needs of the nation. Demonstrating patterns of behavior that valued manners, decorum, religion, and education in this perceived uncivilized world, early American settlers brought a European-influenced system of education (Rudolph, 1990). Early 17th century schools met the needs of particular audiences with the creation of schools designed primarily for instruction of males as

future civic leaders and clergy. Private schools embedded religious curriculum into the educational offerings, giving families with the financial means an alternative to free public education.

Adding to the choice of public vs. private schools, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 created diverse types of public schools in the form of charter and magnet schools. Charter schools operate with freedom from government regulations and controls and are often led by community leaders and educational innovators while upholding high standards and accountability (Young & Clinchy, 1992). Nearly 3,000 charter schools exist nationwide (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2016). Magnet schools are another public school choice designed to attract racially and socioeconomically diverse students and those with specific theme-based interests such as technology, business, or fine arts; they offer students and families a variety of educational options.

In addition to the ESEA, George Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and Barack Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) promised quality education equally accessible to all families regardless of income, race, or address. The educational landscape offers a variety of school options available, and even homeschooling is a choice for parents most concerned about meeting the individual needs of students. Recent discourse in public education surrounds potential changes in education by President Trump's administration, proving that education still provides a topic for national discussion, and that school choice is an important issue (Goldstein, 2017). In addition to providing the educational experiences to meet the needs of diverse students, schools today are charged with communicating with various audiences including governing legislators, community members, and families, making known what schools have to offer families and local communities.

Because education is a value and priority for many parents, school districts should market what they do to serve students and help parents navigate the fields of school choice in large cities and areas allowing for school choice. Communication is essential in the marketing of schools. The current research aims to study the essential communication products and processes of a school district to understand how the district promotes itself to various audiences. Examining the methods and content of organizational communication helps illustrate how schools use communication tools to establish their identity amongst other school districts and educational offerings.

Organizational Communication In Schools

Schools are complex organizational structures. Organizational communication "reflects the relationships between all organizational actors; creates those relationships, and defines, shapes and explains them to ourselves and others" (Hargie & Tourish, 2009, p. 5). As members of an organization work together, messages exchanged impact perception of the organization, its collaborators, and its audiences as communication from leaders to members of the organization form identity and common vision. Therefore, an organization's survival often depends on the exchange and coordination of information, thus exposing the need for organizations to monitor communication and its effectiveness (Downs & Adrian, 2004).

In schools, organizational communication involves various essential communication products and processes (ECPPs), including traditional forms such as newsletters, events, press-releases, and digital forms including websites, blogs, e-news, and social media posts. These methods of organizational communication relay messages both to current district staff and families and extend outward to the community and families navigating school choice. It is essential for organizations to function with unified commitment and vision within daily

operations. The purposeful and timely release of information among members of an organization

and its various publics is the focus of strategic communication. Schools use strategic

communication to achieve goals as well as to construct organizational branding messages.

Strategic Communication

Born from modern military tactics, *strategic communication* can be described as the

advancement of objectives by forces working together to achieve a common goal or behavioral

outcome. The U.S. military discusses strategic communication as a formal methodology that de-

conflicts messages through "careful deliberation and coordination, analyzes and prioritizes key

audiences, and synchronizes and times the release of information by all public information

agents to their respective audiences in a disciplined fashion" (Eder, 2007, p. 63). In similar

regard, British military officials define strategic communication with subtle nuance as "a

systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and

tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and

develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain

particular types of behavior" (Tatham, 2008, p. 3). While both military views of strategic

communication are similar in use of tactics and recognition of audience perceptions, the former

definition emphasizes the unified system of message release while the latter emphasizes intended

audience reaction or behaviors. It is the view of this researcher that both consistency of messages

and intended audience impact should be equally valued in strategic communication.

As in the context of politics, strategic communication uses words, actions, images, or

symbols to influence attitudes and opinions of target audiences, shaping their behavior in

allegiance to political objectives (Farwell, 2012). The impact can be described as "purposeful

influence" of an organization's constituent audience, and can be characterized as "campaigns of

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influence" (Farwell, 2012; Hallahan et al., 2007). Organizations including schools should use this same type of influence to shape perception and behavior of their audiences. Purposeful release of information provides audiences the narrative which they can in turn share with others, building the reputation of the school. Conversely, communication scholars warn that strategic communication should not be negatively viewed as a "spin" on reality or "propaganda" used in manipulation of audiences (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015; Sisco, 2006). Although strategic communication was born from military origins, this purposeful use of words and symbols to influence audiences is becoming more common outside of government and politics.

Emerging as best practice in businesses and nonprofit organizations, the concept of strategic organizational communication is defined as "the process of planning and executing acts of written and oral communication in order to achieve specifically-defined organizational goals" (Sisco, 2006, p. 19). Aligned with military definitions, Sisco (2006) further asserts that strategic communication is achieved with carefully planned messages (the WHAT) through appropriate channels (the HOW), and associated with larger goals of the organization, considering the audience, their motivations, and their perspectives. "Without establishing these commonalities [with audiences], communication is likely to fail" (Sisco, 2006, p. 20). There are six factors of strategic communication and they are as follows: speaker/sender, audience/receiver (primary and secondary, including unintended secondary), message, context, goal, and strategy (Sisco, 2006). The addition of "strategy" as a factor emphasizes the purposeful application of communication and how the organization functions as a social actor advancing its mission. Strategic communication focuses on "how the organization itself presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 7).

The use of strategic communication in complex organizations such as school districts requires monitoring for message alignment. An organization's survival often depends on the exchange and coordination of information. This underlines the need for organizations to monitor communication and its effectiveness (Downs & Adrian, 2004). The current study sought to understand the intended impact by school leaders, the actual content of district strategic communication, and the potential for brand creation by the public school district.

Strategic Communication Audit

How does an organization measure the effectiveness of its communication? Which channels are used to communicate to various audiences? A communication audit provides an objective view of communication practices in order to create a comparison between what organizational leaders intend to communicate and the reality of message content (Hargie & Tourish, 2009). "A strategic communications audit is a systematic assessment, either formal or informal, of an organization's capacity for, or performance of, essential communication practices" (Coffman, 2004, p. 1). The process is evaluative because it measures the current reality, and formative as it suggests areas to strengthen performance. When messages are widely disseminated throughout an organization, there exists potential risk for mixed messages or for communication not aligned with an organization's purpose or mission. Benefits of conducting a communication audit include identifying subjective interpretations of reality held by actors in the organization, identifying common understandings of organizational life, and understanding that gaps can exist between real and imagined communication practices (Hargie & Tourish, 2009, p. 41).

Coffman (2004) offers a scale of measurement for organizations to evaluate communication strategy, implementation, and support or integration. Matrix levels label the

current reality of an organization's communication practices as Ad Hoc, Planned, Institutionalized, Evaluated, and Optimized (Coffman, 2004, p. 5.) This audit matrix provides a "snapshot" of an organization's current communication capacity so goals for improvement can be made. The matrix is divided into three main measures: Strategy, Implementation, and Support and Integration. Each category is further broken down into aspects of message creation and dissemination. Organizations can measure the effectiveness of their communication practices.

Non-profit organizations are increasingly engaged in the practice of using communication audits to understand their communication performance and capacity as well as to get a realistic sense of communication effectiveness (Coffman, 2004). There have been studies conducted on communication practices and branding of higher education institutions (Klassen, 2002; Lamboy, 2012; Moogen, 2011; Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2013; Riza, 2011; Shaver, 2012), but to date there are few studies on strategic communication in American public schools (Berthiaume, 2015; DiMartino & Jessen, 2014; Rios-Harrist, 2011). Conducting communication audits within American public school districts allows school leaders to understand the method (HOW) of communication and the content (WHAT) they communicate with audiences. Communication audits uncover gaps in what administrators believe is being communicated and the current reality of output to various audiences leading to better understanding of communication trends and helping leaders shape the public perception of the school district.

Situation

Although possessing unique traits, schools across the nation share the following common challenges: generating funding and enrollment, maintaining favorable public perception, communicating safety of students in times of threat, and meeting the needs of diverse learners. All of these necessitate the use of strategic communication. One reason strategic communication

is important relates to school choice. Funding and enrollment creates major challenges for schools because schools are funded on a per-pupil basis. Currently in most states, school improvement initiatives and shifting boundary regulations have created an educational market for parents selecting a school, causing schools to vie for student enrollment. Families in 47 states have the option of inter-district or intra-district open enrollment according to criteria outlined by each individual state (Education Commission of the States, 2016). Even in areas without school choice where children are required to attend their neighborhood schools or rural school districts, parents selecting a home make choice of school a criterion within limits of financial resources and other factors. Parents typically want the best education for their children and educational programs offered impact parental choice of schools. Enrollment drives school funding on a per-pupil basis making school choice and school funding interrelated and necessitating the marketing of schools to their various publics.

Because information about schools impacts public perception of the need to raise or lower funding, strategic communication is needed to generate support for bond referendums for school development and renovations (Gunther, McGowan, & Donegan, 2011). Local bond referendums levy funds for school improvements. Sometimes votes pass and sometimes they fail, and in order to generate necessary funds for school improvements, schools need to make their value and contributions known to voters through strategic communication. In addition, a disconnect exists between the general population's support of schools and legislative support. One former superintendent explained

> "we [Iowans] have been electing individuals to our legislature who talk support, but are not willing to provide minimal financial support necessary. I could go on and on about the growing need for additional support from schools to deal with mental health and the

continued intrusion/expansion of state-mandated programs in school, without [legislators]

talking to educators regarding what they believe is needed" (Wilkerson, 2016, email).

Schools are required to do more for students with less support. In addition, "public schools face

greater competition than ever from private schools, charter schools, and homeschooling; and the

public's dim view of school leadership grows," (Gunther et al., 2011). If schools expect public

support, they must educate the public on the value and contributions of their educational system.

The popular opinion of public school is more critical today than in years past and necessitates

strategic communication to both local and state audiences.

In addition to choice and funding initiatives, providing physical and emotional security

for students has become increasingly challenging as has communicating school safety to parents

and students. Teachers and school administrators have engaged in active shooter training, and

office personnel have been trained in receiving phone calls related to bomb threats and other

external dangers. When threats to schools occur, schools are charged to not only manage the

threat but also control the perception of safety to students, staff, and parents through crisis

communication. Communication protocol has been designed by necessity for the release of news

after a threat or the loss of a student or staff member. Careful control of strategic messages of

emergent nature remains essential in these sensitive communication situations.

These common problems faced by school districts necessitate the use of strategic

communication and branding of school districts both within their organization and outward into

their communities ensuring that all stakeholders see the value, importance, and strength of their

schools. Information to internal audiences helps everyone function within the organization, while

information to external audiences "tells the story of how the district works and what it's

accomplishing" (Gunther et al., 2011, p. 40). Helping various publics to better understand what

schools "do here" impacts local, state, and federal support for schools; one of the most important benefits of strategic communication used by school districts. One state which regards itself as a leader in education is Iowa.

Education In Iowa

Geographically located in the area of the U.S. called "the Midwest," Iowa is a state characterized as an educational and agricultural leader. In Iowa education has been historically a top priority and source of state pride. Iowa leads the nation in graduation rates among typical students, low-income students, and students with disabilities (Governing Data, 2017). Iowa's school choice opportunities afforded by open enrollment and private school tuition in the form of tax credits in some areas are putting Iowa in the national educational spotlight as national education discourse considers the efficacy of increased school choice (Goldstein, 2017).

Iowa's shifting agricultural industry has impacted school districts in recent decades. The nation's top producer of beef, pork, corn, soybeans, and grain (City-data, 2017), Iowa responds to farming trends. In the past 20 years, large farming corporations have become more prolific reducing the number of small family farms. The reduction of family farms has resulted in diminishing student enrollment in rural counties forcing schools to join with one another forming consolidated school districts like Adel-Desoto-Minburn, Collins-Maxwell-Baxter, and West Central Valley to name a few. While rural schools have been forced into consolidation with other neighboring districts, suburban migration has pushed the population to explode in select areas such as the Des Moines metro area, Cedar Rapids, and Iowa City. At the same time, urban sprawl has increased the size of several major cities and suburban neighborhoods exist in place of centuries-old corn fields. A few Iowa cities show concentrated populations impacting the school enrollment in both the cities and rural areas. (See Appendix A for heat map of school

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population). Both large and small schools in rural and urban areas could benefit from actively attracting and retaining students through strategic communication.

Des Moines Metro Area

Almost directly in the center of the state thrives the Des Moines metro area, its urban core (population 203,400) encapsulated by suburban cities framed by a sprawling variety of towns referred to as "bedroom communities" where people live while commuting to work in large downtown corporations. The average American commuter travels 25 minutes each way with "extreme commuters" willing to travel 90 minutes to work and home again (Plumer, 2013). Such is the commuting situation in the Des Moines area. The Des Moines metro boasts several large companies drawing corporate commuters to Principal Financial, Allied, Wellmark, Wells-Fargo, Nationwide, and others. As corporate employees relocate families to the Des Moines metro area, a veritable buffet of school choice awaits. Within a 40-mile radius of downtown Des Moines, parents and students have the choice of attending 32 public high schools and 3 private high schools ranging in size from 500 to approximately 3,500 students. (See Appendix B for school distance chart).

Because schools offer a rich variety of typical and unique programs and activities, parents are able to select the school district which meets the needs of their children as they relocate to urban and suburban areas. Others carefully select schools to meet the needs of individual students through open enrollment. High levels corporate relocation in addition to suburban migration and open enrollment legislation have led to the increased need for schools to communicate mission and values to families shopping for the best school system to meet their needs. Strategic communication and strong brand creation for school districts and individual

schools within large districts can help parents navigate the choice of schools in the state of Iowa, and especially in metro areas where school choice may be overwhelming.

Problem

Even though strategic communication and strategic communication audits are common in business, research to determine how public schools use strategic communication to address their goals and objectives is not so common. If schools need to attract and retain students while controlling the perception of various publics, school administrators and/or district communication specialists need to align messages. This type of research aids both large and small districts. In large districts, multiple administrators are sending messages to publics with no assurance that those messages are aligned with each other or with the brand personality of the district. In small schools with fewer school leaders, there is a need to measure the communication output and message alignment through various channels in order to control public perception of the school system. It is unclear whether the use of essential communication products and processes (ECPPs) including school website, emails, newsletters, announcements, social media, and others are effectively communicating the same message content outwardly to audiences. These issues necessitate the use of a strategic communication audit to determine the method and content of messages.

Significance

Measuring the effectiveness of strategic communication in public schools is urgent for the following three main reasons: supporting perceptions of the education system, aiding parents in school choice, and promoting competitive advantage of schools. Schools need to position themselves for future change. With current proposed budget cuts impacting education, state and federal funding of public schools now faces an uncertain future. Informing legislators and other

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agencies of school worth and effectiveness will aid schools in creating a favorable impression with its publics. Schools need to promote what they do and how they serve their population in order to maintain favorable perceptions at the state and federal level.

In addition to positioning themselves, schools need to help consumers choose. Parents searching for the best education programming to meet the needs of their students navigate the fields of educational choice. "Any families who exercise choice in the public sector may have limited knowledge of educational systems. Thus, it seems critical that they receive help in acquiring information to make informed decisions" (Schneider et al., 1996, p. 27). Schools should find it in their best interest to promote their programs helping families make informed decisions and ensuring schools attract students who fit their particular mission, focus, or style. Schools need to use strategic communication to broadcast who and what they are in order to attract and retain families.

Although individual family's priorities in selecting schools differ, they have a few main criteria in common to consider. Some parents weigh physical location, facility characteristics, and size as factors in selection, but many are attracted by perceived quality (Young & Clinchy, 1992). The quality of schools commonly desired by parents "show high levels of academic achievement, emphasize academic standards, and promote a relatively structured (disciplined) school atmosphere" (Hoxby, 2001, p. 296). Parents seek schools that best meet the needs of their individual children and most closely align with their own values. This concept necessitates school districts' use of strategic communication to broadcast mission and values in attracting families.

Lastly, school choice promotes competition and benefits schools. The bar has been raised for public school systems with competition between schools, a byproduct of school choice

(Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 2004; Hoxby, 2001). Competition between schools will cause schools to improve or if they do not, they will close due to loss of funding per pupil (Di Martino & Jessen, 2014; Ebert & Culyer, 2014). The voucher system is one method of allowing parents choices of schools. Another is the option of open-enrollment in 47 states giving parents the power to select their child's school district. Even without school vouchers and in states without open-enrollment, parents use selection of school as criterion for buying a home. Conversely, some urban areas are using schools as a way to attract families of certain demographics to urban areas (Cucchiara, 2008). Using strategic communication has the potential to help schools thrive in competition with other area schools.

A communication audit uncovers truths and shows gaps between perceived communication effectiveness and the reality of message content. Using a communication audit, information showing how strategic communication addresses school challenges and communicates school culture can be elicited. The examination of strategic communication exercised within a sample district offers useful information about the methods and content of school district communication with interested stakeholders and could either indicate strong brand or facilitate the creation of strong school district brand personality. Communication audits illuminate the reality of strategic communication use among school leaders in a school district and provide recommendations for communication assessment or suggestions for strengthened brand alignment.

Goal

The current study examines how essential communication products and processes (ECCPS) are used in public education. This study realized how (which ECPPs are used) and what (message content) school leaders communicate, offering both evaluative and formative

values; bringing forth a snapshot of the current communication performance and pointing to areas where processes can be strengthened. Traditional ECCPs used in schools include open-house nights, newsletters, notes, phone tree calls, press-release, bulletins, PTO events, assemblies, and parent meetings as methods of communicating with parents and community members. The digital age affords more immediate contact with publics with the additional use of email, blogs, video, websites, and social media. Discovering how and what school leaders communicate leads to understanding of whether or not school mission and values are communicated and if messages from many leaders are aligned with each other and with the common vision of the district.

Objectives And Research Questions

The current research examines the strategic communications of leaders in an American school system in order to understand the purposeful release of information. Recent studies have measured the effectiveness of HEIs' names, logos, and mission statements (Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Others have focused on how branding identities are created (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury 2009; Khanna & Yadav, 2014). In addition, several works have studied perceptions of relationship building between institutions and their stakeholders through relationship marketing (Klassen, 2002; Shaver, 2012). Increasingly public primary and secondary schools have been the subject of strategic communication and marketing inquiry (Di Martino & Jessen, 2014; Rios-Harrist, 2011). Market-based reforms challenge leaders to carefully consider their target audience and create messages that communicate shared vision, helping maintain schools which are more competitive and responsive to the needs of the community. The current study uses what is known about educational communication by school leadership in primary and secondary schools and applied understanding from university studies

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related to attributes attracting students. Understanding gained from previous school studies in addition to what is known about best practice in corporate branding helped develop scholarship on how school communication holds brand potential.

The overarching goal of this work was broken down to three research objectives which focused on selected communication products, message content, and perceived school district branding. Just as communication content is described as the WHAT and the strategy as the HOW (Sisco, 2006, p. 33), the objectives of this study detailed the WHAT and HOW of communication both within the district and outwards to various publics. When organizations examine results of a communication audit, they can identify discrepant messages and move closer to a unified brand through strategic communication. Revealing problems or gaps in communication practices and working towards unified commitment and vision within its daily operations, communication audits benefit organizations.

The first objective of the current research was to determine how school leaders use strategic communication.

RQ #1 What ECPPs do school leaders use? In order to understand how school leaders use strategic communication, the first task was to understand which methods of communication are most frequently used in communication with vital publics. More traditional forms include press release to news outlets, town hall meetings, face-to-face meetings, bulletins, or notes sent to students' homes. Current digital methods include school websites, administrator blogs, social media, email, and e-newsletters. Is digital communication used more often than traditional methods in schools? When? Why? What goes into the decision for school leaders to choose one method of communicating information above other possible methods? Who is most often the audience? These are important questions. Klassen (2002) used Kotler's Five-level method to

describe the extent to which communication was established between the school and potential students and found that the top-rated schools (of higher education) had the most extensive communication with potential students. The results suggested that having a school website alone does not have measureable effects on marketing (Klassen, 2002, p. 84). Noting methods/channels used helps demonstrate HOW school officials communicate with individuals and with target audiences.

After measuring HOW the school district communicates, the second objective of this study was to ascertain the substance of school communications.

RQ #2 What do school leaders communicate? The content of messages from school leaders to target audiences were referred to as "content priorities." The content of communication to vital publics works together to create the brand personality of an organization; in this case the brand personality of the school district. In an organization with many leaders, it is difficult to create consistent messages communicating the same priorities and values working together to form a strong organizational brand. This study measures the content (the WHAT) of communication by individual school leaders. Determining content priorities helped in measuring the alignment of messages with the mission and values of the school district. Whereas the first and second objectives determine the uses and content of school communication, the third objective worked to measure perceived branding through strategic communication.

RQ #3 How do school leaders perceive branding messages? Studies have been conducted to measure school leaders perception of impact of school marketing and school leaders' involvement in this practice (Rios-Harrist, 2011; Rockholz, 2002). The current study aimed to examine how school leaders characterize the district by measuring how they describe the personality of the district in their experience from their roles in school leadership. Ideally,

school leaders perceive and communicate similar characteristics of the school district, creating brand potential.

The results of a communication audit, revealing essential communication products and processes as well as message content (Objectives 1 & 2), contribute to the understanding of branding messages as part of school district strategic communication (Objective 3). An essential tool for districts in maintaining enrollment, attracting students and families, bridging the gap in perception between school officials and legislators, and communicating school values and effectiveness, strategic communication and branding should be a focus of all school districts in the state of Iowa. The following section details the studies used as models which advance this understanding.

CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the alignment of common messages working together to achieve an audience perception, there is potential for brand creation. Though not as common in elementary and secondary public schools, branding strategies are exercised in higher education institutions (HEIs) to maintain and improve their standing among rival schools. Communicating mission and values through branding has positive impact on colleges and universities ranging from bolstering campus identity and increasing enrollment, to improving college recognition (Lamboy, 2012; Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2013). Studies have been conducted to measure effectiveness of logos as means of communicating academic and athletic identities; however, logos are not reported to convey "what the university is" as an important element of brand creation (Bennett & Ali-Chourdhury, 2009, p. 97). It is apparent that school branding goes beyond the selection of school colors, logos, and images. "In an era marked by dwindling support for all education, and higher education in particular, it is incumbent administrators and leaders broadcast who they are, what they do, and what makes them valuable," (Anctil, 2008, p. 5). This "who they are and what they do" brands a school more than the capacity of school colors or mascots.

Communicating identity creates a "living" personality for academic institutions. The culture of the school is not the demographics of the student population, but instead defined as the context in which everything else takes place: "the way things are done around here" (Rooney, 2005, p. 86). This culture reflects the interaction of people, the experiences shared, and the goals stakeholders set out to achieve. These elements illustrate the essence of the school and create the school's brand. All communication by administrators, teachers, students, and community members create "touchpoints" with the potential to provide strong organizational communication and form institution's brand.

Branding 101

Why do consumers choose one product over another? Successful businesses employ catch-phrases gaining trust and promising an expected level of excellence. "Great businesses can generally summarize their values in just a few words helping them communicate more effectively relative to how and why they exist" (Davis & Dunn, 2002, p. 21). Beyond catch-phrases and logos, brands can be defined as "a cluster of values that enables a promise to be made about a unique and welcomed experience," which then drives a "visionary promise that adds value to all stakeholders" (de Chernatony, 2009, p. 104). In addition, social status and identity are associated with belonging to an organization that has strong "brand community," and brand identity is created through multiple and various methods of exposure referred to as "branding touchpoints" (Aaker, 1996). These interactions between all members of an organization and their audiences work together, creating the brand identity of the organization and asserting that every actor and every communication shapes the perception of the organization or entity.

Strong organizational communication builds a brand-based culture by engaging employees and other stakeholders in the excitement and experiences of the organization, giving them stock in the brand (Davis & Dunn, 2002). Brand identity is developed by the process of all messages to all stakeholders, creating and maintaining an audience perception. Perceptions of brand personality can be formed and influenced by any direct or indirect contact that the consumer has with the brand. The idea that communication from all members of an organization contribute to the brand identity and brand personality of the organization necessitates nurturing the brand as a living thing.

The purposeful nature of both strategic communication and branding creates a natural association between the two. The act of carefully considering audiences requires acknowledgement that all interactions with an audience have impact much like individual branding touchpoints impact consumers. Digital communication should be considered as both a branding and a strategic communication tool. The need for strategic communication in an organization tightly connects to the evolution of the technology age, demanding carefully planned communication in the creation and transmission of messages for diverse audiences comprised of differing skills and expectations (O'Hair et al., 2011). The technology age has expanded potential audiences and increased the rapid release of information exponentially, bringing increased urgency and relevance to the field of strategic communication. Today's communication focuses not solely on the content of messages but on how communications contribute to an organization's purpose for being (Hallahan et al., 2007). The "purpose for being" is the essence of branding. In a world constantly churning with media messages, organizations are realizing the need to control perception of consumers through branding messages. Strategic communication manages stakeholder perceptions and works to keep those perceptions aligned with an organization's intended brand.

Branding Education Research

In the world of education where students are both the consumer and the product, institutions of higher education (HEIs) concern themselves with marketing efforts in order to attract and retain students and secure alumni loyalties (Anctil, 2006); however, research related to branding effectiveness has left gaps in our collective understanding (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Studies conducted in the last decade have contributed to the understanding of educational branding in colleges and universities, and this literature review aims to thematically

synthesize the most current HEI branding research before a taking a more in-depth look at the few studies relating to primary and secondary communication research. Recent studies have focused on how branding identities are created through messages (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury 2009; Khanna & Yadav, 2014; Luna, 2014; Pinar et al., 2013; Williams & Omar 2014). Others have measured the effectiveness of HEIs' names, logos, and mission statements (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Lamboy, 2011; Rosenthal, 2003; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). In addition, several works have studied perceptions of relationship building between institutions and their stakeholders through marketing (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Riza, 2013; Shaver, 2012).

Though several studies have been conducted on educational branding in higher education, there are fewer studies related to elementary and secondary public school branding (Berthiaume, 2015; Cucciara, 2008; Di Martino & Jessen, 2014; Lafavore, 2012; Rockholz, 2002; Rios-Harrist, 2011). Synthesizing HEI studies helps lead to understanding the branding potential in public primary and secondary school systems, the subject of fewer research conversations in the area of branding.

Branding Methods Through Various Touchpoints (How)

Building an "atmosphere and impression" relies on building relationships with stakeholders, and relationship marketing creates a bond between stakeholders and the institution (Klassen, 2002; Moogen, 2011; Riza, 2011; Shaver, 2012). How are various stakeholders reached? Moogen (2011) investigated the types of communication used by HEIs to measure which are most effective for marketing to prospective students. The study concluded that "by addressing potential students' concerns and offering more tailor-made communication strategies to suit them, HEIs can segment the marketplace and then position themselves within the

competitive environment" (Moogen, 2011, p. 583). Communication in multiple forms including career fairs, websites, and personal messages draws students to an institution of interest. In regard to building relationships with prospective students and alumni, studies have shown that the top-rated schools interact the most with stakeholders at various levels of contact to create and sustain a bond between the HEI and stakeholders resulting in levels of relationship positively correlated to high levels student loyalty to the institution (Klassen, 2002).

Social media studies have shown that this newer medium has become a marketing tool of universities to attract and engage potential students and their parents, enliven current students for active participation, manage potential crisis, and retain alumni loyalties in the expectation that maintaining the relationship will promise future philanthropic value (Luna, 2014). Investigating the use of social media marketing in four Texas universities for commonalities in use and best practice for training social media users with the goal of transmitting effective brand messages, Luna (2014) sought to understand how universities communicate using social media. Within the commonly-practiced list of social media policies of the four sample universities, a few common themes emerged as follows: "strategic planning and goal-setting, initial instructions on how-to, daily use instructions related to frequency of posts, collaboration and teamwork with colleagues, importance of honesty, accuracy, and transparency, and adherence to privacy policies" (Luna, 2014, p. 123). The primary objectives of social media platforms used (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and others) included community building, recruitment, alumni relations, crisis communications, and building relationships with stakeholders (Luna, 2014). These studies in relationship building as part of communication practices amongst colleges and their publics inspired the current study on how communication practices of school leaders build relationships with their publics in primary and secondary education.

It's Not Just The Name And Logo (WHAT)

Several studies have shown that school names and logos contribute to the institution's identity but do not create the brand. What's in a name? The set of associations related to name and logo of an institution help develop its recognizable identity. The brand of an HEI grants a level of social status that students enjoy as life-long members of the school community, and all aspects of the institution from infrastructure to core values "strive to promote and explain its heritage and current practices. All elements such as brand name, slogan, logo, etc. developed by the organization and communicated to the market "form a favorable brand image and create brand equity" (Williams & Omar, 2014, p. 6). University logos, name, and symbols attached to it contribute to the perceived personality of the institution (Rosenthal, 2003; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013) and its culture and uniqueness (Lamboy, 2011). Logos and images strive to communicate what Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009) called "quiddity;" "a set of distinctive features that define the brand's inherent nature and reality" (p. 87). Watkins & Gonzenbach (2013) discovered that the names and logos scoring highest in regard to Aaker's (1997) brand personality scales communicate excitement and competence (in athletics) and competence (in academics) in communications aimed at attracting students. The features of marketing materials such as images and font affect how the public perceives an educational institution (Dholakia & Accairdo, 2014; Idris & Whitfield, 2014).

Logos and institution names work to effectively impact how a school is perceived; however, logos are not reported to convey "what the university is" as an important element of brand creation (Bennett & Ali-Chourdhury, 2009, p. 97). Students need to feel connected to their environment with a sense of school spirit and emotional support from others on campus. "Students may not remember everything they learned at an institution, but they will remember

the atmosphere and impression the school had on them (Lamboy, 2011, p. 29). Environment and relationships are key. "Education as a service is a special type of service due to the intensity of contact between the consumer (student) and service provider (higher education brand) and also the continuous nature of the contact between the consumer (student) and the service provider (higher education brand)..." (Khanna, Jacob, & Ydav, 2014, p. 122). All connections with students from admissions counselor to resident assistant create the environment of the institution and can be considered brand "touchpoints." All communications should work together creating the unified brand image of the school communicating message content related to school environment. Transference of this idea to understanding communication in primary and secondary schools can advance the collective understanding of what creates the essence of the institution and how strategic communication can market an intended brand.

But Is It Working? (Perceptions Of Branding)

Recent studies have identified important factors influencing student perceptions and student choice, and these studies have contributed to the understanding of how to control perception in primary and secondary schools. When valuing HEIs, prospective students are driven by cognitive attributes including perceived quality and service, and affective attributes including innovation, ambition, and prestige, for example (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). Central values of strong brand equity for academic institutions (of higher education) include academic experiences, perceived quality of experiences, emotional and learning environment, student-life experiences like extra-curricular activities, sports, and community involvement, the institution's reputation, and physical facilities (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Pinar et al., 2013) as well as whether or not student expectations are met by the HEI (Shaver, 2012). Although these studies have been conducted relative to college student consumers, many of these school attributes should be

appealing to parents of primary and secondary students. Contributing to the perceived academic value of an (HEI) institution is the competence of teaching staff and the quality of student-faculty interaction (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Klassen, 2014; Shaver, 2012). Researchers have concurred that the marketing of instructor competence and the interaction between instructors and students are both important in creating a strong brand for the institution. These interactions contribute to student and community perceptions of the school, and should also be considered as factors influencing selection of primary and secondary institutions.

Studies have also focused on communication and relationship building among internal members of the HEI organization as "faculty and staff contribute to the brand experience" (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014, p. 149). Others have agreed that employee perspectives within the institution have great impact on the institutional branding as a whole (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Ruck & Welch, 2011; Williams & Omar, 2014). Everyone in the organization should work towards the same goal and speak the same language. When internal stakeholders are informed and commit to contributing to the branding efforts, the favorability of the brand increases (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Williams & Omar, 2014). These studies have illuminated the need for all stakeholders to understand the mission and values communicated by the institution's brand in order to create a common perception shared externally to audiences.

Branding Education

Promoting school culture and purpose for being, educational branding is becoming more widely practiced. Typically associated with marketing businesses, branding is progressively used in the marketing of (higher) education to attract and retain students, enhance image and prestige, and increase financial resources (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Williams & Omar, 2014).

Strategic marketing in higher education institutions (HEIs) takes the form of brochures, websites, postcards, billboards, social media and others with the goal of attracting students and retaining alumni loyalties. Educational branding and strategic communication naturally connect as "marketing involves designing the institution's offerings to meet the target markets' needs and desires….to inform, motivate, and service these markets (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 6). Just like the purposeful influence involved in strategic communication, marketing strives to identify and respond to human and social needs and can be best defined by "meeting needs profitably" (Kotler & Keller, 2016, p.5). Meeting the needs of students and communities drives school practice, so it follows naturally that schools market what they do to serve their communities.

Generally marketers promote "10 main types of entities: goods, services, events, experiences, persons, places, properties, organizations, information, and ideas" (Kotler & Keller, 2012, p. 3). Because of the difficulty conceptualizing the products sold in education, colleges and universities market themselves by way of showing the "intangibles," the learning and living that create the educational experience. University branding creates promises to potential students related to the institutions' learning and social environment and the prospect of graduation (Bennett & Ali-Chourdhury, 2009). Successful branding attracts potential students by allowing them to picture themselves on campus or as part of the school culture narrative. "Consumers often choose and use brands with a brand personality consistent with their actual self-concept or ideal self-concept" (Kotler & Keller, 2012, p. 70).

Schools marketing their programs should avoid misleading various publics. Negotiating the line between "effective promotion" and "false advertising" creates one major challenge in school marketing (Di Martino & Jessen, 2014). One pitfall of school branding is "massaging the image rather than the reality" in creating marketing materials (Gerwirtz, 2002, p. 41). Within the

context of school branding administrators work to attract certain populations of students and promote what the school aspires to be. Creating "niche markets" of students strengthens the promise of specialized educational programs geared toward specific student interests like technology or fine arts; however, public school marketing could potentially lead to tracking and segregation, an undesirable outcome threatening educational equity for students (Ancess & Allen, 2006). Consequently, school branding requires constant care and purposefulness.

Branding In Primary And Secondary Schools

Because the current study seeks to understand the role of strategic communication and potential for branding messages in primary and secondary schools, the following section isolates studies that have been conducted in primary and secondary educational institutions.

New York leads the country in school choice initiatives. Di Martino & Jessen (2014) combined two studies for analysis of the roles of school branding and marketing in the New York City school system, a district providing an open market of school choice and prevailing as the largest school district in the nation. Di Martino & Jessen (2014) found a school brand represented by marketing materials influences parents' perception of the school and their decision to enroll. There are also "expressed disappointments when the promises made in promotional materials did not match lived experiences with students and their families (p. 465). The study argued that having students subscribe to the shared culture or vision is an important factor in school satisfaction. Defining "marketing" as "anything produced by a school to create or manage their public perception" (p. 449), the study warned that the school's objective is to not blur the lines between "effective promotion" and "false advertising" to massage the image rather than illustrate the reality, and further cautioned that school marketing may create tracking and segregation, a warning shared by Cucchiara (2008). Parents and students who effectively

negotiate the variety of school options and choose as well-informed consumers are most satisfied, but the time-consuming nature of selecting schools discourages many.

A significant benefit of school marketing, audience-centeredness helps schools tailor message emphasis and shared vision for consumers. Di Martino & Jessen (2014) further suggested that this focus could have the "potential to create stronger schools more responsive to the needs of the communities they serve - an aspiration which historically public schools have found to be very challenging" (p. 471). Related to community benefits, Cucciara (2008) asserted that schools can revitalize an area by wooing financially affluent families to further the economic growth of cities, but this practice also creates the "potential to re-inscribe social status, exacerbating the effects of race, class, and geography on students' educational experiences and opportunities" (p. 176). Careful and strategic marketing of schools through the use of strategic communication has the potential to impact the community as a whole. Careful communication responds to the needs of the community and accurately represents the situation in schools to avoid misleading audiences.

School leadership and principal communication are driving forces in school marketing. Lafavore (2012) measured the influence of schools' mission statements on principal leadership and perceived principal influence on teacher practice. The study provided a greater understanding of the actual role mission statements have on forming leadership beliefs and influencing principal and teacher practice. The study suggested that the creation of a mission statement does not guarantee teachers and administrators use the statement to guide practice, but if used, principals as school leaders are responsible for influencing the advancement of the mission. "Whether used in business or in schools, the primary function of mission statements is to affirm organizational purpose and theoretically, the established purpose guides the practice of

those within the organization in fulfilling the purpose" (Lafavore, 2012, p. 206). This study showed the capacity of school leaders to impact teacher practice with the effective use of mission statements, and inspired further research on the connections between principal communication practices.

Rockholz (2002) studied school leaders' perceptions of the importance of marketing communication and its practice in Connecticut schools in creating community partnerships. The study revealed that the overall perceived value of marketing among public school superintendents and assistant superintendents was higher than the actual demonstrated practice, and that most school leaders had minimal formal training in strategic marketing. The study showed significant use of marketing strategies and activities; however, the "proactive or reactive manner of those strategies is unclear" (p. 119). Ongoing communication with community members is critical in the maintenance of relationships with community stakeholders and effective in garnering long-term support affecting voting behavior in referendums. Most effective communication is personal contact in the form of local meetings and activities throughout the year. Implications of the study have suggested that marketing strategies and activities which illustrate respect, appreciation, and value of staff could be designed to attract and retain teachers, support staff, para-educators, and substitutes.

Rios - Harrist (2011) agreed that building relationships with the community is an essential task of school leaders. The study reported findings from a survey of Texas principals and vice principals related to perception of importance of parental engagement and strategies used to involve them in school through communication, events, and volunteerism. The study recommended identification of best practices and areas of need to drive professional development in the area of school communication.

Berthiaume (2015) surveyed several school leaders to understand the impact of email on the culture and climate of the school. The study argued that email is part of the organizational environment. Berthiaume (2015) looked at the content and tone of emails between principals and staff and arrived at some conclusions about benefits of email. Email is an efficient way to communicate within the school and provides a record of communication accessible later. The study considered the detriments of email as limiting time and communication effectiveness, being viewed as a way to "catch" people doing something wrong, and providing confusion related to writer's intentions. There was one principal in the study who used email more frequently than any other form of communication and findings suggested that this practice contributed to an "overall negative climate of the school" (Berthiaume, 2015, p. 101).

Understanding constructed from this collection of communication studies in the areas of HEIs and primary and secondary schools fueled the current research. Studies have shown that marketing unique aspects of schools leads to connecting college students with the desired institution. Particular aspects of school organizations, like facilities, social environment, and teaching staff, attract students and families. It has been shown in HEI and primary and secondary studies that communication builds relationships with potential students and families. Effective communication with target publics enhances the success of the school system and incites feelings of satisfaction among consumers. School leaders have the power to impact both school climate and how audiences view schools and what they offer. The current research works to understand how and what school leaders communicate in order to measure the alignment of content and potential for brand creation.

CHAPTER THREE. METHODS

In order to understand strategic communication used by schools, a communication audit was designed. Following the examples set forth by the studies detailed in the literature review chapter, the goal of the current study is to further understand school communication by measuring the use of essential communication products and processes (ECPPs), documenting their content, and discussing perceived branding measures by school leaders in a sample public school district. A brand audit's objective evaluation of brand alignment with the strategic goals of the institution as well as the perception of success in meeting the needs of consumers is essential and becomes a key objective in aligning messages with the brand identity (Williams & Omar, 2014). This section reviews the research questions, describes the sample district, and details the qualitative and quantitative methods that were used to collect the data.

The study used a mixed-method design involving qualitative methods of in-depth personal interview (IPI) and focus group discussion (FGD), along with the quantitative method of empirical quantitative content analysis (EQCA) to answer the following research questions:

RQ #1: What ECPPs do school leaders use? (Objective 1)

RQ #2: What do school leaders communicate to target audiences? (Objective 2)

RQ #3: How do school leaders perceive branding messages? (Objective 3)

Use of the mixed-method approach aided in avoiding systematic bias and allowed for diverse perspectives to emerge and illustrate the situation of how and what is communicated in the sample district. To strengthen validity and contribute to recent discourse on school branding, established instruments were used in this study. Aaker's (1997) Brand Core Values aid in identifying message themes that have the potential for brand building. In addition Pinar et al., (2013) Central Values of Brand Equity offer the most important factors contributing to brand

equity in schools (i.e. quality, reputation, environment) and was used as a tool for measuring how the sample district communicates brand equity through communication products. Each instrument is further explained following the particular methods of study it supports.

Participants

The sample school district serves a population of more than 10,000 students in their K-12 school district. Located west of the Des Moines Metro, the sample district has in the past 25 years grown from a small farming town into a booming suburban community and is currently the fastest-growing district in the state of Iowa, increasing in size consistently since 2001 by approximately 500 students per year in the last five years. Because of its constant growth and change, the sample district constantly adapts to its shifting populations and stands out as an interesting sample for a school communication audit.

All members of an organization create different "touchpoints" of branding communication. In a school district touchpoints include teachers, principals, support staff, students, parents, and anyone else who represents the institution. Because previous research has suggested that school leaders have great impact on school environment and building relationships with the community, the current study focuses on the strategic communication of school leaders. For the context of this research, school leaders sampled include principals, associate principals, vice principals, superintendent, and associate superintendents, in a Des Moines metro suburban district. This study also includes the perspectives of the district's communication specialist, director of adult and community education, director of teaching and learning, director of student services, as well as the district's chief financial officer, all of whom engage with the community using various communication products and processes in their school leadership roles.

Procedures

After obtaining consent from the Institutional Review Board, an email was sent requesting the voluntary participation of school leaders in focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth personal interviews (IPIs). After the email was sent to all school leaders in all 13 schools, a purposive sampling selected participants of two focus groups; one comprised of the principals and vice principals of various schools within the district, and one of district office school leaders. The intent was that FGDs included school leaders with similar district perspectives for greatest generalizability of results relative to their similar district roles and to avoid potential validity threats of participants in discussion with direct supervisors. The superintendent of schools, one associate superintendent, and the communication coordinator were interviewed separately and outside of FGDs to provide their perspectives on how the district uses communication and to illustrate a general view of branding in the district. After responding to the invitation to participate in either the FGDs or IPIs, all participants were emailed a copy of the adult consent form which was signed before the start of each interview or discussion (see Appendix C for consent form). In total, 10 school leaders, representing district office administration and three of 13 individual schools, contributed to the data collection for this study in the form of in-depth personal interviews or as participants in one of two focus group discussions. The study also enlisted the district's communication coordinator responsible for overseeing school district communication to participate in an interview.

Defining Terms

Participants of the IPIs and FGDs were first directed to read the following definition of *strategic communication* printed on handouts. This was done to ensure participants had a

common understanding of the topic for the purpose of discussion. The definition of *strategic communication* was simplified as follows:

> *"the process of planning and executing acts of written and oral communication in order to achieve specifically-defined organizational goals….*
>
> *achieved with carefully planned messages (the WHAT) through appropriate channels (the HOW), and associated with the larger goals of the organization, considering the audience, their motivations, and their perspectives"* (Sisco, 2006, p. 19).

"Brand" and "brand personality" were also defined on handouts as follows:

> Brand: *"a cluster of values that enables a promise to be made about a unique and welcomed experience,"* which then drives a *"visionary promise that adds value to all stakeholders"* (de Chernatony, 2009, p. 104).
>
> Brand personality: *"refers to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand"* (Aaker, 1996, p. 341).

While attention was drawn to the definition of strategic communication prior to the discussion, the definition of branding was held until later in the discussion to allow natural flow of discussion without pre-scripting the discussion in the direction of branding.

Qualitative Method #1 In-Depth Personal Interview

The first qualitative method utilized in-depth personal interviews (IPIs) with the superintendent, associate superintendent, and communications coordinator to get an understanding of how district communication functions and to gain perspectives on the communication goals for the district. The purpose of conducting the in-depth personal interviews was to build understanding of ECPP use and content through individual perspectives of school leaders as well as their views on brand personality. Because the superintendent is the

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spokesperson for the district and participates in communication both internally and externally, she was interviewed for her perspectives on how the district uses communication as well as to understand how mission and values contribute to the district brand. The superintendent and associate superintendent were interviewed with the same protocol questions as the FGD participants to strengthen validity of results. The communication coordinator was also interviewed for her whole-district perspectives and because her position requires her to ensure quality communication to both internal and external audiences. Consent forms were emailed prior to the interview and signed at each interview. All interviews were conducted at the district office and lasted approximately 40-60 minutes. Interview protocol for each is found in Appendices D and E.

Qualitative Method #2 Focus Group Discussion

The second qualitative method was designed for two focus groups comprised of five to eight school leaders purposefully selected and not involved in the IPIs to collectively delve further into the topics of strategic communication and ECPPs used in the district, as well as to discuss intended branding messages. Purposive sampling for the focus group resulted in representatives from different levels of administration in homogeneous groups determined by position held within the district. A total of 19 school administrators were invited to participate; and after several email invitations, only eight attended one of the two FGDs. Focus group #1 was comprised of five district office administrators who would offer a holistic perspective of district communication. Focus group #2 was made up of three principals and vice principals from particular schools across the district for different perspectives by building. Though small, the sample group of participants represented schools at elementary, middle, and high school levels. Both discussion groups took place at the Innovation and Learning Center. Participants of both

focus groups were recruited via email which included the adult consent form for IRB

compliance. Signatures were collected on the consent form as participants arrived for the FGD.

Both discussions were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription by researcher.

The questions/prompts which guided the discussion were as follows:

1. Describe the use of strategic communication in the [sample school district].

2. What products & processes are used by the district to reach stakeholders? (follow-up

    prompt: list all and name top 3-4 products used)

3. What do you consider as the main content of school messages?

4. Branding experts describe a brand as the "essence" of an organization characterized by

    "who we are and what we do here." What qualities characterize the [sample district]?

These questions were selected to drive the conversation for their direct relationship to the

research questions. Prompt #1 was used to elicit information about how the school district

understands and uses strategic communication. It was intended to get the conversation flowing

naturally regarding communication to reveal how the school district uses ECPPs (RQ #1).

Prompt #2 was used as a follow up inviting school leaders to identify which ECPPs were used

most often (RQ #1). Prompt #3 was designed to facilitate conversation related to the content of

school messages (RQ #2). Prompt #4 was intended to get participants to describe the brand

personality of the district (RQ #3). The results of the FGDs helped establish the content measures

for the Empirical Quantitative Content Analysis (EQCA) described in the next section.

The first focus group discussion lasted approximately 50 minutes. A light lunch was

provided for FGD #1 as compensation for the time spent during the beginning of the school year

chaos. Participants of FGD #1 had been selected for their comprehensive understanding of both

the vision of the district and the operations of the school district within the community and

outward across the state. The school leaders participating in the discussion included the chief

financial officer, one associate superintendent, one director of teaching and learning, the director

of community education, and the director of instructional services. Focus group discussion #2

was comprised of principals and vice principals from different buildings across the district and

lasted approximately 45 minutes. This group had been purposively selected because of their

principal or vice principal role in elementary, middle school, or high school buildings across the

district, communicating routinely to various audiences which include staff, families, and

community members. The researcher facilitated the discussions in order to pose follow-up

questions as needed. Focus group discussion questions are listed in Appendix F.

Immediately following the FGDs, audio recordings were transcribed. After transcriptions

were recorded, initial coding was performed to allow themes to emerge using an inductive and

constant comparison methods to uncover trends in the data. After careful reading, In Vivo coding

highlighted segments of data found to be the essence of how participants were creating meaning

related to their experiences with strategic communication and branding. These segments of data

were then grouped into thematic categories in second cycle analysis using Focused Coding to

reveal emergent themes. Results of the FGDs are detailed in the Results chapter.

Quantitative Method #1 Empirical Quantitative Content Analysis

A communication audit measures the method and content of strategic communication.

The current study was most interested in communication about the district accessible to the

public, especially those "shopping" for schools, so the ECPPs used for quantitative analysis were

website pages, newsletters, and social media. After learning from IPIs and FGDs which ECPPs

the school district uses most often, for what purpose, and to what intended branding impact, 26

webpage samples and ten newsletters from over the course of one year were collected to perform

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an empirical quantitative content analysis. The intent was to verify subject/topics, tone, and characteristics of the district which had been described in the IPIs and FGD sessions. Analysis of the In Vivo codes in FGDs helped create the coding structures for the quantitative study.

The district website pages, newsletters, and social media posts were collected and reviewed for content in order to quantitatively measure content and general branding themes. Quantitative content analysis first measured the topic of each ECPP using results from the IPIs and FGDs. Those methods of data collection established that topics of school communication includes procedural, resources, situational information, "what we do here," and student impact. Twenty-six webpages and ten newsletters were read and given a numeric value for content. Then second and third cycle method used established coding systems to examine the substance or nature of the message. Pinar et al. (2013) uncovered the Central Values of Brand Equity in HEIs and these values were applied in this study of elementary and secondary education. Qualities most important to consumers (of HEIs) include academic experiences, perceived quality of experiences, emotional and learning environment, student-life experiences (i.e. extra-curricular activities, sports, and community involvement), the institution's reputation, and physical facilities. To help categorize identifying qualities of the message that contribute to potential brand power, Aaker's (1997) Core Brand Values were also used. Emergent themes in FGD included the Aaker's (1997) Core Brand Values of relationships, excellence, heritage, and innovation. These themes were used for measurement of each web page and district newsletter.

It was discovered in FGDs that social media is used to send messages to student, parent, and community audiences. This study intended to measure social media outlets for their content; however, it was difficult to limit and contain pieces of social media for data collection. When social media pieces (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) were examined for content and branding, it

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became clear that this aspect provided a "rabbit hole" of never-ending messages. There is a Facebook page to represent the whole district organization; however, because of the interactive nature allowing people to post-share-comment, examination proved difficult using the same measures as more static ECPPs. Also, some individual schools in the district used Facebook and some did not. Many school clubs and organizations maintain Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. Some are managed by school leaders, some by parent organization (PTO), and some by coaches or club sponsors, making social media a branch of study that needs to be examined independently from the current study. As samples were pulled, it was clear that there was no clear format or regulation for much of what was being communicated as school communication using social media channels. In addition, social media messages are brief and it proved difficult to measure content with the same measures as the other ECPPs examined. A different instrument needed designed for measuring social media posts. All communications help create the perception of a school district; however, information communicated by the district as official information may look very different than what is communicated by staff, clubs, students, and others. The goal of this study was to understand how school leaders communicate, so social media was not examined at this time. If examined in the future, a separate measurement tool will need designed specifically for social media content analysis.

The content analysis brought to light general topics addressed by the ECPPs and trends suggesting branding power. Using these methods of measurement already established relative to university branding studies helped ground the current study and contribute to recent research in school branding, this time on the public school level. The following chart summarizes the methods of discovery and how each related to the research questions.

Table 1

Research Questions And Methods Summary Chart

Research Questions And Methods Summary Chart		
	Method Used	Objective
Research Question #1 What ECPPs do school leaders use?	In-depth Personal Interviews (IPI)	To give insight on how school leaders choose ECPPs and their understanding of strategic communication and branding
	Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	To measure which ECPPs are used most often and why
		To create a general picture of the uses of school district communication
Research Question #2 What do school leaders communicate?	In-depth Personal Interviews (IPI)	To show what individual school leaders view as general cx topics and occasions for prescriptive and emergent cx.
	Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	To capture collective view of general communication topics/occasions in prescriptive and emergent communication
	Empirical Quant. Content Analysis (EQCA)	To identify substance of messages including topic, tone, subject/character, etc.
Research Question #3 How do school leaders perceive branding messages?	In-depth Personal Interviews (IPI)	To measure individual perceptions of school branding
	Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	To collectively measure the perceptions of school branding
		To identify elements of intended brand personality

Qualitative Data Measures

The first qualitative data measure was the in-depth personal interviews (IPIs). After meeting with school officials, the IPIs were transcribed and read for understanding of how school leaders use strategic communication, what topics were communicated most, and what characteristics of brand were mentioned. First cycle measure of responses used In Vivo and descriptive coding to uncover what was being communicated about the topic for each of the three interview transcripts. Then second cycle pattern coding sorted responses by thematic trends. Trends in data found in the IPIs are reported in Chapter 4 Results.

After the focus group discussions were conducted, recordings were transcribed and read thoroughly before analysis to note thematic trends in topics, content, and emergent themes. The first cycle open coding highlighted In Vivo codes which seemed to capture the essence of the responses. These verbatim phrases were then sorted by descriptive theme. For example, when searching for information that answered the question of HOW schools communicate, the researcher looked for phrases that worked together to explain the strategic communication process. At one point in the first FGD, school leaders referenced the process of information moving downward from leaders to various departments and the need for all staff to hear the same message from school leaders "for consistency no matter which building you're in or which department," and later someone else added "so everybody feels like they are part of the organization." These types of verbatim responses were grouped and categorized as *organizational processes* as a way of explaining how the district uses strategic communication. This coding process was used for each of the four FGD prompts, and the resultant, thematic codes are detailed in Chapter 4 Results.

After initial coding was conducted, second-cycle Focused Coding was used to detect brand identity and identify Aaker's (1996) Brand Identity Values related to prompt #4 which generated discussion related to district brand. Brand identity "is the unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members" (Aaker, 1996, p. 68). Aaker's (1996) Brand Identity Values expressed in FGDs included *relationships, heritage, excellence, innovation.* Using pre-established measures for brand potential helped sort meaning emerging from the data in focus group discussions and then were applied in the quantitative measures of the study.

Quantitative Data Measures

After learning from school leaders what essential communication products and processes (ECPPs) were most commonly relied upon, data was collected from those ECCPs referenced in the IPIs and FGDs. Because it was learned in the focus groups that school website, newsletters, social media, and email (via School Messenger) were the most commonly used methods of distributing information about the district, samples were pulled for quantitative analysis. Individual ECPPs were coded for their topic and core values expressed. This study was most interested in communication most accessible to the public especially those "shopping" for schools, so the ECPPs used for quantitative analysis were website pages, newsletters, and social media. A total of 13 main web pages were examined detailing information about the district. These pages represented different aspects of the district as a whole and were titled as follows: home, about, crisis, community, instructional goals, facts, maps, diversity, business, community education, communication, school improvement, and student services. Each web page gave information about the district as a whole.

In addition to these pages speaking for the entire district, web pages for each individual school were examined. Thirteen schools were represented by home pages, including one high school, two junior high schools, two middle schools, and eight elementary schools. Only the main page (titled "overview") of each individual school was measured for content because this main page was the only page unique to each building. Other web pages for each school were consistent with all other school buildings (staff, bell schedules, menu, etc). ECPPs accessible to the public include the district website, the district newsletter, and social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. For this reason, the ECPPs collected include school website main pages, individual school main pages, and district newsletters. It should be noted that social media messages were intended for use in this study but ultimately not used in the data sample. Reasons are explained in the limitations section of Chapter 5 Discussion.

An excel spreadsheet was created for web page data compilation. Each web page was identified with a numeric code and read for content, making note of words that expressed topic or mood of the content. The table first measured topic of content predicted in focus groups. School leaders in FGDs and IPIs said that district ECPPs communicate procedures, resources, situation/status, impact, and "what we do here." After identifying subject of each web page, the topic was given a value of 1 (addresses topic) or 0 (does not address topic) and charted on the data spreadsheet for later calculations. Then two established coding systems were used to examine the substance or nature of the message. The findings from the FGDs expressed some of Aaker's (1996) Core Brand Values. Because the FGD identified these as core values of the district, all ECPPs collected were measured for which core values were expressed. These valued include relationships, excellence, heritage, and innovation, (Aaker, 1996). This data was charted in the spreadsheet with values of 1 (expressed core value) and 0 (did not express core value).

In order to align with other studies related to school branding, the same ECPPs were then read for their content using the values used in branding higher education in Pinar et al., (2013). Those core branding values include academic experiences, quality, academic and emotional environment, student life (i.e. activities & clubs), reputation, and facilities. These central values of brand equity for colleges and universities were applied to the current study, although searching for primary and secondary schools differs from searching for colleges or universities. Because the sample district's ECPPs addressed many of the same values discussed in Pinar et al., (2013), these same content topics were used. Applying the methods of measurement already established relative to university branding studies helped ground the current study and contribute to recent research in school branding, this time on at the elementary and secondary public school level. After documenting the topic and brand values of each ECPP, average values were calculated.

Validity

Throughout the data collection, constant comparison of results worked to strengthen reliability of outcomes and member checks were used to verify information derived from interviews and discussions. As the researcher is a member of the 500+ teaching staff within the sample district, it is noted that this association forms potential researcher bias; however, the researcher knows and is known by only a few of the administrators in the district. Using different methods of evidence collection as part of the study strengthened conclusions related to products and processes of communication within a school district without subjectivity of the researcher. Chapter 4 illustrates results of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

A communication audit provides an objective view of communication practices in order to create a comparison between what organizational leaders intend to communicate and the reality of what is communicated (Hargie & Tourish, 2009). The current study measures school leaders' perspectives of their communication practices against content measures of actual communication products used for sending messages to various audiences. To understand strategic communication used by a school district, this communication audit addressed three objectives and parallel research questions.

The first objective was to determine how school leaders use strategic communication. RQ #1: What ECPPs do school leaders use? After measuring how the school district communicates, the second objective of this study was to ascertain the substance of school communications. RQ #2: What do school leaders communicate? Whereas the first and second objectives determined the uses and content of school communication, the third objective worked to measure perceived branding through strategic communication. RQ #3: How do school leaders perceive branding messages? A mixed methodology including in-depth personal interviews (IPIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and empirical quantitative content analysis (EQCA) was conducted.

It was important to capture the views of school leaders through in-depth personal interviews (IPIs) and focus group discussion (FGDs) because the results of those conversations drove other aspects of the study. To understand how school leaders use ECPPs, in-depth personal interviews (IPIs) were conducted with the superintendent, associate superintendent, and communication coordinator all of whom communicate on behalf of the district as an organization. There were two focus group discussions (FGDs) comprised of school leaders from the district office (FGD1) and made up principals and a vice principal from individual schools

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(FGD2). It was interesting to note that school leaders at the district and building levels had very similar viewpoints as they described how the district uses communication processes and intended brand characteristics. Responses related to how communication was used and to what intended impact determined which product samples would be measured in the content analysis. Describing communication products used, the results became inconsistent among sample participants with emphasis placed on different communication tools. The following section isolates each research question, uses details emergent from the mixed-methods data collection to illustrate the situation, and draws general conclusions as a result.

Research Question #1 What ECPPs do school leaders use?

RQ #1 Results. After transcribing and annotating the transcripts of the three IPIs and two FGDs, first cycle coding of data used In Vivo codes, which were then sorted as each related to various aspects of ECPP use. School leaders were asked to describe strategic communication in the district, and the results came together to illustrate the answer. Responses of all interviews and group discussions were synthesized into the following categories to describe the process of school communication: *organizational structures*, *choosing ECPP*, *reference to the audience*, *ECPPs used*, and *intended qualities* of communication described.

For example, while describing communication in the district, school leaders referenced the process of information moving downward from leaders to various departments and the need for all staff to hear the same message from school leaders "for consistency no matter which building you're in or which department," and so everybody "feels like they are part of the organization." These types of responses were grouped and categorized as *organizational structures*. One school leader offered, strategic communication "depends on what we are trying to do." She then described the ease of pushing out information to broad groups of people with

emails or text messages using School Messenger and referenced the school website as a place where families should look for information. All three individual interview participants made reference to strategic communication as a collaborative effort among school leaders "working together to get things done" with multiple sets of eyes working "collaboratively as a team" on communication before it goes outward to audiences. One school leader emphasized the consistency of messages by explaining, "we try to use the same vernacular across the district so if you are listening to a principal, or an instructional coach, or someone from the school improvement team, or administrators, you're using the same language so we all have that in common." This idea of collaborative communication was supported by responses from the FDGs as well. These responses showed that there is a desire for consistency in messages and that school district communication is a collaborate effort. Also mentioned was the process of teamwork among administrators and the communication coordinator, working to craft messages related to important issues, emergent situations, and upcoming events including bond referendums.

The second thematic category to emerge from the data and describe how the district uses ECPPs included examples of how school leaders select communication processes or products for different contexts and occasions. This theme was coded *choosing ECPPs*. One school leader said, "it depends on what the message is about. The audience changes. There's no one size fits all for who the audience is so [method] depends on what the message is and who the audience is." Another explained the process with "we use [face-to-face] presentations if we want to really hammer out a topic." Describing how leaders decide to communicate, *choosing ECPPs*, was a theme supported in both IPIs and FGDs but with differing emphasis. In IPIs both the superintendent and associate superintendent expressed reliance on face-to-face and public

meetings as their most valuable communication products. In order to increase visibility in the community and in addition to appearances at school events, both described civic engagement as an important communication product and process.

One associate superintendent described his process of interacting face-to-face with members of the community, "Really it's just one conversation at a time using facts. I know that if I can get one fact into a conversation with a business owner, with somebody at Hy-Vee…if I have one fact people are going to grab onto that. Today's audiences need information - numbers, so I try to equip myself with facts." In this way, conversations with members of the community are preferred above digital methods for certain topics like finance and future planning. The superintendent justified her choice of communication as face-to-face and through meetings with the statement, "low touch isn't going to get me there." She expressed the need to have one-on-one contact with audiences through PTO meetings, events, committees, and "word of mouth" information to be spread around the district.

The preference to use face-to-face methods was echoed by members of both FDGs, "depending on what we are trying to do." The chief financial officer explained choice of communication method, "when advocating with legislators, I take the board to the capital to have face-to-face meetings" and "last night we had board candidate orientation so in a short amount of time we explained to them school finances and one of the things I gave them was a handout [illustrating] school funds. Now [the communication coordinator] is working on a graphic that we can stick on the website so taxpayers understand." These expressions indicate "purposeful influence" of audiences using strategic communication. Decisions to meet face-to-face and allowing news and other information to spread from person to person aims to control topics of conversation. After school leaders share information through formal groups like parent teacher

organizations (PTO) and the education association, for example, they expect that information will radiate outward through the community spreading those messages for intended audience impact.

Audience drives the communication of school leaders, and insights and challenges were expressed as members of the IPIs and FGDs detailed experiences which were later coded as *audience challenges.* School leaders expressed the value in knowing their audiences and what audiences want. One principal reflected "not all parents need to know all information" and that "parents and students want information that affects them." Also expressed were the challenges in communicating with audiences. "We need to find a tool that works for everybody," and "we have to cast a large net because you don't always know who they are" were sentiments that expressed frustration by school leaders in their attempt to reach all audiences. The communications coordinator stated, "the audience is always changing." Perhaps this explains the vast variety of ECPPs used in the district and described in the next section.

As part of the data collection, a list was created of all responses thematically coded as *ECPPs used.* In addition to face-to-face meetings an important ECPPs, all three participants of the interviews discussed the newsletter as an important channel of communication for those in the community including families and community members without children in the school system. This newsletter, also referred to as "the bulletin," and mentioned by all IPI participants and focus group members, was one of the main tools for carrying information to the community via email, district website, and social media outlets. Because of this emphasis as a communication tool in both IPIs and FGDs, the newsletter was a logical tool to examine for its content. The district website was also referenced in all of the IPIs as a main tool for communicating to audiences and was used for further examination of content. The FGD1

comprised of district leaders also highlighted the district website as one a main tool; however, FGD2 comprised of school principals did not, subsequently agreeing amongst themselves that they rarely direct people to the website. Main tools emphasized by building principals were emails to parents and social media outlets like Twitter, Facebook, and teacher tools like See Saw and Class Dojo. This group also offered Google Docs as a main tool for internal communication among staff.

It was clear that strategic communication is a topic of interest and importance to all school leaders who participated in the IPIs and FGDs. This was illustrated in the responses that were eventually thematically coded as *desired qualities*. Examples of this are found in expressions like "every time we communicate we are trying to educate people," and statements expressing transparency, effectiveness, and accessibility for all audiences. Participants described the balance or what was called "the happy medium" between too little and not enough information as they navigate who gets which information.

The responses from the first question related to strategic communication, sorted into the four main themes: *organizational structures*, *choice of ECPP*, *ECPPs used*, and *desired quality* of communication. See Table 2 illustrating the four themes with examples from the discussion resultant of the interviews and focus group discussions related to how the district uses strategic communication.

Table 2

IPI & FGD In Vivo Codes Categorized By Theme

Organizational Processes

      Knowing layers of organizational chart

      Admin meetings with downline of staff

      Staff meetings across departments (teachers, custodial, nutrition, etc)

      Committees working on strategic communication

      Presentations linked to a static webpage

      Working with outside groups of folks with public relations experience

      If I tweet something, select others retweet it

      Have people read and re-read before hitting "send"

Choosing ECPPs

      A lot of what we do is direct people to the website

      Presentations if we really want to hammer out a topic

      You don't want to send so many emails that people don't read

      Tours = Chamber, Rotary Club, civic groups spread the word

      If I need more words (than email), I go and talk to them

Audience Challenges

      Not all parents need to know but some

      Audience is always changing

      Need to find the tool that works for everybody

      You have to cast a wide net because you don't always know who they are

Products Used

      Website, E-newsletter, School Messenger, Graphic handouts, Stuff in the paper,
      Presentations, Focus groups, emails, meetings, face-to-face discussions, See Saw,
      Class Dojo, Google Docs

Desired Quality Described

      Being transparent

      Try to ramp up the amount of communication, timeliness, effectiveness

      Make website accessible and easy to navigate

      "Where's the happy medium?"

      We are trying to streamline announcements

      Short and to-the-point

RQ #1 Conclusions. The organizational processes described in the IPIs and FGDs

showed consistent understanding and use of strategic communication as senders of messages;

however, reported ECPPs used were inconsistent. One FGD participant explained, "it varies greatly from building to building how we use communication." This became clear when examining the responses from IPI and FGD regarding the top three or four ECPPs used. Responses varied, making it difficult to determine which products were most frequent channels of communication. When prompted to provide a list of the top three or four communication products used, leaders in the two FGDs mentioned website, newsletters, emails, and social media formats as the most widely used ECPPs. One leader stated that even though information is available on the school website, people don't always go there to find it. Notifications of situations (i.e. project announcements, responses of the district to "hot button" media topics) are put out in social media, blogs, and newsletters with links to the website housing the complete information, making it clear that the school district website is heavily relied upon by school leaders at the district level for communicating to various audiences. In contrast, FGD2, comprised of school principals and vice principals, minimized use of the website and emphasized use of emails from teachers and administrators and social media tools from individual schools, clubs, and organizations to get information to families.

Participants indicated that more could be done to regulate messages and channels used for consistency across the district. The communication coordinator shared, "when I first came we had some conversations and communication training for blogs, social media, and websites. You need to review and refresh as principals come and go. I don't think we've stayed on top of the training." While a couple of school leaders expressed appreciation of their autonomy to communicate to their own buildings and parent audiences, it came to light in one FGD that one principal had the ability to send mass text messages through School Messenger while another

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principal did not. These examples illustrate some inconsistencies in organizational processes of the district.

Social media use was a topic of interviews and discussion that could be further guided by organizational procedures and content study. It was interesting that one school principal described her process of engaging key students in the spreading of information by quoting "I don't tweet often. When I do - [key student groups] re-tweet it." In this way she describes the process of spreading information across student populations using social media.

There were a few unique responses to the question *How does the district use strategic communication?* One surprising communication product described was "physical structures." The superintendent explained that "our buildings and even the furniture inside sends a message about how we do things." This concept was supported in FGD2 results when a principal said, "we are sitting in a building that is the picture of innovation." Another interesting communication product that stood out was "celebrations." She reasoned, "I try to be a cheerleader. People need to know that they are doing great things, and they need to feel respected." Prior to the interviews, expected responses describing communication tools did not include "buildings" or "celebrations," but these responses indicate that the superintendent is mindful of all aspects of communication. This reference to "celebrations" was not used to describe *what* is communicated, but instead as a *method* of communicating what the district views as important. Besides the one reference to the building as a symbol of innovation, facilities and celebrations were not mentioned as communication products among other participants, so it is unclear if others share this perspective.

When considering all of the responses from school leaders regarding RQ #1, it became clear that school leaders view school communication and its ECPPs through the lenses of their

unique roles played in the school district. The superintendents emphasized community

engagement as a strategic tool and described public-facing communication while principals

described non-public communication with parents through email as the answer to *What ECPPs*

do school leaders use? This can be explained through the complexities of organizational

communication. While all actors in an organization create "touchpoints" reaching out to various

audiences, unique roles in the organization determine use of public or non-public forms of

communication.

RQ #2 What do school leaders communicate?

    RQ #2 Results. In response to RQ #2 the IPIs and FGDs suggested various topics

categorized into the following themes: *procedural information*, *resources*, *situation/status*, "*what*

we do here," and *impact*. Sample responses are found below in Table 3. Responses coded as

procedural information include employee information (i.e. curriculum & new teacher

information), how programs work (i.e. special education, extending learning program) and

reminders (i.e. how to pay fees). Topics coded as *resources* include fee-based offerings (i.e..

adult and community ed courses), articles for parents (i.e. understanding the technology age),

and opportunities (i.e. APEX camps, upcoming productions like the play). According to the

FGDs, the district communicates *situation/status* (i.e. safety notifications, school finance,

construction updates.) It was mentioned that this type of information includes the emergent

district response to what one leader described as "hot button topics" explained as "when parents

hear something on the news and then ask about our situation" relative to the topic of the news

story. Examples which make up the coding theme *what we do here* include organizational goals

(i.e. to show that school is different than in the past), school events (i.e. everyone feels part of the

organization), mission and vision (i.e. focus on kids), and philosophy statements with standards

and benchmarks for each department (i.e. curriculum information). The last emergent theme of

was *impact* described as student achievement and "kids making their mark." Table 3 illustrates

responses related to the content of school messages.

Table 3

Message Content In Vivo Codes By Theme

    Procedures
        Bussing info
        Where to go to vote for the board
        Everything you need to know to be successful [in the district]
        Employee information
        Family information
        How programs work
        Reminders
    Resources
        Fee-based offerings
        Articles for parents
        Opportunities & upcoming events
    Situation/Status
        Safety notifications
        Finances
        Project announcements
        Cleaning up after the media decides to claim whatever is the news of the dat
        District situation relative to hot-button topics
        Construction updates
    "What we Do Here"
        Focus on overall health
        Laser-like focus on teaching and learning
        Value achievement
        Every student gets to discover passion & identify strengths
        Collaboration
        Philosophy, Standards & Benchmarks, Objectives
        Mission & vision
    Impact
        Student achievement
        Kids making their mark

A communication audit measures the HOW and WHAT of strategic communication. After learning from IPIs and FGDs which ECPPs the school district uses most often, for what purpose, and to what intending branding impact, samples were collected to perform an empirical quantitative content analysis. Twenty-six pages from the district website and ten newsletters from over the course of a year were collected and reviewed for content in order to quantitatively measure content and general branding themes. Results of the IPIs and FGDs offered that email from teachers and principals were also a main tool of communicating with families; however, this study aimed to measure school communication from the perspective of those "shopping" for schools from outside of the district who would not have access to emails and school messenger announcements that are directed to current district families. ECCPs accessible to the public include the district website, the district newsletter, and social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. For this reason, the ECPPs collected include school website main pages, individual school main pages, and district newsletters. Social media messages were not used in the sample for reasons described later in RQ #2 conclusion.

The results of the IPIs and FGDs related to content priorities were used measuring content of the ECPPs through empirical quantitative content analysis (EQCA.) Content priorities of school communication include *procedural information*, *resources, situation/status, "what we do here,"* and *student impact*; therefore, ECPPs were read for content and measured for content priority. Each sample was given a value of 1 (does include) or 0 (does not include) for topic content. ECPPs examined included district web pages, individual school pages, and the district newsletter.

District web pages, which represent the district organization as a whole, scored highest in the content category "what we do here" (.69). It makes sense that as a potential first impression

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of the district, the web pages explain the organization goals, mission, and curricular standards and benchmarks. The lowest content priority values expressed on the district web pages were related to student impact (.23). During her interview, the communications coordinator explained that a future website will focus more on student learning and activity that help illustrate "what we do here."

Individual school web pages for 13 school buildings were measured and scores were averaged. It is not obvious which building in-coming students and families would be assigned, so anyone "shopping" for schools would need to consider the district as a whole instead of evaluating individual schools. Also, all school web pages are found through the district website and therefore contribute to the overall perception about the district. Individual school web pages measured high in values of resources (1), "what we do here" (1), and impact (1). These values were assigned if the school page had links to any resources. All of them did, however inconsistently, with some school pages containing more resource links than others. The district newsletter scored high in values associated with procedural information, situation/status, "what we do here," and impact. This outcome correlates to descriptions of the newsletter in IPIs and focus groups as being a way that the district communicates "snippets of information" about all aspects of the district. Table 4 shows content measured on district web pages, individual school web pages, and in the district newsletter.

Table 4

ECPPs Measured By Content Priority

	Procedural information	Resources	Situation/ Status	"What we do here"	Impact
District web pages	0.54	0.46	0.61	0.69	0.23
Individual school pages	0.07	1	0	1	1
District newsletter	0.6	0.1	0.9	0.8	0.8

Aaker's (1996) Core Brand Values were used in second cycle coding as a result of thematic trends which emerged from the IPI and FGD results. Themes identified by school leaders corresponding with Aaker's (1996) values include *relationships, excellence, heritage,* and *innovation*. One school leader was describing relationships when he said, "it's a place where people want to make this the best experience for the people they are working with." Another added, "together - through risks and failures - these people help." In a story about school boundary complaints an associate superintendent reasoned the parents' dissatisfaction with, "it's because their family has built relationships with the people in that building*."* Explanations communicating environmental excellence included, "this is a place where you can grow yourself and others and be around those who are goal driven," and excellence in staff describing them as "willing to invest time and energy - passionate about what they do." The qualities of heritage were described with statements including, "it's a destination district" to describe the historical reputation as a draw to the district. Innovation was seen in statements such as, "we push the edge, whether it's how we do things in the classroom, staff development, finances...our goal is to be on the cutting edge for our students, our staff, our public."

Because the results of IPIs and FGDs aligned with Aaker's (1996) Core Brand Values, the quantitative content analysis next measured components including *relationships*, *excellence*,

heritage, and *innovation*. All main pages of the school website (13), main pages for each individual school (13), and all newsletters over the course of a school year (10) were evaluated for content. Average scores for each brand core values are charted in Table 6. The district web pages scored highest core value in *excellence* (.61), followed by *heritage* (.3), *relationships* (.23), and *innovation* (.07). The individual school pages scored highest values in *excellence* (1), followed by *innovation* (.76), *relationships* (.69), and *heritage* (.07). The newsletter scores reflected highest values of *excellence* (1), followed by *relationships* (.6), *heritage* (.4), and *innovation* (.3).

Table 5

ECPPs Measured By Aaker's (1996) Core Brand Values

	Relationships	Excellence	Heritage	Innovation
District web pages	0.23	0.61	0.3	0.07
Individual school pages	0.69	1	0.07	0.76
District newsletter	0.6	0.9	0.4	0.3

Pinar et al, (2013) offers the Central Values of Brand Equity, which details the most important factors contributing to brand equity when selecting colleges and universities (i.e. quality, reputation, environment). These values were used in the current study as a tool for measuring how the sample district communicates brand equity through communication products and provided the third-cycle analysis of the ECPPs selected for study. Central Values (Pinar et al., 2013) addressed *academic experiences*, *quality, academic & emotional environment, student life, reputation*, and *facilities*. These core values aligned with the current study when compared to values expressed in IPI and FGDs. Example statements from IPIs and FGDs that expressed these values include: academic experiences (i.e. innovative learning), quality (i.e. we get the best teachers & staff), academic & emotional environment (i.e. support our students and support each

other), student life (i.e. opportunities), reputation (i.e. we do things differently), and facilities (i.e. we are sitting in a building that stands for innovation). Because these values emerged from IPI and FGD responses, they were used as a measure in the content analysis of school messages.

The district main pages scored the highest value in the area of *quality* (.5) followed by *academic experiences* (.38) and *reputation* (.3). Lowest values were found in areas of *academic & emotional environment* (.07), *student life* (0), and *facility* (.15). The web pages for individual schools reported higher values in areas of *quality* (1), *academic & emotional environment* (.92), and *academic experiences* (.85) with lowest values in *student life* (.23). This low result occurred because only two elementary schools along with the high school communicated student life experiences with photos and mention of clubs and activities. It is possible that the topic *student life* is more important a factor for adult students shopping for colleges and universities than for families choosing primary or secondary schools; however, school leaders at the district level mentioned the school website as a way of showcasing opportunities for students.

The school newsletter scored the highest content values in the areas of *quality* (.8), *reputation* (.6), *academic & emotional environment* (.6), and lowest in *academic experiences* (.2). This makes sense as the function of the newsletter was described by school leaders in IPIs and FGDs as method of representing the district as a whole; therefore, not thoroughly addressing school aspects (i.e. *student life* and *facility*) which may be unique to individual schools. See Table 6 for list of EQCA results.

Table 6

ECPPs Measured By Pinar's (2013) Central Values Of Brand Equity

	Academic experiences	Quality	Academic/ emotional environment	Student life	Reputation	Facilities
District web pages	0.38	0.5	0.07	0	0.3	0.15
School web pages	0.85	1	0.92	0.23	0.54	0.61
District newsletter	0.2	0.8	0.6	0.2	0.6	0.5

RQ #2 Conclusions. A brand audit's objective evaluation of brand alignment with the strategic goals of the institution as well as the perception of success in meeting the needs of consumers is essential and becomes a key objective in aligning messages with the brand identity (Williams & Omar, 2014). Examining content of messages can uncover the reality of what is communicated and identify gaps in intended messages and real messages. This idea drove the first method of measuring what school leader discuss as the content of school messages. Results from the IPIs and FGD provided content priorities including procedural information, resources, situation/status, "what we do here," and impact. The reality of ECPPs containing these content priorities was inconsistent with expectations described by school leaders. Highest content values were found within individual school web pages in the areas of resources (1), "what we do here" (1), and impact (1). The individual schools are communicating directly to their own families, and it could be assumed that these web pages are the ECPPs most closely used by parents. At least the content of each individual elementary or secondary school relates most closely to the student and family experience in that particular school building. FGD2 made up of school principals indicated that they do not rely on the website but instead communicate more often with parents through email.

The district newsletter scoring highest content values in *excellence* (.9) aligns with the results of the interview with the superintendent, the self-described "cheerleader" for the district.

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The newsletter is the ECPP that presumably reaches the largest audience. According to interviews, it is released in several formats including email, social media, and web links to parents and area residents. Communicating *excellence* along with *situation/status* is probably good information with which to promote education to various publics, especially in times of budget restraints or when "hot-button" issues make the news.

Research Question #3 How do school leaders perceive branding messages?

RQ #3 Results. When participants were asked "what qualities characterize the district?" results of the conversation centered around the topic of branding and were grouped by the following emergent themes: *branding process described*, *brand characteristics*, *branding the organization*, and *brand as a symbol.* Both FGDs groups touched on the idea of how the district goes about branding. One leader offered "for us we have multiple internal brands," while another explained "it doesn't matter what colors we put on the fancy brand - it comes down to the culture and that's how we drive what people we bring into the organization to continue that forward." These types of comments were coded as *branding process described.* One school leader participating in the second focus group explained that each building in the district was unique, and that each had "its own flavor." The category code *brand characteristics* include verbatim phrases including "we do things differently," "it's the relationships," and "excited about change" as examples. Those In Vivo phrases coded as *branding the organization* were ones that illustrated how the district views itself and wishes to be distinguished from others. One example stated, "get people to know that there is a better way to do education that makes sense." Examples include expressions such as "seeing what's changing and then being proactive gets us about 10 years ahead" and "get people to know there's a better way to do education." Responses that inspired the theme *brand as a symbol* include quotations like "we are [named school]" and

"people feel it and then people get fired up about the color purple - it's not about the color - it's about what it means to people. Another explained brand with, "it's about a feeling that you have that you can't put out in print materials."

To further understand the qualities which characterize the school district, each In Vivo phrase was coded for context of the discussion, topic being described, and spirit of the phrase. For example, when one leader explained "if I want to run a science camp, I want a picture of a student with goggles on, with a teacher next to him, working on something interesting" this explanation placed in the context *self-analysis,* related to the topics of *students, teachers, camp,* and assigned the spirit of *engagement, student-centeredness, innovation.* The results of the IPIs and FGDs provided the coding measures for the quantitative study described in the previous section.

Other results of the FGDs resulted in expressed sentiments like "excited," "proactive," "innovative," "support," "together," "excellence," to name a few. For example, "respect for each other" as a description of the district environment described the brand identity of the district and was coded as *sincerity.* Other characteristics were sorted as *perceived quality* and included responses like "this is a place where you can grow yourself and others and be around those who are goal-driven," and "we get the best teachers and staff." When isolating data, a list was created of statements that were best examples of brand characteristics described. Examples include statements like "We've done a good job of getting to know each individual kid, and their family. Their story matters" and "innovative, proactive, keeping the vision."

Though used for measuring brand equity of higher education, Pinar et al., (2013) Central Values of Brand Equity were used to measure aspects of school experience viewed as attractive to consumers of higher education institutions (HEI); therefore, these measures were used the a

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third cycle of quantitative content analysis (described in RQ #2 Results). Qualities most important to consumers (of HEIs) include academic experiences, perceived quality of experiences, emotional and learning environment, student-life experiences like extra-curricular activities, sports, and community involvement, institution's reputation, and physical facilities. Because this was a study of branding education, core values modeled in Pinar et al., (2013) were used to categorize statements from IPIs and FGDs. Using Aaker's (1996) Core Brand Values and those used in Pinar et al., (2013) created a logical measure for school communication in answer to RQ #2 related to ECPP content. Using these methods of measurement already established relative to university branding studies helped ground the current study and contribute to recent research in school branding, this time on the public school level. Table 7 lists sample quotations and shows relationship to Aaker's (1996) Core Values and Pinar et al., (2013) Core Brand Values.

Table 7

Select Brand Characteristics Aligned With Established Brand Measures

In Vivo Code	Aaker's (1996) Core Brand Values	Pinar's (2013) Core Values
"Wow, [this school] really invests in their people – like instead of products…they invest in their learning." Which is so different – I'm a human in the equation not by- product of someone else's vision.	relationships	academic experiences
Together - risks and failures and these people help	relationships	academic/emotional environment
Support our students and support each other	relationships	academic/emotional environment
Respect for each other	relationships	academic/emotional environment
If someone feels valued they stay and you have a working relationship. It's a family.	relationships	academic & emotional environment
"It's the place where people want to make this the best experience for the people they are working with.	excellence	quality
We get the best (teachers & staff)	excellence	quality
Willing to invest time and energy - passionate about what they do	excellence	quality
Innovative, proactive, keeping the vision	excellence	quality, academic experience
We do things differently	innovation	reputation
There's something to be said about pushing the boundaries and pushing us forward.	innovation	academic experience
(interviewees say) "it's a destination district"	heritage	reputation
This is a place where you can grow yourself and others; be around those who are goal driven	innovation	quality, academic experience
We push the edge, whether it's how we do things in the classroom, staff development, finances...our goal is to be on the cutting edge for our students, our staff, our public	innovation	reputation, quality, academic experience

RQ #3 Conclusions. The results of the FGDs and IPs showed consistency in how school leaders view characteristics of the school system that creates the district's brand personality. These descriptions of brand characteristics aligned with brand values of established brand measures as described by branding experts (Aaker, 1996) and with studies previously conducted measuring brand characteristics of colleges and universities (Pinar et al., 2013). This brand audit was conducted to measure the perceptions of school leaders regarding communication products and processes compared to the reality of communication content. When using brand values emergent from IPIs and FGDs in quantitative content measures, the brand value scoring highest in all three ECPP measures was *excellence/quality*. One participant explained "people push each other and don't want to let each other down. It's not only the high expectations we have for ourselves, but the expectations of our parents and students. We strive for excellence."

The next section connects the current research with past studies, draws conclusions about strategic communication in schools, connects to theoretical scholarship, and suggests future research in strategic communication.

CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

Schools are complex organizational structures which call for strategic communication, the purposeful release of information to various audiences for an intended impact. Strategic communication includes the transmission of messages from the sender to audiences, within a context to achieve goals, using strategy (Sisco, 2006). Strategy emphasizes the purposeful application of communication and how the organization functions as a social actor advancing its mission. Strategic communication focuses on "how the organization itself presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 7). The use of strategic communication in complex organizations such as school districts requires monitoring for message alignment ensures that school leaders are sending messages consistent to others' and aligned with goals of the school district. The current communication audit measured the process of message creation and release, from school leaders to their community members, for message content as well as to study potential for brand creation.

Good communication is audience-centered as is effective marketing. Marketing works to respond to the needs of consumers "to inform, motivate, and service" markets (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 6). A significant benefit of school marketing, audience-centeredness helps schools tailor message emphasis and shared vision for consumers. It was clear in the results of this study that school leaders of the sample district work to respond to their audiences, comprised of parents and students, community members, and state legislators. The plans for unified systems of information towards an intended audience reaction is referred to as "purposeful influence" (Farwell, 2012; Hallahan et al., 2007). The way in which school leaders of this study described the practices and processes of strategic communication showed high levels of audience-

centeredness and purposeful influence. Results of the study also illustrated the challenge of school leaders in selecting a communication tool that reaches all audiences. One leader expressed frustration that parents and students do not pay attention to information released until after they have a problem or issue. Another school leader described his connection with student audiences using Twitter, because it's the channel with which the student audience prefers to communicate. Another said it best when she described the process of choosing a channel of communication with, "it depends on what the message is about. The audience changes. There's no one size fits all for who the audience is so [method] depends on what the message is and who the audience is." These types of responses illustrate the situation of school leaders working to adapt to their audience when creating messages.

Strategic communication audits uncover gaps in what organizations intend to communicate and what is actually transmitted. This study set out with three objectives and three parallel research questions. The first objective was to understand how schools use strategic communication. RQ #1 What essential communication products and processes (ECPPs) do schools use? The second objective was to ascertain the content of school messages. RQ #2 What do school leaders communicate to audiences? The third objective of the study was to measure perceived branding. RQ #3 How do school leaders view branding messages. The following section discusses the results of this study and associations with marketing and school branding research.

Strategic Communication In Schools

Organizational communication "reflects the relationships between all organizational actors; creates those relationships, and defines, shapes and explains them to ourselves and others" (Hargie & Tourish, 2009, p. 5). As members of an organization work together, messages

exchanged impact perception of the organization, its collaborators, and its audiences as communication from leaders to members of the organization form identity and common vision. *Organizational structures* was one theme illustrated by the current research. The sample school district has in place a system of communication which guides creation of prescriptive and emergent messages in a collaborative way, ensuring that multiple perspectives are used to predict audience reaction. To be most effective in message release, school leaders need to select the best format for the purposeful influence of audiences. This is reflected in the next emergent theme, *choosing ECPP,* which supported the idea that senders of communication need to carefully select the method or channel of communication.

Previous studies have shown that tailor-made communication with potential college students builds relationships. "By addressing potential students' concerns and offering more tailor-made communication strategies to suit them, HEIs can segment the marketplace and then position themselves within the competitive environment" (Moogen, 2011, p. 583). For college and university marketing, communication in its multiple forms attracts audiences with career fairs, websites, and personal messages drawing students to their personal college of interest. The use of interactive channels of communication is relevant in building relationships in primary and secondary schools as well, through use of websites and social media as well as with events that promote face-to-face community engagement. Because social media was mentioned in the IPIs and FGDs as frequently used ECPPs, the current study hoped to align with Luna (2012), highlighting the impact of digital methods of communication (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and others) relied upon by schools for community-building, recruitment, alumni relations, crisis communications, and building relationships with stakeholders. Because of the vastness of social media, it proved difficult to isolate which pages, posts, and tweets to use as

samples. This study sought to understand how school leaders use strategic communication, but it was difficult to determine which social media outlets to study. The structure of social media posts necessitated an additional research instrument because some communicated only through pictures and hashtags. For future research, an instrument should be designed to measure content and brand potential of social media communications.

In regard to building relationships with prospective students and alumni, Klassen (2002) concluded that the top-rated schools interact the most with stakeholders at various levels of contact to create and sustain a bond between the HEI and stakeholders resulting in levels of relationship positively correlated to high levels student loyalty to the institution. Building relationships through communication helps students and families see themselves as part of the culture. Images, slogans, and mission statements communicate values that people can compare to their own personal set of values. Social media makes information interactive. In the current study, one school leader described Facebook as a preferred method of parents in receiving school communication because of its potential for interaction. Questions are immediately addressed through the interactive structures of this social media platform. Of course this interaction poses the potential for negative comments to be spread publicly as well as productive information. The communication coordinator of the sample school referenced the feedback from Facebook as a valuable tool in helping her reach audiences. She is aware of the demographics of her audience for that particular chosen ECPP above other methods of communication where audience interaction is missing.

Organizational communication impacts culture and climate of the organization. Face-to-face methods including presentations, meetings, and other examples of civic visibility are preferred methods of communication among district school leaders. Administrators in the sample

district know that connecting in real time with live presence allows them to connect with community members and state lawmakers in contrast to what one school leader called "low touch" methods of communication like email. Studies agree that method of communication impacts climate, and parent and school partnerships positively impact student achievement and loyalty (Berthiaume, 2015; Rios - Harrist, 2011; Shaver, 2012). The culture of the school is not the demographics of the student population, but instead defined as the context in which everything else takes place: "the way things are done around here" (Rooney, 2005, p. 86). School culture reflects the interaction of people, the experiences shared, and the goals stakeholders set out to achieve. All of these aspects of culture are communicated even through the chosen methods of communication like the decision to hold a meeting or create a social media post.

School Communication Creating Brand

The current study measured how school leaders described school message content with the reality of what topics actually make up school communication. Leaders conclude that most school messages addressed the following content: procedural information, resources, situation/status, "what we do here" (i.e. mission and values), and student impact. Ideally, school leaders perceive and communicate the same characteristics and create brand messages, defined earlier as "a cluster of values that enables a promise to be made about a unique and welcomed experience," which then drives a "visionary promise that adds value to all stakeholders" (de Chernatony, 2009, p. 104). Participants in the current study described their district with qualities like "innovative," "diverse," "mindful," and the work done there as "relationship-focused," "student-centered," "risk-taking," and "progressive." These qualities described show high levels of brand power consistent with business marketing. Communication products that represented the entire district (i.e. district website and newsletter) scored high on areas of "what we do here"

and excellence. Individual school web pages measured high in values of resources, "what we do here," impact, and relationships.

College and university studies show that school choice is related to the perceived academic value of an institution, the competence of teaching staff, and the quality of student-faculty interaction (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014: Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Klassen, 2014; Shaver, 2012). While academic excellence was an expressed value of school leaders as they described content topics of school communication, the competence of teaching staff did not emerge as a content priority, although it was mentioned by a focus group of school leaders that they "get the best teachers and staff." It may be useful to periodically showcase the skill of teachers in school communications, the relationships between the school and staff, and more importantly, the relationships between the staff and students.

School Brand Power And Control

Communicating mission and values through branding has positive impact on colleges and universities ranging from bolstering campus identity and increasing enrollment, to improving college recognition (Lamboy, 2012; Pinar et al., 2013). Central values of strong brand equity for HEIs include academic experiences, perceived quality of experiences, emotional and learning environment, student-life experiences like extra-curricular activities, sports, and community involvement, the institution's reputation, and physical facilities (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Pinar et al., 2013). These features promote educational institutions at the post-secondary level, and so guided the current study to measure how school leaders in the sample district perceived the atmosphere of the school district. Brand perceptions that emerged from the conversations in interviews and focus groups were compared to established branding measures (Aaker, 1996) and previous studies in HEI branding (Pinar et al., 2013). The perceptions of school leaders

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correlating to Aaker's (1996) values were used in second cycle coding as a result of thematic

trends which emerged from the IPI and FGD results. Themes identified by school leaders

corresponding with Aaker's (1996) values include *relationships, excellence, heritage,* and

innovation. The results of the quantitative analysis showed that school web pages scored highest

in values of *excellence* and *heritage* while the web pages of individual schools scored highest in

the values of *excellence, innovation*, and *relationships*. The difference between district web

pages and those of individual schools was probably related to the purpose of communication.

While it is important that the district as a whole communicates excellence and heritage,

individual schools demonstrate more evidence of relationship building and innovative practices

taking place in various buildings. *Excellence, innovation*, and *relationships* were the intended

brand characteristics described by school leaders, proving that some intended brand value was

communicated to audiences in the content of school district messages.

In this study of brand perceptions of school leaders, some misalignment was observed. It

was clear through interviews and focus groups that the school website is an important

communication tool in the sample school district, and leaders emphasized the website as a source

of information for the community and families, as a reservoir for staff information, and as a

branding tool; however, building principals rely on the website far less. In addition, school

leaders expressed contrasting emphasis on school logos as part of organizational branding. HEI

studies have highlighted the importance of images and font as important features of marketing

materials (Dholakia & Accairdo, 2014; Idris & Whitfield, 2014). Although images, colors, and

fonts were emphasized as an important aspect of communicating brand in the sample district, one

school leader offered, "it doesn't matter what colors we put on the fancy brand – it comes down

to the culture and that's how we drive what people we bring into the organization." The latter

view supports the same ideal described in branding literature. Brands are defined as "a cluster of values that enables a promise to be made about a unique and welcomed experience," which then drives a "visionary promise that adds value to all stakeholders" (de Chernatony, 2009, p. 104). The cluster of values that the sample school district aims to communicate to stakeholders includes excellence, innovation, and relationships above all others. These brand values are the current reality of school communication products studied, limited at this time to the school website and district newsletter. Future research could explore how much correspondence exists between brand values communicated via websites and newsletters and the values communicated through social media posts.

Perceptions of brand personality can be shaped by any direct or indirect contact consumers have with a brand. While this study measures brand values of the district website, individual school websites, and the district newsletter, much work could be done to understand communication products and processes that contribute to brand. The problem encountered in measuring all relevant school ECPPs was the vastness of social media. School leaders mentioned Facebook as a tool for getting messages to parents and the community as well as interacting with students.

Twitter proved to be even more difficult to measure. There are Twitter accounts for organizations (i.e. swim team, student council) and school leaders and staff. Some teachers tweet with the district identity in the handle (i.e. @MrSmithSchoolDistrict) and some just as individuals, but all represent the school as various "touchpoints" though not regulated by the district. In addition, there are several hashtags (#) used to promote different district themes. The process of posting, re-tweeting, commenting, "liking," creates a cacophony of media messages not controlled by the district or school leaders. It is beyond the control of school leaders when

students, parents, or community members quote tweets or make disparaging remarks. These uncontrolled messages still carry associations with the school and contribute to unintended or inaccurate brand perceptions. For these reasons social media was subtracted from the current study; however, examining social media ECPPs would make a rich, albeit complex study necessary for nurturing the brand narrative.

Strategic Communication Audit Results

An organization's survival often depends on the exchange and coordination of information. This underlines the need for organizations to monitor communication and its effectiveness (Downs & Adrian, 2004). Coffman (2004) offered a scale of measurement for organizations to evaluate communication strategy, implementation, and support or integration. Levels measure the current reality of an organization's communication practices as reactive and disorganized (Ad Hoc); versus purposeful and proactive (Planned); regular, consistent, and proficient (Institutionalized); reflective to improve performance (Evaluated); and demonstrating high level of organizational commitment to the practice (Optimized). Through the use of this matrix organizations can learn and improve performance over time (Coffman, 2004).

Coffman's (2004) audit provided a "snapshot" of an organization's current communication capacity so goals for improvement can be made by the sample school. The matrix is divided into three main measures: Strategy, Implementation, and Support and Integration. Each category is further broken down into aspects of message creation and dissemination. The current study examined communication products and processes of the sample district as described in FGDs and IPIs in addition to the content analysis of district communications sampled. In the area of Strategy, strengths of the sample district were shown to include identifying vision, choosing goals and outcomes, developing messages, and identifying

credible messengers. It was clear that school leaders in the sample district communicate consistently and with what one leader called "a common vernacular" used across the district so all stakeholders share the vocabulary for message alignment. Improvements should be made in identifying target audiences to further understand the expectations and perspectives in addition to the demographics of various audiences.

In the area of Implementation, the sample district scored highest in building partnerships and developing materials. The way in which school leaders described the structural hierarchy and responsibilities of leaders at different levels collaborating for communication design met the standard of Level 3 - Institutionalized; however, there was not enough evidence to measure the proficiency at Level 4 - Evaluated. An area of improvement should be in training messengers. This training could provide guidelines and resources for social media use among staff. More could be done in the areas of conducting steady outreach and monitoring and evaluating communication products.

Support and Integration scored highest (Level 3 - Institutionalized). The sample district has earmarked and dedicated resources maintaining the communication coordinator to oversee district communication and is in the process of creating a new website; however, more could be achieved in practicing the consistency of messages and channels used in all buildings and across all levels of the district.

Limitations And Implications For Future Research

There were a few limitations to the current study. External validity or the extent of the generalizability of conclusions was limited to one particular district in in the Des Moines area; thus, results were not necessarily generalizable to other districts in the area or around the state of Iowa. Findings were based solely on data from principals participating in the study, and although

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efforts were made to include the perspectives of all principals in the sample, connections were not made with a number of school leaders whose perceptions may vary from those in the test groups.

To build upon the current study which was simply an audit of school communication by school leaders, further research should be conducted as a communication assessment, including the perspectives of school audiences in evaluating strategic communication in schools. The current audit considered only the methods and content of messages from school leaders; however, viewing the impact of school communication from audience perspectives would offer a more complete understanding of school communication. Messages carefully crafted by school leaders may not be received accurately and with the same response as prescribed. Ideally, brand initiatives control the audience narrative in a way that the ideas and values expressed by the brand are the same as those spread in audience narratives. One school leader mentioned how the sample district values feedback of parents and students. It would be valuable to measure perceptions of students, families, and community members to help determine the effectiveness of school district communication.

"Students may not remember everything they learned at an institution, but they will remember the atmosphere and impression the school had on them (Lamboy, 2011, p. 29). How would students describe the academic and emotional environment of the sample school? What struggles or challenges exist to cloud perceptions of *excellence* described by school leader perceptions? What ECPPs do audiences most prefer? One challenge noted by school leaders was not knowing how to reach particular audiences. One principal even admitted coming to a focus group discussion intending to "learn how to best communicate" to her audience. Conducting a communication assessment within the district would further strengthen relationships between

community members and the school and allow consumers a voice. This assessment could indicate preferred channels of communication by parents as well as alignment of expectations of students and parents to their real experiences with the school district. Di Martino & Jessen (2014) found a school brand represented by marketing materials influences parents' perception of the school and their decision to enroll. Shaver (2012) studied branding from the perspective of whether or not student expectations were met by their chosen college university. A similar future study with the sample school could measure brand alignment and communication effectiveness when comparing parent and student expectations to the reality of their experiences after being part of the new school culture for a period of time.

We live in culture on digital messages. Measuring the use and content of social media as an essential communication product in schools provides an area for further study. Because of the prevalence of images used in social media communication, studies should be conducted to examine the message strength of images communicating school brand. Luna (2014) studied social media use at the university level and discovered that schools use social media in strategic planning and goal-setting. The current study of ECPPs by school leaders in the sample school did not include social media posts as intended. Further research should create a system of measure for effectiveness of social media marketing in schools and the brand potential associated with this form of strategic school communication.

Conclusions Regarding Strategic Communications In Schools

Human capital is the experience and knowledge gained contributing to successful outcomes as individuals and as a nation. Quality and opportunities afforded as part of the educational process show correlation with higher human capital values (Hanushek et al., 2008). Schools have been charged with challenging the best and brightest as well as promising no child

shall be left behind. All school district stakeholders share the responsibility to accurately make known "what we do here," so families can navigate fields of school choice when selecting schools to best meet the needs of their children.

All school personnel including school principals, teachers, coaches, office staff, custodians, and others create the environment of the institution and can be considered brand "touchpoints." Communications should work together creating the unified brand image of the school communicating message content related school environment. Employee perspectives within the institution have great impact on the institutional branding as a whole (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Ruck & Welch, 2011; Williams & Omar, 2014). Everyone in the organization should work towards the same goal and speak the same language. When internal stakeholders are informed and commit to contributing to the branding efforts, the favorability of the brand increases (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Williams & Omar, 2014). Stakeholders should understand the mission and values of an organization so communication reflects a unified vision.

Although possessing unique traits, schools across the nation share the following common challenges: generating funding and enrollment, maintaining favorable public perception, communicating safety of students in times of threat, and meeting the needs of diverse learners. All of these necessitate the use of strategic communication. Strategic communication in brand creation can further impact the district. Communicating the mission and values of schools to community members and around the state can have positive results, gaining and retaining students, fostering relationships with community organizations and lawmakers, and nurturing the school culture.

As parents select schools they consider the values of facility, quality, and academic offerings. Schools can benefit from further promoting their programs and instructional

excellence through strategic marketing using purposefully selected essential communication products and processes. All communication helps create the essence of the school, the living personality or brand. The superintendent in the sample school may have expressed communication mindfulness best when remembering advice from a principal years ago warning, "you can never not communicate. Whether it is through your lapel pin or wearing purple to a football game, and how you position your desk… how you greet people, you are always communicating."

Brand creation in school districts has the potential to impact perceptions and move people towards a common goal. School colors and logos create the symbol, but communicating the essence of the school by illustrating the "who we are and what we do here" draws people together within a common narrative. One participant of the current study explained, "people feel it and then people get fired up about the color purple - it's not about the color - it's about what it means to people." All schools should use strategic communication to accurately promote the strengths of their people, the atmosphere in which work takes place, and the vision for the future.

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APPENDIX A. HEAT MAP

Heat map showing concentrated urban populations causing school population boom in urban areas. As families have moved from farming communities to urban areas, school populations have been impacted both in rural and urban areas necessitating strategic communication for schools.
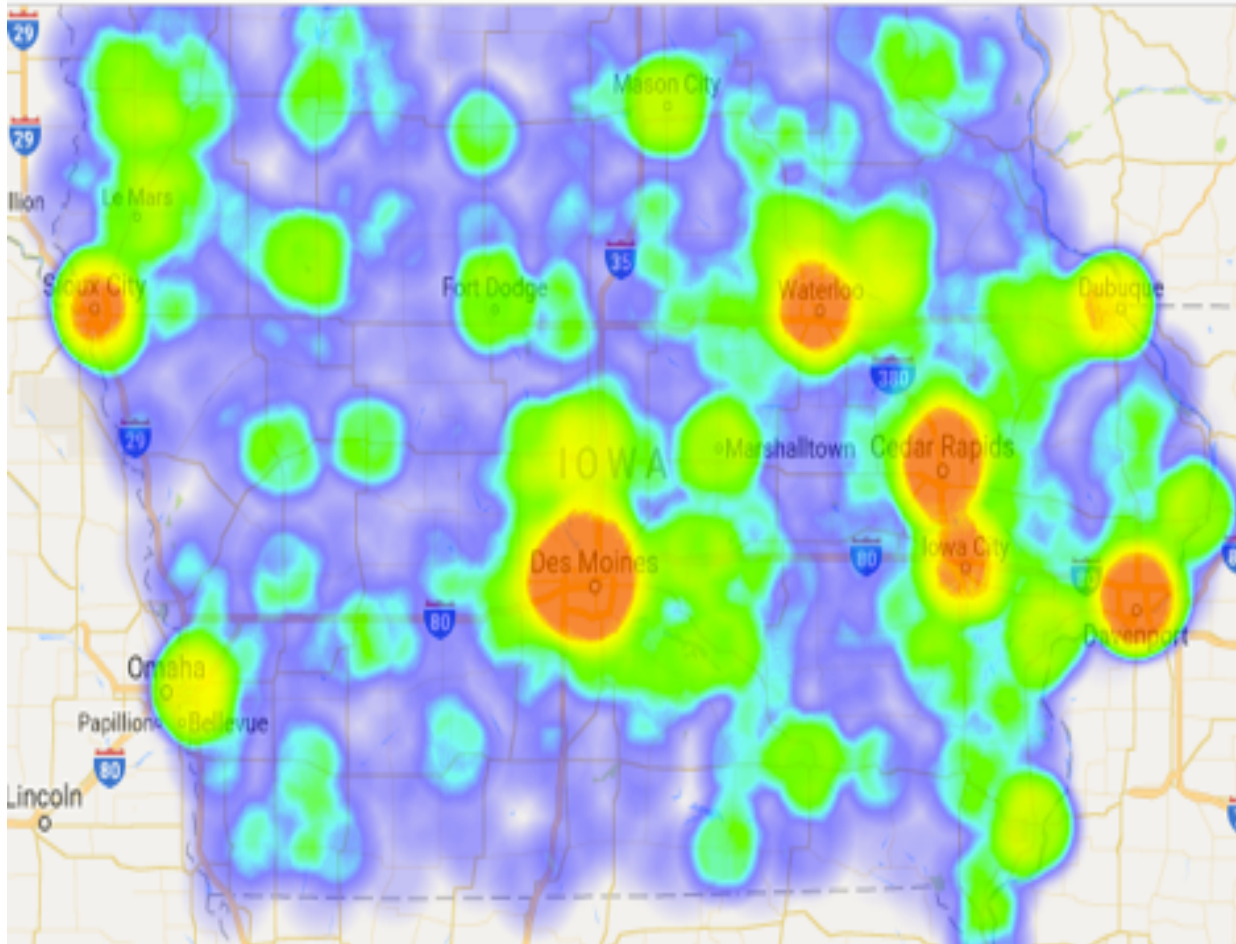
APPENDIX B. SCHOOL DISTANCE CHART

For commuters working downtown and shopping for homes in the Des Moines Metro area and surrounding communities, the distance between schools and Downtown Des Moines is charted here. The Des Moines Metro is surrounded by "bedroom communities."
   *miles distance rounded to nearest mile from Downtown Des Moines

Public High School	Location	Miles
Adel-Desoto-Minburn	Adel	22
Ames Community	Ames	35
Ankeny HS	Ankeny	13
Ballard	Huxley	25
Carlisle	Carlisle	12
Centennial	Ankeny	15
Collins-Maxwell	Maxwell	31
Dallas Center-Grimes	Grimes	17
Des Moines East High	Des Moines	1
Des Moines Hoover	Des Moines	6
Des Moines Lincoln High	Des Moines	5
Des Moines North High	Des Moines	2
Des Moines Roosevelt	Des Moines	4
Earlham HS	Earlham	30

Public High School	Location	Miles
Indianola	Indianola	18
Johnston HS	Johnston	10
Martensdale-St. Marys	Martensdale	19
Newton	Newton	35
North Polk	Alleman	20
Norwalk	Norwalk	9
PCM	Prairie City	21
Perry	Perry	39
Saydel	Des Moines	6
Southeast Polk	Pleasant Hill	10
Urbandale	Urbandale	9
Van Meter	Van Meter	20
Waukee	Waukee	16
West Central Valley	Stuart	40
West Des Moines	West Des Moines	8
Winterset	Winterset	37
Woodward-Granger	Woodward	31

Private Schools	Location	Miles
Des Moines Christian	Urbandale	12
Dowling	West Des Moines	10
Iowa Christian Academy	West Des Moines	10

http://www.mapquest.com/directions/from/us/ia/des-moines

NDSU North Dakota State University
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        Minard Hall
        Fargo, ND 58108-6050
        [phone]

Title of Research Study: Strategic Communication in Public Schools: A Communication Audit of a Midwestern School District

This study is being conducted by:
Jacqueline Pleggenkuhle, candidate for Master's degree
        NDSU, Dept. of Communication
        [phone]
        [email]
with Charles Okigbo, Advisor
        NDSU, Dept. of Communication
        [phone]
        [email]

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study? You are being asked to participate because you are a school administrator in the sample district.

What is the reason for doing the study? Because the educational landscape is changing in Iowa and around the nation, schools are expected to do more with less funding. There seems to be a disconnect between what schools are doing and how legislators and the general public see what's happening in schools. This study will measure the communication of leaders in a school district to ascertain methods and content of messages generated and look for brand alignment of messages.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to participate in one of the following activities: survey, email/blog collection, focus group discussion, or personal interview. If participating in the email/blog collection, you will be asked to provide 5 emails sent to your community members. Emails will be used for coding content, helping the researcher understand what school leaders communicate about to members of their community.

Where will the study take place, and how long will it take?
- Interviews will take place in administrator's office and will take 60 minutes or less OR

will be conducted via email.

- Surveys will be taken electronically at administrator's convenience within a 3-day window after consent is obtained.
- Focus group discussion will take place at the WILC and will last 60-90 minutes.
- Essential communication products and processes (ECPP) collection sampling will be at administrator's convenience and within a 3-day window. You will be asked to provide 5 pieces of communication in the form of emails, newsletters, blog posts, etc. to your school community.

You will only participate in ONE method of sampling.

What are the risks and discomforts? Common risks in social/behavioral research include loss of confidentiality and emotional, psychological distress and or social implications. This study does not forecast risk beyond use of time, and potentially uncomfortable discussion.

Participants in the focus group discussion will be asked to keep the conversation confidential, but participants' decision to share information outside of the Focus Group Discussion cannot be measured or controlled.

What are the benefits to me?
Potential benefit to participants includes increase of communication awareness.

What are the benefits to other people?
This study may advance our understanding of district communication and ultimately lead to increased understanding of district brand management.

Do I have to take part in the study? Your participation in this research is your choice. If you decide to participate in the study, you may change your mind and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are already entitled.

What are the alternatives to being in this research study? You may choose not to participate.

Who will see the information that I give?
Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When I write about the study, I will write about the combined information that has been gathered. The results of the study may be published; however, I will keep your name and other identifying information private unless you are asked for permission to quote.

Face to face interviews and the focus group discussion will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. The recordings will be recorded on my iPad and stored as mp3 files on my computer for a period of 3 months after the conclusion of the study, after which time they will be

destroyed.

What if I have questions?

If you have questions, contact Jacki Pleggenkuhle, [email] or by phone at [number]. Or Charles Okigbo Ph.D., North Dakota State, at [email] or by phone at [number].

What are my rights as a research participant?

You have rights as a participant in research. If you have questions about your rights, or complaints about this research, you may talk to the researcher or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program by:

- Telephone: [number] or toll-free [number]
- Email: [email]
- Mail: NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050.

The role of the Human Research Protection Program is to see that your rights are protected in this research; more information about your rights can be found at: [website]

Documentation of Informed Consent:

You are freely making a decision whether to be in this research study. Signing this form means that

1. you have read and understood this consent form
2. you have had your questions answered, and
3. you have decided to be in the study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

_____

Your signature   Date

_____

Your printed name

_____

Signature of researcher explaining study   Date

_____

Printed name of researcher explaining study

APPENDIX D. IPI QUESTIONS FOR SUPERINTENDENT & ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT

1. Describe the use of strategic communication in [the sample district].

2. What products & processes are used by the district to reach stakeholders? (follow up prompts to list all and name top 3-4 products used)

3. What do you consider as the main content of school messages? (subjects & themes)

4. Branding experts describe a brand as the "essence" of an organization characterized by "who we are and what we do here." What qualities characterize [the sample district]?

APPENDIX E. IPI QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNICATION COORDINATOR

1. How does the district use strategic communication? How does strategic communication

   work in the district? What processes and products are used?

2. What are the top 3-4 ECPPs used?

3. How would you describe the audience for school communication?

4. What is the content of school communications?

5. What is branding? How does your work help brand the district? What characteristics

   describe the district?

APPENDIX F. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe the use of strategic communication in [the sample district].

2. What products & processes are used by the district to reach stakeholders? (follow up prompts to list all and name top 3-4 products used)

3. What do you consider as the main content of school messages? (subjects & themes)

4. Branding experts describe a brand as the "essence" of an organization characterized by "who we are and what we do here." What qualities characterize [the sample district]?