

THE IMPACT OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:
BUILDING SUPPORT FOR K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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I dedicate this thesis, the culmination of twenty years of education, to my parents, Stephen and Leslie. Their encouragement and support has fueled my efforts to achieve excellence in and out of the classroom. I cannot express enough gratitude for their presence in my life.

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzed the interactive media platforms and surveyed communications professionals in six Colorado public school districts to identify the mechanisms used to effectively foster a sense of community and engagement among their constituents. Ultimately, the researcher gained an understanding of the specific process by which individuals connect in a meaningful way through digital communication with educational organizations. Through the application of engagement theory, this study examined how interactive technologies are employed to build support of a public education system and identified multi-faceted communication, empowerment, transparency, actionable information and culture of participation as the key strategic recommendations to educational entities from which to build community engagement strategies that work.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

The benefits of involving communities in students' education abound: schools that support meaningful parent involvement have higher levels of student achievement, improved school attendance higher graduation rates and larger enrollment to post-secondary education (Waterman & Harry, 2008). To encompass parent, family and community involvement in educational institutions' strategies for nurturing more high achieving students, schools must learn how to successfully foster relationships that are meaningful and accessible to community members. Interactive technology via social media provides a means of empowering individuals and building connections in support of a common cause or belief. The interactive nature of social media, as suggested merely by the term "social," can play a role in building connections between people and with organizations. Due to the ease of access and wide-reaching potential of social media platforms, there may be potential for the medium to be adopted by public education institutions as an effective communications tool in the pursuit of community engagement. Additionally, mobile technology makes it possible to participate in the online conversation through cell phones via text messages and mobile access to online sources, offering access to digital platforms to a broader population, potentially closing the access gap traditionally created by socioeconomic status. Considering these aspects of mass communication via digital media, this study aims to provide educational entities with research-based methods to establish better dialogue with the greater community in order to build meaningful relationships between community members and schools.

Information takes on different forms at different times, and in this case, it offers a platform on which to launch research findings in a more broadly applicable way (Stacks & Salwen, 1996). Is it possible to create a genuine community support network around public education through the use of participatory media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and text messaging? Subsequently, can this interactive technology provide a means of empowerment for individuals and groups of people in building connections in support of a common cause or belief, specifically public education? By conducting research through the lens of theory, the information is refined in a way that allows for significance and meaning that addresses the questions presented. Thus, engagement theory will provide a foundation on which to better understand how participatory media use might be directed in a manner that facilitates effective engagement of community members with their school districts.

The purpose of this research is to identify the mechanisms, via case study, that educational institutions utilize in their participatory media campaigns, which foster a sense of community and engagement among their constituents. Ultimately, this study will provide an understanding of the process by which individuals connect in a meaningful way through online communication. This research will also explore how digital communication can be used to effectively fit into a 21st century cultural reality through the application of engagement theory through the analysis of social media-facilitated communication. This research explores the use of such participatory media by public education institutions and assesses how they are used to build relationships between schools and communities. The research seeks to understand what motivates individuals to become engaged in their communities' public education systems and aims to provide

solid recommendations that may be applied to school districts' communications and engagement strategies on a wide-reaching scale.

Engagement may be considered a community's civic glue, performing functions that involve the public in solving community problems. Community engagement fosters participation to involve members of the public, allowing them to become active participants in democratic life (Saltmarsh, 2008). Applying engagement theory to this research on facilitating community engagement through interactive media-based communication is necessary in order to assess how and why individuals connect with a cause or purpose. Community participation can mean the achievement of an organization's goals and objectives and when specific tactics are employed, the public may be engaged in a productive way. Mulrennen et al. (2012) found that when individuals participate in activities that impact an organization's goals, those individuals recognized the value that comes with investing long-term support in the organization. An assessment of these components informs the recommendations established for public education entities via this study.

Digital Challenges

Despite the exponential growth in the use of participatory media, organizations are still working to manage the risk involved in opening up such online communication avenues. Because supervision of social media is a moving target, public entities are establishing policies to regulate participatory media use (Tsikoudakis, 2011). Rules banning social media interactions between students and teachers have been enacted to prevent inappropriate relationships, and the prohibiting of access to social networks via an organization's computers is meant to protect schools from potential cyber hackers

(Tsikoudakis, 2011). Such restrictions affect the feasibility of educational institutions to employ participatory media communications strategies in a wide-reaching, effective manner.

The state of Missouri repealed a law that limited online chats between teachers and students, citing free-speech infringement caused by the law that prohibited the use of websites allowing private communication between educators and children under 18 (Associated Press, 2011). Discussion around the Missouri bill encourages schools to develop their own policies to define appropriate online interaction as part of the teacher-student relationship (AP, 2011). It is evident that the impact of participatory media on the educational environment does provide opportunity for appropriate, meaningful interaction, though it should be acknowledged that the risks and legal implications of such a new communications tool continue to raise concern. However, with the potential for social media to connect networks and create communities, school districts may be better served to consider the platforms as positive, as opposed to negative, forces. Educational institutions must weigh these various implications when developing strategies to involve community members through interactive media, thus this study will also include exploration of this issue. Additionally, it is relevant to note that this study focuses upon interactive communication at the organizational level, analyzing participatory media use between a school district, or representative, and its community members. While the results of this study are meant to be broadly applicable as other organizations or institutions develop strategic engagement campaigns, a study focused at the level in which individual teachers connect with parents and other stakeholders would

likely reveal different reactions to the opportunities facilitated by frequent, effective engagement.

Technology has expanded the functionality of the Internet into a participatory platform where users not only consume information, but also contribute and produce information as part of the online community (Darwish, 2011). The nature of online interaction provides opportunity for individuals to connect with others digitally, developing relationships, shared experiences and a sense of community. Understanding the foundational impacts of such relationships built through online mediums and digital communications offers the potential for additional discussion on how interactive media can support community causes in an impactful, productive manner. By understanding what types of digital interactions inspire community-creation and -building among individuals, research involving participatory media use and community engagement will identify methods by which educational organizations can create an environment of support around community schools in an effort to foster support for students – both financially and academically.

Information and communication technologies can establish a powerful community dynamic, keep a record of the historical process and allow for broader debate and transparency (Souza de Alvear & Thiollent, 2010/11). Using an interactive, digital platform to build a link between a community's residents and organizations, if done effectively, could serve to better support educational organizations in an era when resources and funding are scarce. Not only must interaction opportunities be engaging to the individuals across diverse segments of the community, but long-term involvement and sustainable participation are critical to developing a successful community support

network as, “it is the people involved in a project who are the project's most useful and valuable resource” (Munt, 2002). Munt suggests that no matter the cause, the individuals who choose to become actively involved make a significant impact on whether the common goal is realized. This concept asserts the need to engage a number of stakeholders in order to effectively build a support network around a specific cause or organization.

K-12 public education in Colorado was selected for this study because its funding source is significantly related to public support via ballot issues that require majority voter support. However, it is not only in Colorado; communities around the country are struggling to foster a sense of purpose and support for their educational systems. Communications professionals in the K-12 school system experience the need for and impact of community engagement on a frequent basis, and this research study explores solutions to the engagement issues necessitated by the cultural expectations of public education and the current funding environment. While communities expect their public schools to use tax dollars efficiently to prepare children to be successful once they leave the educational institution, there is frequently a disconnect between that expectation and the resources, funding and otherwise, necessary to support the school systems. As schools begin to build relationships by engaging community members, people begin to understand schools’ challenges and successes, resulting in a genuine partnership toward achieving a unified goal: preparing students for success as productive citizens in society.

The identification of Facebook, Twitter and text messaging as the primary platforms of study stems from the prominence of those media in K-12 school communication. New information technologies have far-reaching potential for improving

education, including increasing students' engagement and creating new forms of parent involvement. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are being used by 65% of American adult Internet users to connect with one another and with causes and organizations. Harnessing such engaging media to build relationships between community members and the public education system may be successful, yet few studies have explored such potential (Brenner, 2012). Additionally, the proportion of online adults who use Twitter on a typical day has doubled since May 2011 and has quadrupled since late 2010. The rise of smartphones may account for some of the increase because smartphone users are particularly likely to be using Twitter (Brenner, 2012). SMS/text messaging alerts are increasing in use, as individuals connect and receive information via mobile devices. This presents an opportunity to investigate the use of social media as a powerful communication tool in order to bolster support for schools and educational resources. However, the study does not limit analysis to those three platforms, but also encompasses other relevant means of communication as identified throughout the research process.

CHAPTER 2 - REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Interactive Media Defined

In order to understand how interactive media impact community engagement, it is pertinent first to define the terms involved in the study. While the nature of communication via social media is dynamic and even unpredictable, there are countless social media tools that are widely used and accepted. Interactive media tools employ a significant amount of user participation and network creation. The focus of participatory media is on a user-centered design, facilitating information sharing in a collaborative, interactive way on the Internet (Click & Petit, 2010). Social networking, text messaging, blogging, instant messaging and online discussion boards are included in the digital, participatory media classification. It is necessary to define these tools by their characteristics and usability, as the interactive media tools relating to education go beyond those currently used by the mass population and restricting the definition to specific platforms or tools currently available would limit the scope and application of the study. The terms interactive media, participatory media and online social networks are used throughout the study to describe the various digital media platforms involved.

Educational Community

Public education institutions, also referred to as educational organizations or K-12 public schools, is a term referencing publicly funded schools in the United States, or groups of publicly funded schools such as school districts in the kindergarten or pre-kindergarten through grade 12 structure. Educators, students and parents are primary populations of study, though it is also necessary to incorporate a wider public to include

members of the greater community. This broader, more encompassing community group is identified as stakeholders or community members. By providing evidence of public education's impact (whether that be positive or negative) on individual communities and on a greater culture, individuals may be motivated to make contributions in shaping policy and participating in local efforts to improve life in their communities (Bittle et al. 2011).

Community Engagement Paradigm

In order to discover how participatory media are used to build relationships between schools and community members, it is necessary to identify exactly what the study will examine in regard to engagement. Community engagement is a broad concept and must be refined for the purpose of analyzing the impact of strategies and tactics on developing a culture of involved community members. Engagement of community members must involve a process that includes dialogue and collaboration with all participants actively listening and learning about the others' perspectives, in this case, in an effort to create a more beneficial educational environment for students (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Additionally, community engagement is the aim of deliberate strategies defined as an educational organization's policies, practices and programs that guide, involve and facilitate parental participation in the educational environment (Agronick et al., 2009). It may be necessary to differentiate between the terms community engagement and community involvement. In this context, community and parental engagement are an expression and attempt by those individuals to have an impact on what actually transpires around children in schools and on the kinds of social and material resources that are valued in school. Parental/community involvement is a less formal term describing how

these groups interact with educational institutions. This designation is made by the researcher in order to guide the study, advise participants and facilitate clearer interpretation of the data presented.

Engagement Theory

In this study, engagement theory will provide an operational definition for community engagement, helping to stipulate how that phenomenon is measured (Stacks & Salwen, 1996). Stacks and Salwen (1996) state that by applying theory, the researcher is able to map out and refine ideas in a manner that allows focus to be placed on the relationships established by communication, in this case digital communication. In considering developments in the field of mass communication scholarship, concepts can be assessed through several processes. When analyzing the ways interactive media campaigns may facilitate community support, engagement theory addresses the creation process by looking at how and why messages are created and understanding the motives involved (Greenburg & Salwen, 1996). The creation process must also address the intentions of communications sources. Engagement theory provides an acknowledgement of effective community engagement, which first necessitates an understanding of why individuals choose to become engaged and what motivates them to take action and develop sustained participation in children's education.

Engagement theory is applied to the specific question of utilizing interactive media to build community engagement, offering additional specificity in regard to applying findings to a broad range of situations. Individual interest, trust, knowledge and feelings of community belonging and support must be developed and nurtured through a community engagement philosophy that develops community knowledge, skills and a

focus on education and raising awareness (Johnston, 2010). Key elements of engagement theory are communication, consultation and participation. These elements must combine to create a community's engagement philosophies, strategies and tactics (Johnston, 2010). Determining whether a public engagement strategy is effective is typically based on the perception of those involved and/or the wider public. An effective engagement program must evoke all relevant information from the active participant, and when values are elicited from participants behaving as individuals, it is important to combine them in an equitable manner, taking into account all inputs in developing a course of action (Row & Frewer, 2005). As Ryan (2008) describes, when community initiatives bring community members 'to the table,' those participants are often representatives of organizations, thus community initiatives provide a means of connection for various networks. Capitalizing on the power of such collaboration may provide a basis on which to build valuable support for education and students; utilizing community networks serves to strengthen connections and engagement around the educational organizations within that community (Ryan, 2008). When applying community engagement successes to specific targeted audiences, it is pertinent to consider the field of public relations and the available literature addressing specific audience-directed engagement processes. Parents, educators and the broader, less-connected members of the community are components of unique and valuable stakeholder groups within the educational culture of a community, thus it is relevant to include a variety of participants in this research to better understand how to grow engagement around public education.

Current research strongly suggests that when educational institutions increase engagement with their communities, it can result in enhanced beliefs about the value of

the organizations (Swanson, 2009). Utilizing engagement theory to assess levels of community involvement is ideal in identifying strategies that educational organizations can employ to rally support for community schools. Additionally, data suggests it is necessary to educate community members about the value of schools and quality education, fostering engagement with community members and potentially leading to better outcomes for students, schools and communities as a whole. (Swanson, 2009) Ultimately, the participants want to have a platform for dialogue, an avenue in which to express views and ideas and proof that their communications are being heard and are impactful (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Communication, consultation and participation are three concepts that Rowe and Frewer (2005) identify as aiding in the flow of information between an organization and its public, defining the public engagement, in its various forms and instances, in a more directly usable manner. Thus, engagement theory provides a solid foundation on which to build this research study.

Current Research

Participatory media present potential for facilitating a sense of community focused on public education. However, participation is not the sole goal of utilizing such media communications tools between communities and their schools – it is necessary to take the communications strategies a step further. Establishing a culture of support and engagement around a community's schools requires community members to feel valued, empowered and engaged in a specific cause or organization. Exploring the ways in which educational institutions might connect in a genuine way with members of the community, motivating them to act and facilitating an environment with a shared goal of supporting schools, is ultimately the goal of this study.

Communication technology has changed the size and shape of the world and it has impacted the human link in communications systems (Pereboom, 1978). Determining where the individual fits into those communication systems, and how to connect people and groups through various mediums, presents ongoing challenges for organizations like public education institutions as they strive to foster community support. This is a discussion that has gone on for decades, as evidenced by Pereboom's research, and communicators continue to face the challenge of creating meaningful communication through evolving channels and technological advances (1978). Social media play a role in building connections between people and organizations. By exploring the use of participatory media campaigns through the scope of engagement theory, it is possible to understand how the platform can be used to create a meaningful community support network around public education. It is relevant to express that the foundation of such engaging communication should be focused on the methods and behavior patterns of users, not the mediums, as technological platforms are constantly changing. In addition, while many educational organizations place value on developing parent engagement practices, they are "rarely evaluated in effectiveness in increasing parent involvement or student achievement" (Agronick, et al., 2009, p.23). Agronick et al. (2009) also recognize barriers to parental involvement include busy schedules and cultural differences, issues that could be addressed in further study of this topic.

Few studies offer research directly applicable to the specific question of how to foster effective, sustainable community engagement to support public education. However, much literature is available on various components of community engagement and parental involvement in the educational process. In applying engagement theory,

effective community engagement requires an understanding of individuals' motivations when choosing to become actively engaged in the educational process – specifically, in a child's education. A Barton et al. study (2004) identifies parental involvement as a dynamic, interactive process, defined by parents' multiple experiences, resources and interactions with schools. This component is also echoed by Hartstein (2011), who suggests that leveraging community relationships may be easier when community members feel comfortable becoming involved in a school's social environment. Implementing community engagement strategies also involves an understanding of the interconnections between what parents engage in and how they manage to do so; schools must empower parents to situate themselves in a place of influence in schools in traditional and nontraditional ways. Parents become engaged because they want to create a place of authority in their child's learning experience. Here, engagement becomes a set of relationships and actions that cut across individuals, circumstances and events, which are bound together by the context in which the engagement takes place – in this case, the community's school(s) (Baron et al., 2004). However, building a collaborative environment must be done with forethought and care; superficial or ulterior motives can sabotage community engagement programs or practices. A community engagement project gains strength and momentum when its participants are empowered, and as suggested by Munt (2002), this is the most compelling element for change in a community.

Social networks are online communities where individuals can share and exchange messages and information, while also fostering connections around joint activities and causes. Online communication has impacted the notion of community and

the manner by which people interact. Gruzd et al. (2011) suggest that social networks can form the basis for interlinked communities, allowing people to form social connections and maintain current ones. Social media are currently being used in the mass media environment as a public relations and persuasion tool – as a hub of communication (Hochberg, 2012). However, Hochberg (2012) points out the raw nature of these mediums and the lack of overarching standards around the use of such platforms; it is necessary to better understand how and why individuals may become engaged around a specific organization, not merely just consume information via social media.

Acknowledging the persuasive elements of the medium and the manner by which it ignites significant cultural shifts in some situations, suggests individuals are truly beginning to harness the power of social media as an engagement tool (Darwish, 2011).

Herber explains academic libraries' use of the interactive medium Twitter to connect with student users by shifting the use of the platform from a one-way "pushing out" of information to the intentional development of creative, direct interactions with followers (2011). By listening and responding to those within the online community of followers, an organization can establish itself not only as an information source, but also as a friend and valuable connection for users. Understanding the importance of such two-way interaction is critical as public education institutions develop methods for engaging the community in support of education. However, in order to listen to community members, an organization must first determine how to effectively connect with those targeted users and identify how and where to interact with them digitally. This element of online interaction is not explored by Herber's research, but should be addressed as an initial step in beginning to understand individuals' digital communication behaviors.

Social media provide opportunities for sustained engagement with users to foster a sense of community, if strategies are implemented effectively. It is critical that this engagement process involve dialogue and collaboration with all parties, as challenges and solutions are presented around the topic of better supporting education and a community's schools (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Participatory media can provide easily accessible two-way communication, and learning about the ways individuals use such digital tools to establish their cultural expectations and experiences will help to address the methods by which organizations can build relationships with users. In addition, it is necessary to examine the needs schools have for building informed advocates for educational causes.

Existing research shows that by engaging across various social media platforms, as well as across online and offline communities, organizations can meet parents or community members where they prefer to connect and become a resource and information provider (Simon, 2011). What warrants further study is the understanding of social media communication to connect with individuals in a meaningful way and determine effective strategies for refining the focus to public education. The types of information shared, the potential for actionable support and the level of on- and off-line community connection are all components worthy of addressing in research to better understand the facilitation of community engagement through interactive media.

In addition to exploring successful examples of community engagement and highlighting engagement theory in action across a variety of organizational structures, it must be recognized that challenges around fostering community engagement are also documented in the current body of literature. Barriers to parental involvement may

compound the struggles involved with organizations' community engagement efforts; those barriers include busy schedules, cultural differences, low levels of literacy, and language differences (Agronick et al., 2009). Additionally, with the increase in access to social media networks and information by way of mobile platforms and cell phones, it may be possible to bridge the gap that is traditionally created due to socioeconomic status and income level. In addition, those in poverty often have limited exposure to digital media due to less access to Internet service. There has also been concern and cynicism over decision-makers' willingness to provide the public access to information or deny public vote or input, despite community engagement efforts (Besley, 2010). The Besley study suggests that messages of public engagement are interpreted in a variety of ways and organizations must clearly communicate specific mechanisms of engagement (2010). By assessing the content relayed via social media networks by the educational organizations in this study, it is possible to determine what types of mechanisms have worked best, or failed, in fostering community engagement around public education.

The City of Portland's community support plan laid out by Potter (2008) also suggests that long-term involvement and consistent participation are critical to developing a successful community connection. Potter (2008) states, "greater community input at the front end will result in decisions that have wide public support, saving resources in the long run," (p. 1) suggesting one element of an effective engagement plan. Community members often feel detached from the city's governmental process or its community-wide services, and building relationships within a community offers empowerment and insight to those individuals (Potter, 2008). Just as public education depends on the small steps taken by a collective group of supporters, so too does

Portland's success as a thriving, desired community depend on the investment of many individuals. Potter's plan involves more traditional means of communication, such as attending meetings or drafting letters of support and it treads lightly on the topic of interactive communication for community engagement and the challenges presented by a disenfranchised constituency (Potter, 2008).

Conflicting studies suggest a range of impacts on student academic achievement stemming from the extent of parental involvement, indicating that varying degrees of parent participation may illustrate the term *parental involvement* is being defined differently in different circumstances. Desforges and Abouchar (2003) state that parental involvement is strongly related to socio-economic class, suggesting that a more open-access method for participation may be necessary. However, application of engagement theory may be a solution to better guide schools and educational organizations in establishing goals for community engagement and the measures by which to judge success and impact on student achievement and overall support for schools. In addition, Waterman and Harry (2008) point out that a lack of information and understanding about schools and programs can hinder parent-school collaboration. Simply providing parents information does not solve the issues, but working to provide information that is conveyed in a comprehensible way can build connections and responsive relationships. By clearly communicating to teachers and staff the value of parents and involvement in the learning environment, school leaders can further promote collaborative relationships (Waterman & Harry, 2008). According to Waterman and Harry (2008), "communication between the home and the school is vital to increasing and sustaining parent-school collaboration," (p.10) and in order to build such relationships, schools must have a clear

understanding of how community members communicate. Kozinets et al. (2010) address this component on a different level in a study suggesting various products or subject matter lend themselves more effectively to word of mouth marketing through social media avenues; there is no specific recognition of educational causes in that study, though the research shows long-term brand-building campaigns are necessary in developing key relationships around a cause to inspire endorsing or embracing narratives in online marketing messages. Additional study examining various campaigns and interaction styles relating to educational communication is necessary. Interactive media may offer solutions to the challenge of establishing effective, sustained communication between education and community members, though few studies have explored the specifics of such strategies.

Interactive media serve as tools to better connect with community members, though it is relevant to observe that social media cannot meet a need for face-to-face community connection. Huwe (2010) explains that outreach via mechanisms such as Twitter must focus on bringing community into an organization's world – being ready to welcome those community members, not merely sending out information. Additionally, effective social media connections must provide a true value to community members, which can be done by understanding the community members' needs and supporting them through the online interaction (Huwe, 2010). More specific research on the nature of interaction between community members and schools through participatory media, and the value they place on various elements of such communication will be relevant in order to understand its role in creating support networks in relation to education. Virtual communities are considered important for social reasons and Blanchard (2004) discusses

the concern that such communities would help replace the relationships lost as people became more isolated from their neighbors. Some researchers argue that virtual communities could allow people to connect with others from around the world who share similar interests (Blanchard, 2004). This notion provides a basis on which to build a greater understanding of the way participatory media use can create a shared sense of community in relation to public education. However, there is a need for research addressing the development of online communities through such online communication and specifically in evaluating how social media platforms facilitate cultural connections around community issues, such as public education. A report from Darwish (2011) discusses political protests in various countries organized through social media communication, illustrating the power of such communication and its ability to connect individuals in support of a cause.

One significant development in the realm of digital communication has been in the mobile market. Some predict that Internet access through mobile devices will overtake desktop traffic in the next five years (Padley, 2011). Information can now be presented to users anywhere, at any time and provide them the opportunity to interact with the information, depending on how it is accessed and how it is distributed. Users adapt quickly to new devices and formats, and mobile technology provides speed and convenience, so it is important for organizations to keep up when it comes to digital communication tactics (Padley, 2011). This mobile access can also impact communication with socioeconomically disadvantaged community members, who have traditionally not had the same access to digital communications. Now, these mobile technologies can help meet the communications needs of such groups, providing

opportunities to engage with a new population, something educational institutions should acknowledge and include in community engagement strategies (Potnis, 2010). However, limitations remain for access to Internet-based media due to cost-prohibitive technological devices and fee-based online providers. Mobile devices present information in a new way – offering pared down data from numerous sources, often in a headline-only based format. Information may be more abundant via mobile technology, but it is often less extensive, and the user’s attention is rarely devoted solely to the messages being delivered due to apparent distractions that accompany the very nature of a technology accessed anywhere, at anytime. Naaman et al. (2011) discovered that local events and happenings that are underrepresented in more traditional media may be of great interest to local communities and supported by communication via interactive media. The current body of available research explores the ability of social media to foster a connection between individuals’ physical communities and the relationships they have established digitally. While there is a distinction between the two communities, there is little discussion about the methods through which organizations might leverage effective participatory media communications strategies to genuinely connect groups around a specific cause.

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to identify the mechanisms educational institutions utilize in their participatory media campaigns to foster community engagement. The researcher employs a two-part methodology in exploring two questions related to participatory media use and its impact on community engagement in relation to public education institutions.

RQ1: How are participatory media platforms of Facebook, Twitter and text messaging used to build relationships between schools and communities?

RQ2: How can those participatory media platforms be utilized more effectively to foster community engagement with schools?

Qualitative methods are meant to expand, not limit, the realm of inquiry (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methodology lends itself best to the subject matter by allowing the study to expound upon users' self-created content, interpreting and analyzing the reasons why individuals participate on social media sites, and determining what strategies are most effective in engaging community members around public education. The study indexes five key strategies, collected from the data as proven to foster community engagement: multi-faceted engagement, empowerment of stakeholders, providing school-level connections, transparency in communication, actionable information and developing a culture of participation, which are described in-depth throughout the Results chapter. Community engagement is conceptually defined as involvement in one's community. In the scope of the presented research, this includes volunteering at schools, developing positive relationships with educational institutions or

voting in approval of a tax measure funding schools. Research was conducted through multiple forms of data collection, then organized into categories that transcend form designation, as is evidenced in the List of Tables (Creswell, 2009).

The social network pages, predominantly Facebook and Twitter pages and websites, along with SMS text messaging alerts where applicable, of six public school districts were reviewed to identify themes and consistent messages as documented in Appendix 2. In addition, key interviews were conducted with individuals from each school district, including the person developing communication and community engagement strategies for the district, and the person managing the district's interactive media communication, where available if that was a different individual, to determine goals of the participatory media use, as well as challenges and outcomes. In all, eight interviews were conducted and data recorded regarding interactive media use and community engagement. By assessing public education institutions' – specifically K-12 public schools' – use of participatory media to build relationships with stakeholders, it is possible to better understand users' intentions and priorities when participating via social media platforms. It is relevant to note that the initial scope of the study broadened here, to include online video channels and other interactive platforms that may be less-known to the general public, in order to encompass the full range of engagement tactics used by the district involved in the study. These could not be identified until the study was underway.

Identifying the ways in which educational organizations can employ participatory media communication to establish a genuine sense of community in support of the organization requires an understanding of how the engagement process facilitates relationships through the medium. Community support was defined through the

application of engagement theory, identifying traits, strategies and support mechanisms that reinforce community support and measuring the presence of such traits and the level to which they are achieved through the districts' strategic communications plans and tactics. As participatory platforms, social media sites and interactive messages serve several relevant purposes in establishing an online community around an organization. Social media may augment other social media channels, such as a website or online video channel, and they also allow the organization to center itself in the interaction with the community (Fischer, 2011). However, participatory media is also often just one component of a more extensive communications campaign, thus the research also explores the district's entire engagement strategy to see where and how participatory media make an impact. In order to determine the most effective strategies for public education organizations to engage community members to participate in a greater, common environment to support students, it was also relevant to analyze such organizations' goals and results as part of the interview process.

In order to explore the use of social media-facilitated communication by public education institutions and how it is used to build relationships between schools and communities, interviews with K-12 school district leaders and communication professionals are encompassed in this study. School districts within the state of Colorado were invited through an email request through the Colorado School Public Relations Association network to participate in the study; six medium to large sized districts were selected on a volunteer-basis for this case study. The researcher is a member of COSPRA and is aware of the diverse strategies used by districts across the state, along with the significant challenges, in regard to community engagement, which is why this

organization was sampled for the study. Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting in order to obtain comprehensive information about the strategies used, and the expectations and outcomes relating to the districts' community engagement campaigns. The interviews consist of the questions listed in Appendix 1, while also allowing flexibility to expand upon interviewees' answers and follow up with clarifying questions as needed.

Collected information was then analyzed in order to extract specific themes and methods that have been effectively utilized to engage community members in building a support network around public education. Initial impressions from the review of the interactive media sites were recorded, the interviews were transcribed and organized by question, providing a format in which to analyze the content. Consistent themes and communication strategies were then identified from the obtained data, focusing on components related to engagement. Themes were then established based on topics indicated in the review of current literature (value, engagement, empowerment, participation are initial codes extracted from current research), as well as dictated by the data suggested by any surprising, unusual or consistent findings (Creswell, 2009). By exploring the specific content, tone, timeline and other components of the school districts' community engagement campaigns, the data offers an organized illustration of the strategies used to effectively build engagement within K-12 school districts.

An assessment process was then applied to the analyzed data, providing a mechanism for interpretation of the data into usable, real-life terms, identifying what worked for the districts and what did not. By conducting analysis of such strategies, this research provides educational institutions with substantial, data-based recommendations

on which to build and employ effective community engagement campaigns through the social media tools readily available to the educational institutions and their key stakeholder groups. The communications strategies associated with the districts that achieved successful community engagement, based on the districts' specific engagement goals and strategic plans, are compiled below, providing guidelines other educational organizations might follow to create genuine community support networks.

These methods do not attempt to address all feasible relevant variables. There is no study here of the specific demographic makeup of the participating school districts and how that may impact engagement campaigns. Nor does this study address how funding for public education organizations will be directly impacted by the community engagement strategies. These methods do not explore the broader implications of participatory media use regarding the designation between personal and professional interactions. Additionally, further research involving interviews or feedback from schools' stakeholders and community members would provide insight into that perspective of social media interaction. That component of the educational institutions' cultures is not addressed here.

CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research aimed to answer two questions through the analysis of public school districts' use of participatory media for community engagement.

RQ1: How are participatory media platforms used to build relationships between schools and communities?

RQ2: How can those participatory media platforms be utilized more effectively to foster community engagement with schools?

The results of the study provide detailed recommendations for school districts in regard to the strategies found most effective in building a community engagement campaign. The researcher identified five key strategies through one-on-one interviews and analysis of interactive media platforms. The application of engagement theory provided a lens through which to extract specific communications behaviors and tactics that effectively fostered community participation in support of public schools.

Key Strategies

This study identified five strategies from a detailed list of themes extracted from categories studied during the research process. Multi-faceted engagement, empowerment of stakeholders, transparency in communication, actionable information and developing a culture of participation were each found to make a significant impact on educational organizations' community engagement efforts. It was relevant to move beyond district-specific messaging and content to reach a level of analysis resulting in proven, overarching communication strategies. Though, specific examples are presented in the subsequent sections, along with the deliberate analysis process used to extrapolate the

more broadly applicable strategies. By analyzing the more explicit participatory media use by the districts through the application of engagement theory, it was possible to compile the underlying themes and thus these strategies used to guide them.

Multi-faceted Communication

The multi-faceted communication strategy encompasses the manner in which organizations offer engagement opportunities for community members. By giving individuals multiple platforms and environments where they can share perspectives and ask questions, stakeholders are able to participate in the ways that are most accessible and comfortable for them. A notable result of this study was feedback that the use of participatory media should not mean an end to face-to-face communication and interpersonal conversations between the organization and its stakeholders. “That process is multifaceted,” said the communications director in School District E, “it is not just about social media and print publication and emails – it’s more comprehensive and should involve surveys and face-to-face opportunities. Use all of those tools to complement one another.” Community members want to have options and want to be able to communicate in a variety of ways; meetings, text messages, emails and social media are a few of the most prominent examples. Additionally, having a multifaceted approach assists in maintaining open lines of communication, as is explained by the manager of School District A’s interactive media platforms: “It must be sustainable and vigilance means responding across all platforms.” School District B described a situation where it held a meeting to discuss budget cuts and allowed people to attend, to call in with questions or to ask questions via a Facebook page or email. What resulted was a robust discussion that involved instantaneous polling about issues presented at the

meeting, along with a live blog throughout the event. “You have to provide ways for people to get through the ‘groan zone’ and voice their frustrations,” said the director of communication in School District B, “then you can begin to work out or work through the solutions they need.” Using a multi-faceted communications strategy proved effective in engaging community members in ways that are not necessarily platform-based, but instead offer the stakeholders options, so messages are presented effectively, creating avenues for discourse and subsequently building trust and relationships. School District C’s communications director provided feedback on the use of online blogging as one facet of the outreach strategy: “When people are too busy for meetings, there is minimal contact, but the blog lets them post questions, converse with one another and reach out to one another.”

Empower Stakeholders

The second strategy shown in this study to foster community is to empower the stakeholders; individuals want to know their input is going to have an impact and organizations must clearly define how they will enable those stakeholders to make a contribution. The empowerment philosophy used by the most successful engagement organizations here is: more input equals better outcomes, thus community engagement that increases participation will drive the best outcomes for the organization. Empowerment of stakeholders involves obtaining feedback and information and using that information to affect organizational decisions. As the communications director in School District E explains, “the goal is to get insights as far as who is reposting information, who is sharing it, and to see how effective our posts really are,” when engaging community members through interactive media. Allowing community members

to add information to digital platforms, share information with others and educating them with accurate information creates an empowered and informed support network for the organization. “People are more direct and come to us to ask questions and they are getting more comfortable asking us because we will get them the information,” said School District F’s communications director. Providing online communications empowers stakeholders because they no longer have to attend a meeting or respond on the organization’s schedule; individuals can go to their own computer and contribute directly to the organization’s website, for example. Access to information also creates an empowered community. For the districts included in this study, it was not solely survey responses that informed decisions, but the comments left by respondents – empowering community members translates to actively listening to them, and letting those community members see how that information is, or is not, used by the organization. “We want feedback; we don’t just want a survey, we want the comments so we can see why people are feeling a certain way, what are the prevailing sentiments,” said the communications director of School District A. Community members should understand the direct and indirect benefits of having a healthy public education system and, “parents should be empowered with information to identify what educational environment they want for their child and equip them with the information they need to make those decisions,” said School District E. This allows them to make their own decisions with the information made available as opposed to the educational organization telling them how to choose.

Actionable Information

Employing a strategy in order to provide actionable information speaks to the unique dynamic between a community member and an educational facility. Individuals

expect to receive information that illustrates the organization has a vested interest in the community and its well-being. “People are most engaged at the school level, so one of the advantages education has is this very personal contact with the customer,” said the communications director in School District E. Building school-level connections with stakeholders allows community members to connect directly with an organization with which they interact on a regular basis. By fostering relationships by meeting stakeholders with information where they have the most intimate and vested interest (neighborhood school or child’s teacher), organizations can proactively involve the community members. This makes it less feasible to bypass the general public, because those community members have access directly to a school-level relationship. A key component uncovered through this case study is that educational organizations have stopped listening, which has created significant barriers in building community engagement. The director of communications for School District F elaborated on that strategy, explaining, “the goal is two-way conversation, we value the feedback and want to ask and answer questions.” When districts provide actionable information such as where to provide feedback, how to meet school leaders or where to volunteer time, they open those lines of communication and listening. Using participatory media allows educational entities to not only participate in the conversation, but to observe. “We can go back and see how people are commenting,” said School District A’s communications director, “that is a great way to take steam out of the kettle and address the real issues.” Organizations have to evaluate what they want community members to do when engaging online and must provide clear, defined steps for community members to follow to facilitate participation and effective engagement. “Let people bring their information

forward and tell them how to get involved,” were specific recommendations from School District D’s manager of interactive media sites. Additionally, stakeholders need to clearly understand the process of communication and be aware of the protocol for checking back in with the organization once the action is completed or underway.

Transparency

Transparency in communication is the fourth strategy necessary in building community engagement. In the current media environment of consumer reviews and customer service tweeting, individuals expect timely and genuine responses from organizations when interacting online. Districts in this study state they have to be candid with stakeholders, admit mistakes and be honest about steps taken to resolve them. Dealing openly and transparently with misunderstandings or misperceptions allows organizations to build trust, not only with the individuals involved in the dialogue, but with the broader online community which is able to observe the interaction. When more people are participating in decision-making, not everyone is going to agree with the final decision, but allowing community members to be informed and participatory in the process allows them to understand why decisions are made. Additionally, when using online platforms, guidelines for use of interactive media should be provided to community members upfront, so they understand the protocol for commenting or posting information. “Our interactions have to be intelligent and transparent as to the purpose and the mechanism for looping back with community members,” said the director of communications for School District A. Effective engagement occurs when expectations are clear for community members throughout the collaboration process. If the board of education gets to make the final decision, for example, stakeholders should know that, so

there is no expectation that the community members will get to decide. Interactive media platforms allow for transparent dialogue when used effectively. “We can deal openly with misunderstandings and misperceptions,” said the director of communications for School District B, “we know that’s how we build understanding and trust.” While information sharing and collaboration occurs, transparency in regard to the process is critical. School District A’s interactive media manager echoes the same sentiment, stating, “It is not just the district saying, ‘here’s what we’re going to do,’ and making people understand it, instead, it’s ‘what do you think about this,’ and persuasion between community members and that dialogue.”

Culture of Participation

Finally, developing and supporting a culture of participation is a strategy that underlies a meaningful community engagement campaign. This culture requires commitments from both the organization and the stakeholders, to connect in a collaborative manner. The director of communication in School District C stated, “community engagement success comes from leadership and the board of education, encouraging others to participate.” An organization’s leadership must value participation and support community engagement in order for it to be genuine and effective. “Having an effective culture of public participation is important,” said director of communications in School District B, “the culture must value that engagement of the community.” While adding more voices to the discussion may mean decisions do not happen as quickly, it will mean the organization reaches a better decision, and this process must be acknowledged and supported by the organization. Additionally, it may also mean that information is not always positive or promotional. The individual managing online

communications in School District E states that guidelines must be set ahead of time, “though we are not saying you can’t post a negative comment. That is a part of the dialogue.” This shift in culture from using information to push out an organization’s message, to providing platforms for conversation about the organization, is illustrated in organizational behavior, as decision-makers evolve from telling community members what is going to happen and making sure they understand, to asking them what they think about various issues and option and engaging in the dialogue. This opens up discussion between the organization and its community members, as well as among community members in an online community. “The biggest challenge is internal resistance in the organization,” said School District B’s communications director, “but it is not our school district, it is the community’s school district.” Districts in this study noted that community members now feel more comfortable asking questions and looking for answers; a change in attitude among community members who believe the organization will respond to solve a problem.

Themes

Through the analysis of districts’ digital platforms and interview responses, key themes presented themselves in the prominent elements of the engagement campaigns. These themes informed the identification of the key strategies mentioned previously and provide additional detail into the development of effective engagement campaigns.

Platform Themes

The researcher extrapolated key themes involving districts’ use of various interactive platforms for community engagement. Ensuring that a participatory media platform is sustainable is a prominent theme in this study. Weekends, evenings and

holidays do not mean interaction via social media stops, thus organizations are working to monitor digital platforms continually. This includes regular postings, timely responses and fact-checking of community members' comments. "It broadens community input despite reduced staff," said School District A of the interactive platform, "so we are able to give timely responses. Otherwise, people get frustrated." Districts also used their platforms to connect with other resources that might be beneficial to community members. "There is a wealth of information out there and we want to connect with other district pages and PTA groups," said the director of communications for School District F. Videos and photos were also major components of the platforms used by each of the participating districts.

Two of the districts involved in the study have launched pilot engagement campaigns using a new platform called Mind-Mixer. This new participatory media tool is designed to enhance and broaden the conversation between an organization and its community members online. Organizations can post documents, record and archive input, ask specific questions and post polls. School District A, for example, hosts a link to the platform on its website. "It is different than a survey tool because it has more community reaction so we can pick up on opinions and get a sense of where people are at in the sense of trends," said the director of communications for School District A. The platform is dedicated to community engagement, letting stakeholders talk amongst themselves, while also asking questions and conversing with the district. "It is designed to enhance and broaden the conversation," said the communications director for School District B, "we can post documents, record and archive input and ask specific questions through polling."

This type of collaborative capability stood out in the discussion and analysis of participatory media platforms

Motivation Themes

Analyzing districts' community engagement efforts provided a better understanding of what motivated the organization's stakeholders to seek out and maintain relationships with the district. A prominent theme here was to drill down from positions into interests in regard to decision-making. "Once you get into interests, you can solve almost any problem – we can all explore our interests and find a solution that will work," said communications director of School District B. This ultimately allows organizations to make the best decisions for the district. Open forums for discussions provided an opportunity for stakeholders to see past their positions to more common-ground interests, often, what is best for students and for education. Acknowledging this as a motivating theme provides districts with insight into opening meaningful dialogue.

Additionally, community members were motivated by issues that were impacting them at the moment; not necessarily the budget, for example, but the program their child was going to lose due to a budget cut. Honing in on specific stakeholder needs and interests offers districts insight into what those community members deem important.

Effective Messaging Themes

In regard to specific messages that resonated with community members, districts consistently used certain topics to effectively engage individuals. As mentioned above, messages that directly impacted stakeholders were impactful throughout engagement campaigns: explaining the implications and decisions in regard to the budget, photos and videos involving students and school, along with school year calendars are specific topics

that fall into that category. “We have to move from the theoretical to the concrete,” said the director of communication in School District A, “determining the next five-year goals for our board, or what kids need for readiness for careers or college, that’s about as theoretical as we can get.” Proactively commenting or informing stakeholders of relevant issues was another theme present in messaging. By recognizing issues that may arise and taking initiative with messages to start conversations around those issues, districts provided accurate information and served as a sounding board for the community.

Ineffective Messaging Themes

One major theme was identified as being ineffective when drafting messages to communicate with stakeholders. Getting too vague with community members led to limited or decreased involvement and community discussion. “Most people don’t see anything on the line,” said School District A’s communications director of the theoretical messages presented to stakeholders. Issues of student success or district vision often were too vague to elicit conversation. If stakeholders do not see anything on the line, so to speak, they opt not to get involved. Additionally, event announcements tended to be one-way conversation topics. While these types of messages may be informative, they were less effective in fostering dialogue as part of an engagement campaign. Also, most districts noticed certain topics specific to their unique demographics and school community that failed to resonate with community members. School District E’s director of communication also supported the notion that there must be some kind of interaction for any kind of message to be effective, stating, “it can’t be more of a push of information, it needs to be a two-way conversation for people to participate.”

Successful Engagement Themes

Interviews and platform analysis provided insight into how districts defined successful community engagement, thus the following themes give a broader understanding of the goals the organizations had when implementing engagement strategies. “The newspaper world and the blogging world and the Twitter world gives people all kinds of tools to voice their criticism, and now they’re using those tools to support us,” said the communications director in School District B, “we have qualitative data from the comments they’ll share and enrollment is going up, students are coming back.” Some districts conducted randomized surveys that showed the level of trust for the school district was rising – this provided a clear indicator of successful engagement. Along with that relationship building came a decrease in negative editorials about the organization submitted to traditional media. Another indicator of successful engagement was present in community members serving as advocates for the district, online and interpersonally, encouraging others to participate in the school environment; this shift from clearing up misinformation to encouraging involvement illustrated a successful engagement campaign. “What conversations are taking place at the grocery store? They’re saying, ‘I love my school,’ if you are building positive relationships with every group,” said the head of communications for School District F.

Measuring the number of non-parent volunteers and observing the conversation going on in the broader community provided districts with feedback that community members were genuinely engaged and supportive of the district. An approved ballot issue indicates community members willing to put their own money on the table to support schools and a majority vote on a ballot issue shows trust; relationships and support are evident as outcomes of community engagement. Thus, another dominant theme

illustrating success in community success was identified with the approval of a funding issue on the ballot within the school district's community. "A successful bond or mill is ultimately the prize, when people feel strong enough to put their money where their mouth is and support the schools," said director of communications in School District D. When community members commit financial resources to the school district, it provides the district with a tangible indication that there is confidence and support for the organization. For most studied districts, engagement campaigns were utilized to build that level of support with the community. "75% of our stakeholders have said they believe our students are receiving an excellent education," said the communications director in School District A," and our taxpayers show it by approving a tax measure that pays an additional 25% per student above what the state is giving."

CHAPTER 5 – ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

What This Research Means

The innovative nature of social media allows for constant development of tools and methods, which make the platforms more accessible and easier to use for individuals. As organizations and users push this evolution of participatory media through user-based modifications to these platforms and their functions, the effects of interactive media communication will continue to necessitate updated research and analysis to effectively understand the impact on engagement of the community (Fischer, 2011). Motivations to participate in the bold new world of online communication are shaped by communal interests and are culturally connected. In order to build meaningful relationships for the purpose of fostering support for a cause or unified purpose, interactions through digital means must be personal, building upon cultural norms and community expectations (Kozinets et al., 2010). Connecting as a community offers empowerment and insight to community members on relevant issues and provides opportunities for sustained engagement if strategies are implemented effectively. It is critical that this engagement process involve dialogue and collaboration with all parties, as challenges and solutions are presented around the topic of better supporting a community's schools (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). By employing the key strategies identified in this study, organizations may develop a community engagement campaign that uses interactive media to effectively build support for an organization's greater purpose.

In addition, it is necessary to address the need schools have for building informed advocates for educational causes. By engaging across various social media platforms, as

well as across online and offline communities, organizations can meet parents or community members where they prefer to connect and become an information source (Simon, 2011). This can lead to more community resources donated to schools, taxpayer buying on funding ballot issues or community-launched initiatives to improve a community's educational quality, as just a few visible examples. The results presented here focus on engagement strategies and are not specific to individual platforms. This allows the research data to be applied broadly, without association to a particular media platform. It is important to note: interactive media provide new tools which organizations can use to communicate with community members, however it is not the tool, but the strategy and implementation that make the engagement campaign effective. Thus applying the five key strategies across any platform(s) that is deemed appropriate for an organization's constituency is the recommendation of this study. Organizations must also recognize that participatory media-friendly policies allow staff members to be empowered to participate and engage parents in the conversations, themselves becoming important ambassadors for an educational support network (Simon, 2011).

Engagement theory represents a new paradigm regarding communication and the positive role interactive media can play in human interaction and evolution (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999). By creating an environment that facilitates two-way conversations and provides easily accessible community discussion, social networks and other interactive media offer a valuable resource as schools work toward developing sustainable community engagement networks. This study contributes to a limited body of current relevant research providing sufficient understanding of how interactive media in particular provide improved strategies in the realm of public education as schools reach

out to community members for support. This case study offers insight into various elements of community engagement through the application of engagement theory, and offers recommendations to organizations looking to employ effective community engagement strategies. This research contributes to the current body of information by offering substantial discussion of interactive media's role in building authentic, effective community engagement around public education; the rapidly evolving nature of interactive media and the changing environment surrounding public education and suggests a need for more dynamic guidelines and extensive understanding of this issue.

Building community engagement between stakeholders and community members also comes with consequences that may be adverse to the goal of school support. If expectations are not clear, community members may feel disenfranchised or deceived. "Public participation events must have clear objectives – will they inform, will they collaborate? The board makes the final decisions in most casts, so you have to be very clear on the front end," said the communications director for School District B. If details such as how feedback will be used, how much influence community member influence has on district decisions, or how regularly the district responds to feedback are not addressed, the engagement strategies can backfire, resulting in disengaged individuals. "The staff members need to be able to give real-time response, or people get frustrated," said the communications direct for School District A.

Additionally, involving community members through interactive communication often means negative experiences and perspectives are broadcast to a wide audience. This may impact an organization's image on a broader scale. "You have to work through problems and conflicts in this format," said the communications director in School

District B. Participatory media also provides a platform for any member of the community to address concerns publicly. As the communications director in School District D explained, a group of citizens formed its own Facebook page in order to rally support for a specific district issue. “They are involved, but not in the right way and we saw this group and reached out to support it with information.” Such negative engagement can fuel communications that divert support from the district and in this case, the district is continuing to work to provide the group with accurate information, as opposed to allowing the digital forum to perpetuate rumors or misperceptions.

Limitations and Further Research

By exploring the use of interactive media to ignite community engagement that fosters supportive relationships for public schools, this study provides specific strategies to educational institutions across the board that may be adapted to meet specific needs of their communities. While addressing the ability of interactive media to engage specific facets of the community in support of public education, this research does not provide a comprehensive understanding of all digital media and its implications for other organizations. This study does not attempt to assess the nature of digital relationships in comparison to interpersonal relationships, which is a significant component of understanding how interactive media impacts organizations’ relationship building and community engagement, an issue that warrants further research. This study looks specifically at the ways schools can effectively leverage social media to connect in a meaningful way with community members. However, engagement theory could be utilized to address interpersonal relationships and how social media might help to create relationships that translate from the online realm into dialogue and impactful actions that

positively affect an organization's goals. Such elements of engagement are not to be gleaned from the research presented here – it is more specifically focused on identifying successful components of communications campaigns utilizing participatory media. As the nature of interactive media continues to evolve, additional study would be relevant to discover how different mediums fit into community engagement strategies and how participatory media continues to impact strategic communication on a broader scale. This research analyzed participatory media use and engagement campaigns based at the organizational level – this involves conversations and dialogue between the school districts and their representatives, and community members. Study of individual educators' use of interactive media to connect with students, parents or other stakeholders would likely produce different results when compiling the feedback and opportunities presented by increased dialogue between teacher and individual. The management of those site-based and one-on-one interactions is not specifically studied here.

The presented research questions address limited components of social media communication, though as has been experienced, the fact that researchers have presented an understanding of one communication tool, typically means another has likely entered to replace it; it is the nature of digital media. Thus the focus of subsequent research should focus on strategies and motivations as opposed to specific mediums, which can be done effectively through the application of engagement theory. Lacking within the current research environment is substantial discussion of interactive media's role in building authentic, effective community engagement around public education; the rapidly evolving nature of interactive media and the changing environment surrounding public

education suggests a need for more dynamic guidelines and extensive understanding of this issue.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questionnaire

- 1.) Why did your organization choose interactive media as a communications tool?
- 2.) What were the goals of the social media campaign?
- 3.) What types of messages were communicated via social media specifically addressing community engagement?
- 4.) What platforms were utilized and why?
- 5.) How would you compare engagement and community support before and after utilizing participatory media for this purpose?
- 6.) What messages or tactics were most effective in eliciting participation from stakeholders? Why do you think those worked?
- 7.) What messages or tactics were least effective in eliciting participation from stakeholders? Why to do you think so?
- 8.) How has the engagement campaign benefited your district?
- 9.) Why are community stakeholders important to your district?
- 10.) Prior to the use of participatory media for the purpose of community engagement, did the district have experience utilizing social media to communicate with stakeholders? What was the outcome?
- 11.) Strategically, how did the district employ participatory media to directly connect with and engage stakeholders?
- 12.) How has participatory media affected the level of support and community

engagement for the district, if at all?

13.) Why is community engagement important?

APPENDIX B

Assessment of Participatory Media Platforms

School District A

	Present?	Purpose	Content Description	Community Participation Present?
Website	X	Landing page for all district information and interactive platforms; a background on the district and a functional resource for community members and families	Sections for students, parents, community, employees, test results, superintendent message, news releases, schools and enrollment information, emergency notices	Yes - Community section on homepage; Parent Engagement network; Financial Transparency section
Facebook	X	Provide behind the scenes information on how the district works, what/why programs are implemented; share news about the community and district; drive traffic to more info on website	District and community event postings; student and staff photos; things happening “now” throughout the district (test of emergency notification system, new website posting, etc.); local food initiative in cafeterias	Moderate and growing – most posts have comments and likes; inviting community to engage online and in-person.
Twitter	X	District-wide announcements; resources for community members	Updates on area wildfire for community members; links to new initiatives or	Limited usage by district

			website postings	
Pinterest	None			
Blog	X	Messages from superintendent or notices to district families	Back to school message, enrollment, budget development – initiatives that impact students	No – able to email blog posts, but no comment section has been opened
Online Video Channel	X			
Other	X Mind Mixer	Topics are posted to seek comment and reaction from the community, input is used to shape district decisions	This is a brand new platform – the first topic asks the community about school calendar development and what aspects are most important; this is done through a survey; questions about best means of communication, favorite thing about the district	Yes – though it is a new platform, participation in discussion topics is increasing; nearly 200 active users in one month

School District B

	Present?	Purpose	Content Description	Community Participation Present?
Website	X	Landing page and resource for all district-related information	News links; photos; links to video channel; district, schools, academic programs, parents, board of education, financial sections with in-depth information related to each	Numerous opportunities for community members to find engagement events, classes and ways to participate or support the district

Facebook	None			
Twitter	X (Superintendent tweets)	Build relationship with district leader; share district and community news	Sharing visits to schools or community events; links to educational-related news items; starting discussions on educational topics; upcoming district events	
Pinterest	None			
Blog	None			
Online Video Channel	X District and superintendent channels	Sharing district information through video and interviews	Interviews with educators, administrators, students; highlighting community and school programs; introducing pertinent educational issues to community	Yes – opportunities to follow the channels, to comment or like. Most videos have dozens of plays
Other	X MindMixer			New platform – still awaiting data

School District C

	Present?	Purpose	Content Description	Community Participation Present?
Website	X	Landing page for all district-related information	School, parent, faculty, news and departmental links; extensive information on district performance and	Provides opportunities and information for face-to-face interactive events

			programming	
Facebook	X	Primarily linking to district webpage for info		
Twitter	X (Superintendent tweets, not district)	District good news; offers a way to get to know district leader	District and staff awards; conversations with others in education; superintendent's school visits	Moderate number of followers, but active discussions with the network of followers on education-related topics
Pinterest	None			
Blog	None			
Online Video Channel	None			
Other	Chalk Talk	a new campaign designed to shed an honest and accurate light on what's happening in Eagle County Schools.	Questions around construction, special programs within schools, boundary information, and any other topic you hear buzzing around town related to the district	Relatively new campaign – still awaiting community feedback and success measures

School District D

	Present?	Purpose	Content Description	Community Participation Present?
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Website	X	Information – landing page for all district information and to all other communications platforms	Links to information specific to parents, students, staff, schools, employment, calendars, social media platforms	Opportunities for community members to obtain information and link to interactive sites
Facebook	X	Sharing district good news and community interest items	Photos of events, links to district/community initiatives and webpages; sharing of student and community accomplishments	Yes – moderate – a few likes and comments on most posts; answering community questions, providing clarifying information
Twitter	X	District and community news alerts; driving followers to FB	Links to Facebook page regarding new posts and photos; alerts about district/community events	Light participation - mostly following, little engagement
Pinterest	none			
Blog	none			
Online Video Channel	X	District events, staff and student interviews on educational programs	Videos including interviews with staff, students and community members – showing kids in action	Moderate views – few comments
OTHER - SMS Texting	Not district-specific (but links to the Mesa County emergency notification texting system)			

School District E

	Present?	Purpose	Content Description	Community Participation Present?
Website	X	Landing page for all district-related information; links to other digital platform	News highlights on current events; community-related information; news-focused with links for parents, schools and community for more content.	Yes – links to surveys on district performance; parent involvement page with information on volunteer opportunities and resources; RSS feed available for news updates
Facebook	x	Sharing district news and board of education information; community invites to events	Photos and videos; links to website news section;	Light engagement – a few likes; few comments; some discussions and questions
Twitter	X	Alerts regarding FB posts and photos; sharing district/school-related current events and news stories	Promotion of student and school accomplishments; links to other sites and articles; community service items	Limited followers; some good conversation within network
Pinterest	None			
Blog	X (Superintendent's Blog)	Building a personal connection with district leadership; informing on relevant	Personal stories and experiences from superintendent; information	No area for comments within the blog; a one-way communication piece

		community and district issues.	on student success; new educational programs	
Online Video Channel	X	Educational programming as a community service	Extensive educational listings – NASA TV, nationally produced curriculum-based programs; locally-produced student/staff highlights	Moderate – opportunities for feedback

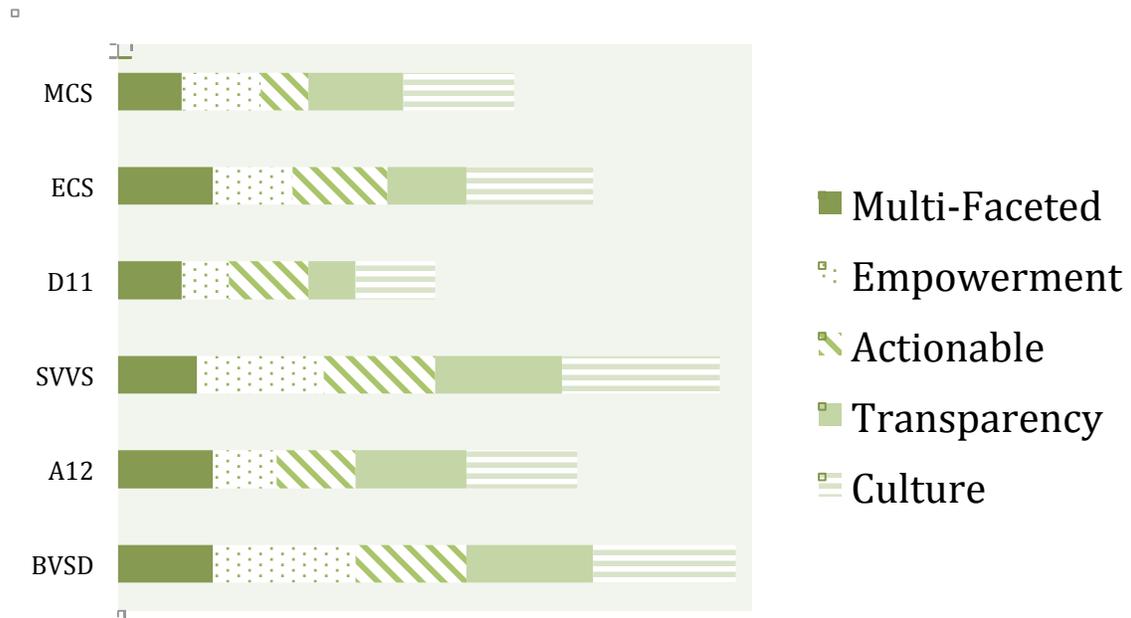
School District F

	Present	Purpose	Content Description	Community Participation Present?
Website	X	Landing page for all district-related information – links to other platforms	Photos, upcoming events, quick links to frequently requested information, parents, employees, visitors and students sections	RSS feed for news updates from the site is available; links provide community and parent participation opportunities
Facebook	X	Community conversation; promotion of district highlights	Student/staff features; event announcements; questions on community opinions on upcoming decisions; photos	Yes – conversations taking place frequently; personal interaction between district reps and community members; asking for community feedback
Twitter	X	Real-time	Brief dialogue	Limited following – but

		updates from district events; community can follow along with progress at meetings, topics discussed	from board meetings, budget discussions, fielding and answering questions from community; links to website and district resources	significant effort to solicit community feedback via Twitter
Pinterest	None			
Blog	None			
Online Video Channel	X	District-produced videos	Student features; school and community events; highlighting community supporters of schools; commercials for individual schools	Limited views or comments, but opportunities to link and share are available
Other – SMS Texting	X	Emergency notifications – subscriber based	Brief, timely information on school closure, emergency or safety situations	Subscribers can receive text messages (or can receive the messages via another preferred platform)

APPENDIX C

Prevalence of Key Strategies*



*Each of these key strategies was found to be prevalent within each of the studied districts' engagement campaigns. This chart provides a visual depiction of how much each district employed each of these key strategies as a percentage of the engagement campaign as a whole. This chart is meant to show how the districts compare to one another regarding these key strategies, but is not meant to provide statistical data on the individual campaign strategies.