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RESEARCH ARTICLE

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PRINCIPALS AS SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETERS IN SELECTED SCHOOLS IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Today's schools all over the globe are on a constant pressure to improve the quality of instructions and services that they provide. Marketing of their programs and activities has become a higher priority for them. To date, the literature on educational marketing has focused on how schools market and promote themselves in the community, how they maintain and enhance their image, and the factors affecting parents and there remains a paucity of research on principals' patterns of involvement in the marketing and image-building of their schools, and on the potential impact of these new managerial activities on principals' careers and well-being. Specifically, this study's objectives were: (1) describe the lived experiences of principals as social media marketers of their schools; (2) identify the essence of the experiences of the principal marketers. This study employed the phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of the principals as digital marketers. The setting of this study was in Hunan, China. The researcher originally selected 7 private upper secondary schools in the province and mainly utilized two research instruments: interview guide and observation guide. It was found that: (1) Principals recognize and commit to high accountability as social media marketers of their schools;(2) Principals devote themselves to highly engage in social media marketing of their schools;(3) Principals experience a lot of difficulties as social media marketers of their schools; (4) Principals provide programs and trainings in capacitating employees who support them in social media marketing of their schools; and (5) Principals develop their creativity and adaptability in social media marketing of their schools. Based on the summarized findings, the following are concluded: (1) the lived experiences of the principals as social media marketers generated five themes: Responsibility, Immersion, Challenge, Entrustment, and Growth; and (2) the experiences of the Chinese school principals as primary school marketers highlighted their holistic journey towards their personal, professional, and leadership development, revealing the factors that propel them to take on the marketing duties, and the conflicts which paved the opportunity for growth. Culled from the conclusion, the researcher made the following recommendations: (1) the school principals may engage themselves in training and workshops that focus on technology and digital marketing; (2) the principals may hire a person who is assigned to digital marketing, so they may focus on supervising and monitoring leads and progress; (3) the roles of the school principals may be reviewed in light of the findings for the possibility of updating and revising their job descriptions; (4) Focus Group Meetings participated by the marketing group may be done on a weekly basis to cater to concerns, and to assess the effectiveness of social media marketing implementation; and (5) a follow-up research may be done to quantify the effect of the performance of marketing roles on the academic leadership of school principals.

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INTRODUCTION

Today's world demands people to acquire an immense amount of knowledge and skill set in order to cope with globalization. In fact, education has been greatly affected by globalization. The term Globalization of Education is the integration and application of similar education systems and knowledge throughout the world across the borders, improving the quality & deployment of education worldwide. Hence, schools all over the globe are on a constant pressure to improve the quality of instructions and services that they provide and how their target "clients" will patronize what they can offer.

Many schools have created a new curriculum to help students cope in this fast changing world. Marketing of their programs and activities has become a higher priority for them (Foskett, 2012; Hanson, 2016). They were discovered to contain a variety of forms. In order to successfully recruit students in the new competitive climate (Foskett, 2012; James & Philips, 2015; Levin, 2021; Oplatka, 2012), they need to incorporate a marketing approach into their plan. However, there has been some criticism of these new functions and emphases. For example, Ball (2014) describes school choice as an "instrument of class reproduction" that legitimizes and strengthens the "relative advantages of the middle and upper classes inside state education" (p. 13).

Working-class families are routinely disadvantaged by strategic choice processes, whereas middle-class groups benefit (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 2015). Furthermore, the drive for educational efficiency that underpins the school choice process appears to be at odds with other educational ideals (such as democracy and equality), pushing schools in different directions (Labaree, 2017). To date, the literature on educational marketing has focused on how schools market and promote themselves in the community (DeZarn, 2018; Foskett, 2012; James & Philips, 2015; Lauder & Hughes, 2019; Oplatka, 2012, 2017; Oplatka, Hemsley-Brown & Foskett, 2012), how they maintain and enhance their image (Grace, 2015; Hanson, 2016), and the factors affecting parents and children and the processes they undergo when choosing their junior high and high school (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2021; Maddaus, 2020). Yet, there remains a paucity of research on principals' patterns of involvement in the marketing and image-building of their schools, and on the potential impact of these new managerial activities on principals' careers and well-being. This study intends to explore the marketing activities of principals in marketing their schools in social media through their lived experiences. Specifically, this study will address the following objectives: describe the lived experiences of principals as social media marketers of their schools and establish the essence from the lived experiences of the school principals as social media marketers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Locale and Participants: The setting of this study was in Hunan, China. The researcher currently works and resides in the said province. The researcher originally selected ten (10) private upper secondary schools in the province where she expected the principal participants to come from. However, throughout the data collection phase, the participating schools were limited to seven (7) due to the withdrawal of participation from three (3) participants. Senior (Upper) Secondary School in China refers to the following level of education: after the completion of junior (lower) middle school, students can choose to enter either general (academic) senior secondary school or vocational senior secondary school. Vocational senior secondary programs last 3 or 4 years. Senior secondary school is known as (gaozhong 高中) and vocational senior secondary school is known as (zhongzhuan 中专) in China.

As for the selection of the participants, the following criteria were used:

- Should be presently employed as school principals in the private upper secondary schools in Hunan, China.
- Should be engaged in social media marketing through the use of the varied social media platforms in China.
- Should be working as principals and should be engaged in marketing for at least 3 years since the researcher assumes that they will be able to account encompassing lived experiences.
- There will be no restrictions when it comes to the age, gender and educational qualifications of the participants as these variables are perceived to have no effect on the outcome of the study.

Research method: This study employed the phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of the principals as social media marketers. Specifically, it was used to investigate the experiences of the principals of utilizing various social media as platforms to promote their schools' brands and identify its essence. Phenomenology is a search for the essence of the lived experiences (Husserl, 1970; Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Collazzi, 1978; Gadamer, 1990; Husserl (1970) explained that it is "the science of the essence of consciousness focused on defining the concept of intentionality and meaning of lived experiences from the first person point of view" (p.6). "Phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2013). It focuses on what all the participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon.

A phenomenological approach is used when studying people's experiences, how they make meaning in their lives, studying relationships between what happened and how people have come to understand these events, exploring how people experience the essence of a particular phenomenon, and examining the commonalities across individuals (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013; Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). According to Creswell (1998), phenomenological research requires entering the participants' field of perception by listening to their accounts of their experiences and observing how they live these experiences—from which they can derive meaning. There are a few things to consider:

- Read descriptions of experiences or statements of feelings;
- Take the most important statements from the expressions;
- Translate the important sentence into their respective meanings;
- Make a theme out of the meanings; and
- Incorporate themes into a story about your experience.

All research participants, according to Heppner (1999), must be informed about the data that will be obtained and used. Emphasize confidentiality and privacy during the interview, but also recognizing personal differences. Researchers must explicitly disclose any characteristics and situations known to the researcher that would affect the outcome when reporting research findings. The participants' identities should be hidden in the data presentation by using a pseudonym.

RESULTS

The seven school principals shared their lived experiences as social media marketers through their explored realities, perceptions, and reflections on past experiences and to extract their essence. They narrated their experiences as social media marketers in Chinese schools, the challenges they face as they engage themselves in social media marketing, the practices and interventions they apply to meet the expectations, the importance of delegation and trust, and the growth the experiences have brought them. The themes reflect their experiences as they respond to the considerable demands for education in China and highlight both the pressure and dilemma of how they can effectively market their school brands, their flexibility and adaptability, and the role their team members play in achieving their institutional goal.

Theme 1 High Sense of Accountability as Social Media Marketers: It reflects the principals' sense of responsibility and accountability in social media marketing. The principals' readiness in taking marketing roles is exemplified as they have embraced the full responsibility of marketing the school upon appointment or after taking on the position. This key quality has been tested among principals even when faced with challenges, making it highly evident that they take accountability and maintain their commitment and will to achieve the goals and objectives. In addition, it was discovered that the principals have a driving force that propels them to take on the responsibility of marketing the school: to keep the school relevant for the demands of the future and to take the opportunity to lead their school as a blessing, which gives them the motivation to go beyond expectations. Aside from managing academic matters of their respective schools, one strong expectation was to take part in matters that concerned promoting and advertising the schools. The sense of responsibility and accountability of the school principals are also evident in their narratives. The principals assume full responsibility for social media marketing and have been hands-on in this process, which is a good quality of a school principal marketer while possessing the self-initiative to promote the school. Moreover, the majority specified the necessity for being on top of everything and being hands-on. This means that they fully supervise and monitor the implementation of social media marketing, including the people assigned to each process. The principals have manifested an awareness of the importance of their duties as school marketers. They are aware of the long-term effect of social media marketing as a new method of increasing enrollment in their school and that creating a

Table

Themes	Meaning	Indicators
High Sense of Accountability as Social Media Marketers	Principals recognize and commit to high accountability as social media marketers of their schools.	Readiness and responsibility to take social media marketing roles
High Engagement in Social Media Marketing of their Schools	Principals devote themselves to highly engage in social media marketing of their schools.	Commitment to achieving goals, establishing connections with people
Difficulties in Social Media Marketing of their Schools	Principals experience a lot of difficulties as social media marketers of their schools.	Difficulties taken as challenges to attain goals and succeed in social marketing
Capacity building of Employees Supporting the Principals in Social Media Marketing	Principals provide programs and trainings in capacitating employees who support them in social media marketing of their schools.	Capacitating employees and building trust
Creativity and Adaptability as Social Media Marketers	Principals develop their creativity and adaptability in social media marketing of their schools.	Personal and professional development, positive expectation, critical thinking of principals as social media marketers

school image and knowing their school's competitive edge is key in getting enrollees. They apply strategic marketing that is centered on the integrated management of products and markets in order to achieve previously established goals (Jain 2020). This awareness seems to be an important tool that gives them the motivation to keep themselves committed to their responsibilities. They lead private schools where competition is rampant in their community (Huang, 2018). Since private schools in China and their employees are not fully subsidized by the government, the need to strive in order to continue operating is paramount. It is since marketing programs and activities have become a higher priority for schools, principals need to partake in their marketing initiatives (Foskett, 2002 & Hanson, 1996).

Theme 2 High Engagement in Social Media Marketing of their Schools: It shows the principals' full engagement in social media marketing. Marketing the school lies in the effective leadership of the principals while involving the other key people in the organization (Scott & Liu, 2014). The principals' engagement and strong commitment to achieving goals, their commitment to keeping abreast with the new trends in marketing, and their commitment to establishing connections with their potential clients are highly evident. The school principals' commitment to achieving goals in marketing is the fundamental factor to raise the number of enrollees in their schools. They are committed to establishing a school brand by marketing the schools, going out of their comfort zone to meet expectations, going the extra mile in fulfilling their duty, devising new means to market the school, delivering what is promised to parents, taking the marketing duty as a way to give back to love his job, strengthening awareness of the importance of their job, and taking the initiative or going the extra mile to contribute to a company through marketing. All these are key indicators of the extra-miler. They believe that they cannot stay taking on the typical roles to respond to the new demands of the situation in education, especially in this era of the pandemic. They show parents what kind of brand they have as an institution through which they are able to deliver what is promised to parents. Doing what has been promised may convince the parents to reenroll their children in the next school years. Moreover, some principals view the marketing duty as a way to give back love to their job. Furthermore, the outbreak of the pandemic provided significant learning to school principals to become resilient and strategic in terms of marketing their brands to their target clients (Wu, 2020). They take advantage of the limitations of people's mobility and physical and social interactions. Since educational institutions have fully embraced online educational platforms to provide quality education, even without going to physical classrooms, the principals have found this as a strong and effective means in the marketing of the schools (Wu, 2020). The principals keep abreast with trends in terms of social media marketing. The principals are flexible enough to take advantage of the popularity and convenience of social media in China (Chou, 2020). They follow the trend in marketing which is the use of social media platforms as channels to reach a wider audience by which they can maintain visibility. They noted the convenience of social media in marketing their schools.

Moreover, being familiar with the facets of social media marketing is key to the effective implementation of this strategy. They also try to examine the methods of competitors as a step in effective marketing. They are aware of the need to understand how to convince students from China to enroll in their schools. Promoting the schools entail providing important information about the school – facilities, curriculum, awards and recognitions, technology integration, and teaching force (Gu & Shin, 2020). In addition, it is highly evident that principals use various social media platforms to promote their schools to prospective schools (Yin, 2019). It may also be drawn from the narratives that they choose a social media platform that has a mobile-friendly version. They also take advantage of the fact that the majority of online users browse on their smartphones, and all social media platforms in China are for mobile use. Furthermore, because of the strong position they hold within the market, principals of schools are still able to withstand market pressures while marketing initiatives are superfluous (Grace, 2015). One of the key steps in effective social media marketing as stated by the principals is by establishing connections with people, especially the potential students and their parents. They have devised a new and effective way to utilize and maximize social media in establishing connections with their existing and potential clients such as students and parents. Through this, Chinese parents and their children can enrich their knowledge of the schools whenever they see relevant information on websites or social media platforms (Haw, 2016). Hence, it is typical of a principal to join a community of netizens in order to promote their school to potential students. Chinese school principals are committed to ensuring that they have a stable, reliable, and consistent marketing strategy that entices students to enroll (Qi, 2018). Moreover, schools may be concerned about acquiring students, but it should also be noted that the school's life relies heavily on effective marketing strategy to keep it floating (Wen, 2020). Thus, school principals should continue to accomplish their marketing duties as they know how big the responsibilities are in keeping the school operational, which will also benefit the employees in the long run.

Theme 3 Difficulties in Social Media Marketing of their Schools: It reveals that the principals' difficult experiences in social media marketing. The school principals as social media marketers are not only restricted to the actual act of selling and promoting a brand to target clients. They are also expected to monitor and manage the marketing progress of their institutions' social media pages (Lace, 2018). They have different functions in their schools which provide a prelude to more challenges that principals encounter as they engage themselves in marketing their schools on social media platforms. Hardship in meeting expectations is a constant problem of school principals in social media marketing in China. Many schools, especially their principals are still left with the pressure and dilemma of how they can effectively market their brands to their client targets. Thus, principals must play in the whole marketing process, and undeniably, principals are compelled to hold a strong sense of marketing ideology and practice for their schools so they can employ effective marketing research, strategies, or plans since they decided to

take on the role (Bell, 2019). The challenges are described as the trials or encounters, including internal challenges, referring to inherently personal, emanating from psycho-emotional concerns or experiences, and other external challenges. The administrative role of principals is perplexing in itself. Aside from making sure that they fulfill their administrative tasks as prescribed by their job description, they are also seen to fulfill other tasks that are equally challenging. The principals perceive their role as social media marketers as secondary to their administrative and managerial roles, but they may find it difficult to effectively divide their time among their priorities Bunnell (2015). However, through setting priorities, they are able to make better and cost-efficient decisions which is the key to the efficient implementation of strategic marketing plans without compromising their administrative tasks. It was revealed that school marketers are still short on time and this lack serves as the largest barrier for school marketers to achieve their predetermined goals. In addition, principals' time with their families gets compromised. Due to not having enough time, they need to juggle and, unfortunately, compromise the quality time that should be spent with their family in order to satisfy the need of being a social media marketer. Furthermore, negative feedback from people disheartens them since social media marketers usually perceive the vitality of customers' perceptions on how they assess the quality of their own brands (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Hamilton, *et al.*, 2016; & Zhu *et al.*, 2016).

Theme 4 Capacity building of Employees Supporting the Principals in Social Media Marketing: It depicts the principals' relationship with subordinates in social media marketing. Marketing a school is the task of everyone from the principals to the teachers, to the non-teaching personnel (Wen, 2020). Involving all the stakeholders ensures a more holistic approach to school marketing (Foskett, 2012). People Empowerment and Building Trust are found to be equally important and beneficial to the principals as marketers, the staff as members of the team, and in the long run, the whole school.

Capacitating employees plays a vital role in the effective implementation of social media marketing. Principals set a vision both for the employees and the institution and provide opportunities to retain their teachers which is a good quality of a leader in general. In addition, principals establish and fulfill the organizational goal and duty through the delegation of responsibilities. Not only does it promote inclusivity, but it also gives the staff a sense of belongingness which makes them feel valued and motivated to perform their job well and even better. Moreover, awareness of the importance of keeping all the students informed while he knows his own personal difficulties and balancing his time between administrative work and marketing roles. Furthermore, showing kindness to the people and believing that the people are key in achieving institutional goals. Building trust includes winning the trust of the people or clients and drawing inspiration from them. Principals are capable of accomplishing extraordinary things in the face of challenges, they possess limitations and weaknesses. This is enough reason why they need a strong support system that will complement their weaknesses (Oplatka, 2020A). Through delegation and time management plans, principals can become better administrators and marketers at the same time.

Theme 5 Creativity and Adaptability as Social Media Marketers: It reveals that principals' creativity and adaptability (personal and professional) in social media marketing. It highlights the ability of the school heads to grow both professionally and personally. Principals' growth is evident in their own personal development, their commitment to strengthen their skills, their positive expectations and disposition about their duties, and developed critical thinking skills. The principals' personal development is one of the areas in which the principals improved. Physical appearance while dealing with potential clients matters in creating an impression. In addition, in social media marketing, the principals emphasized the significance of strengthening their skills which takes awareness of their skills and the skills necessary in a marketing job. Setting positive expectations and having a positive disposition amidst the hardship of social marketing are evidence of growth. They set a vision for the employees and the

institution and widen their perspectives on their job. Moreover, the principals feel some sense of accomplishment despite the hardship. They have self-fulfillment in their job. The Critical thinking skills of the principals have developed. A marketing plan is widely regarded as the most important aspect of the marketing process. The creation of a marketing plan entails the formulation of marketing goals and objectives and the positioning of the organization. In marketing a school, promoting the school features, services, and quality education to target clients is a rigid job for principals (Kotler & Armstrong, 2019). The principals have shown development in challenging the process of social media marketing to make it more effective. The principals may have encountered difficulties, but they have gained benefits from this process, and that is the opportunity to grow.

The Essence of principals' lived experiences as social media marketers: The essence of this phenomenon where principals live and experience being social media marketers entails high sense of accountability, thus they need to highly engage themselves in social media marketing of their schools where they will experience a lot of difficulties but they have taken as challenges to attain their goals. They have to be creative and adaptable in social media marketing. They provide capacity building to their employees supporting them in social media marketing. Thus, all these lead to the success of social marketing of their schools.

DISCUSSION

The essence of this phenomenon where principals live and experience being social media marketers entails high sense of accountability, thus they need to highly engage themselves in social media marketing of their schools where they will experience a lot of difficulties but they have taken as challenges to attain their goals. They have to be creative and adaptable in social media marketing. They provide capacity building to their employees supporting them in social media marketing. Thus, all these lead to the success of social marketing of their schools. The following are the recommendations based on the results of the study: The school principals may engage themselves in training and workshops that focus on technology and digital marketing. The principals may hire a person who is assigned to digital marketing, so they may focus on supervising and monitoring leads and progress. The roles of the school principals may be reviewed in light of the findings for the possibility of updating and revising their job descriptions. Focus Group Meetings participated by the marketing group may be done on a weekly basis to cater to concerns, and to assess the effectiveness of social media marketing implementation. A follow-up research may be done to quantify the effect of the performance of marketing roles on the academic leadership of school principals.

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