

Building a Positive School Culture: A Case Study of a Chinese Private School in Cebu City, Philippines

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to explore the school culture of a Chinese private school in Cebu City

Method: This case study approach involved individual interviews with ten (10) participants who were two supervisors, two teachers, two alumni, two parents, and two senior high school students. Also, there were two sets of focus group discussions (FGD), one set with two teachers and one staff, and another set with four Junior High School students. The focus group discussions were interviewed to serve as data triangulation. There were a total of ten (10) participants and seven (7) key informants in this qualitative research.

Findings: The analysis of transcripts revealed seven (7) major themes that best described the experiences of the participants in this study. These are student-centered learning; teacher's professional practices; values inculcation; parental involvement; leadership roles; technological influences; and cultural diversity.

Significance: This study aimed to offer valuable insights for researchers and educators in promoting a positive school culture where healthy values, effective teaching, and conducive learning environments in this institution are highly fostered.

Conclusion: Building a positive school culture is essential in creating a safe and healthy school environment that leads to student success and teacher's work satisfaction. This can be achieved with the combined efforts among the stakeholders that embraces values inculcation, teachers' professionalism, leadership roles, and cultural diversity to have a conducive learning environment.

Keywords: School culture, Chinese private school Case study.

1. Introduction

School culture can be stated as what, where, when, how, and why a school does things over a period. It is a set of shared common vision, mission, goals, values, and beliefs among the school stakeholders (Karadag & Oztekin-Bayir, 2018). It is just like any sports game where each player has his different roles and responsibilities. Likewise, school culture is composed of different people with different roles that will help build a strong educational environment that may greatly influence the school community in their behaviors, attitudes, mental health, and student performances (Olsen et al., 2018). Historically, school culture is crucial in the overall educational success that goes beyond the physical structures and curriculum (Macmillan, 2014). To date, there have been limited literature reviews specifically addressing Chinese private schools in the Philippines. While the broader context of school culture

has been explored in various educational settings, there is a notable gap in the understanding of the unique cultural dynamics within Chinese private schools situated in a Filipino context (Lim, 2022). In this study, qualitative research approach through semi-structured interviews will be utilized to explore the different dynamics of school culture within a Chinese private school located in Cebu City.

According to Hollins (1996 as cited in Prasoon & Vasumathi, 2018), strong school ethics help in shaping the school community where it develops their whole being not just cognitively but also ethically. Freiberg (1998 as cited in Alvarez, 2019) stated that school culture is just like the air we breathe that is unnoticeable but can be detected. Therefore, school culture may affect their community greatly, either positively or negatively in terms of students' learning,

behavior, and interaction with others (Olsen et al., 2018).

Lim (2022) revealed that in any organization, people will behave based on their shared goals, beliefs, and values. In this regard, educational leaders play a crucial role in developing a positive school culture as they utilize their shared leadership style in empowering team members to have a sense of ownership in the workplace for the success and growth of their team and for the school improvement (Carpenter, 2015). Fonte & Ancho (2021) focused their study on faculty development that affects school culture.

To date, research studies about school culture in the context of local Chinese private schools with their distinct cultural values and practices call for more in-depth exploration. Hence, there is a pressing need for research that focuses specifically on Chinese private schools to provide a comprehensive understanding of the prevailing school cultures and how they impact the educational experiences of students and the dynamics within these schools.

This study aimed to offer valuable insights for researchers and educators in promoting a positive school culture where healthy values, effective teaching, and conducive learning environments in this institution. This study utilized a case study approach to explore the school culture of a Chinese private school in Cebu City. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the common school practices in terms of teacher's instruction and feedback? Student norms and values? School-Parent involvement? Supervisory functions of school leaders? (2) How do they exhibit such practices and model such values (teachers, students, parents, and supervisors)? (3) What are the challenges faced by the school in developing positive school culture?

2. Research Methodology

As pointed out by Tracy (2019 as cited in Sadeghi Moghadam et al., 2021), a case study approach is very useful in doing an in-depth investigation or exploration of a natural phenomenon which can be a person, program, event, or organization wherein a limited number of participants as the subjects or key informants must be involved.

Furthermore, the researchers in this study utilized a case study approach to explore the school culture of a Chinese private school in Cebu City because little research has been made especially among the Chinese private schools in the Philippines. In this case study,

data were gathered and written in narrative form following the 6 steps by Braun and Clarke where familiarizing with the data must be the first step followed by initial coding, searching themes, defining themes, and lastly, writing the report (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

3. Research Environment

This study was conducted in a Chinese private school in the island of Visayas, specifically in Cebu City. This school was selected based on the following selection criteria: school existence for more than 50 years; majority of the enrolled students come from Chinese middle-class to affluent families; an accredited school by the Association of Christian Schools, Colleges, and Universities Accrediting Council; medium to large scale population size; and a good location and proximity to the city.

4. Research Participants

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Interviews were conducted to the selected participants due to their characteristics or uniqueness that helped in giving thorough information and investigation in this study. This study involved individual interviews with ten (10) participants who were two supervisors, two teachers, two alumni, two parents, and two senior high school students. Also, there were two sets of focus group discussions (FGD), one set with two teachers and one staff, and another set with four Junior High School students. The focus group discussions were interviewed to serve as data triangulation. There were a total of ten (10) participants and seven (7) key informants in this qualitative research.

5. Research Instrument

The researchers were the main instruments of this study because they facilitated and supervised all the procedures that took place during the stages of data gathering and data collection of this study. Also, interview guide questions were used to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews for both individuals and focus group discussions.

6. Data Gathering and Ethical Considerations

Prior to initiating data collection, formal permission was obtained from the school head to ensure the willingness to participate in the research. Written consent was sought from selected teachers, staff, supervisors, alumni, parents, and high school students

who affirmed their voluntary participation in the study. For interviews involving students, permission was secured from the school administration, and parental consent was also obtained.

When permission was secured from the school head, the researchers set meeting schedules with the participants for a one-on-one interview and FGD. The interviews took 30-40 minutes for each interview, which became very helpful in gathering more in-depth information from the 10 participants and the two sets of FGD.

Interview transcripts were saved in the password-protected folder. Only the researchers could access the files. This is to ensure privacy of the participants and confidentiality of the information shared.

7. Data Analysis

The researchers transcribed all the interviews in verbatim in preparation for the data analysis. To understand the data, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data to generate initial codes, subthemes, formulation of themes and lastly, written narrative report.

They conducted the analysis of the data and covered all necessary ethical considerations to make the study rigor and trustworthy. They had reached data saturation where there were no more other insights that can be drawn from the data.

8. Results and Discussions

The analysis of transcripts revealed seven (7) major themes that best described the experiences of the participants in this study. These are student-centered learning; teacher's professional practices; values inculcation; parental involvement; open communication; leadership roles; technological influences; and cultural diversity .

Theme 1. Student-Centered Learning

A student-centered classroom is where the students are more active and hands-on with the learning processes and the teachers serve as a guide rather than a lecturer (Emaliana, 2017). As pointed out by Serin (2018), a student-centered approach can give students more chances to learn by themselves and are given more involvement in the classroom.

In this study, the participants together with the key informants shared similar thoughts on students' engagement inside the classroom. Teachers should talk less while letting the students be more engaged. These were their statements:

"Teaching has to focus more on student's participation and guided only by teachers." - (P1)

"...here in school, we aim not to be teacher-centered; we aim to be student-centered." - (K13)

It is common for teachers to let students use HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) to make them more cognitively advanced. As what key informant (K12) stated:

"It's also a common practice in giving instruction to use HOTS questions." - (K12)

Yet despite this, the students may still be overwhelmed by their various tasks and exams and as what key informant (K12) stated that if ever half of the students fail on an exam, the need to reteach and retake the test would be in place. Below was her statement:

"If half of the students failed, you need to reteach and retest." - (K12)

On the contrary, there were other things shared by the participants regarding student-teacher interaction in class. Some teachers just discussed their lessons with little interaction only while others have lengthy discussions that make it boring and ineffective. For these reasons, students focus on external resources provided by the teacher rather than listening in class. Below were their testimonies:

"When he discusses something, it's just a brief explanation and then done. He doesn't really interact with students." - (P10)

"I can't stay awake because it's so long, it's so hard to sink into my head." - (P10)

"When we listen to their discussion, it's just in the PowerPoint, so we don't really listen, that's why it's self-learning." - (P9)

Therefore, the roles and responsibilities of teachers are immensely important in building student achievers. They must create ways to ensure student motivation so that learning takes place. The students love to have more participation through active interaction instead of just giving lengthy lectures that sometimes are irrelevant to the students' lives.

Theme 2. Teacher's Professional Practices

The teachers are considered to be one of the most important aspects because of their direct contact with the learners. Their classroom management, innovative teaching strategies, monitoring, and giving feedbacks are building blocks of a positive school culture (Fitriati et al., 2020). They have a strong influence on their students in class. Thus, it's important that the teachers' attitudes reflect good values (Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Regarding the varied monitoring and feedback approaches, many participants and key informants in this study commented on the need to monitor students regardless of the settings to help and improve students who lack skills in certain areas. Below were their statements:

"We get to hear a lot of feedback from students, co-teachers, parents, so we know if our teacher is doing his or her job." - (P2)

"We monitor the learning progress of students, and we also give timely feedback through assessments." - (P3)

"The common practice is to let the student get used to routines in class." - (P4)

"Aside from the book, I do have games and different activities for them to enjoy my class." - (K13)

Consequently, there were some teachers who showed frustration when they were asked to provide the students with more details regarding the instructions while some provided detailed instructions to the whole class. This shows that the personal characteristics of the teachers can affect the way they show and give feedback to the students. This was the statement given by one of the key informants (K13):

"...some get frustrated when you ask for more details regarding the instructions, but others really provide full details even to others who didn't ask." - (K13)

Through feedback, teachers were flexible to take proactive steps to resolve some concerns by implementing effective solutions. This was commented by P8:

"When the students have a complaint or something that they are not in favor of, they would tell the teachers and the teachers would adjust..." - (P8)

Likewise, giving constructive feedback and conducting one-on-one meetings with students to ensure their learning progress. These were the given statements by K11:

"I give feedback through writing down my comments and correcting their work..." - (K11)

"There are times I really call the student for one-on-one, because he or she might have a special need..." - (K11)

Equally important, teacher's attitudes must reflect good values (Zee & Koomen, 2016). According to some key informants, teachers who take time to understand their students, and get in touch with their personal lives, have been received positively. These were their testimonies:

"The way they treat us shows that they possess a good behavior, and they give good advice." - (K11)

"Most of the time, our teachers try to treat us fairly and try to understand us with our personal lives." - (K12)

In brief, teachers' professional practices are reflected in their life inside and outside the classroom that are evidently seen by the students. In this way, it creates ripple effects on their students directly and indirectly because of their authentic modeling of teacher's professionalism.

Theme 3. Values Inculcation

In any school, there is always a set of norms that inform students on how they should behave towards everyone and towards their surroundings. This helps in promoting student academic achievement, holistic development, and effective risk prevention (Berkowitz et al., 2017).

In this research, the participants mentioned a vast information regarding social, moral, academic, and spiritual values. These values helped the students develop them holistically. Showing respect, concern for others, support, and cooperation were some practices mentioned by the participants. These were their comments:

"I can say our batch (Grade 11) is respectful to teachers." - (P9)

"Students and teachers respect one another." - (P10)

"Simple greetings inside the school campus became a habit without them knowing it and reflected even in their respective homes." - (P1)

"Students are respectful and they also show their concern toward their schoolmates." - (P4)

Moreover, students have exemplified their good qualities like being supportive, cooperative, friendliness and helpfulness. Below were their vignettes:

"The students you meet, they're very helpful." - (P5)

"They're not really sociable, but they tend to interact with other people, and they're friendly." - (K11)

Having a respectful learning environment encourages students to express their thoughts and engage in meaningful relationships with their peers and teachers (Patrick et al., 2007, as cited in Wentzel, 2022). These observations made by the participants prove the existence of good social values among students on campus and off campus. Ultimately, these social values will be able to contribute not just to the campus, but also spread its influence beyond the school premises.

On the contrary, it was noted that many younger students nowadays display disrespect towards others that possibly caused by the pandemic that hindered the younger students' social development. This has brought negative impact on their behavior that they missed the important lessons of character development:

"They were disrespectful; their character development is stagnant." - (P9)

Every school is not perfect. The feedback drawn from P9 shows that school leadership has a favorable impact on students' behavior management. The rules they create must be put into place in a way that these good values seep into the school culture (Nooruddin, et al., 2014). Moreover, schools play a critical role in shaping the students both academically and morally to become catalyst of change in the society where they must be given different avenues to learn moral values (Kaur, 2015).

In this study, the participants shared their experiences that their school upholds moral values that can be seen in their practices. Their school handbook provides information that ideally guides students on proper behavior on the campus. This allows students to stay in touch and prevents them from behaving cluelessly. Cooperation with guidance staff is evidently seen among the students who show concern for their fellow classmates. Cooperation from homeroom advisers was evident through constant reminder about their good manners and right conduct such as proper behavior towards self and others and proper dress code. These were their vignettes:

"Cooperate with the school guidance counselors if something not normal in terms of behavior is seen by some students which could affect other students." - (P1)

"Student handbook will guide the students on how to behave inside the campus." - (P7)

In addition, the participants mentioned that putting high regard on academics has motivated them to maintain a good academic performance. Furthermore, it pointed out that the school also fosters extracurricular activities which influences student performance positively.

"Students are very involved with their academics." - (P6)

"My classmates are academically inclined; even though they're into extracurriculars, they still prioritize their academics." - (P9)

However, other participants clarified that this does not result in unhealthy competition among the students. P9 stated that:

"In our class, there are a lot of people shining. There are a lot of achievers. So, it's like a healthy competition..." - (P9)

Undoubtedly, this study revealed that the school gives strong emphasis on academic values though not restrictive towards extracurricular activities. However, teachers do not just focus on academic excellence but also on the character-building of these young people. The participants shared their positive sentiments regarding the spiritual values of this school. They all agreed that the school is doing a good job in upholding Christian values and imparting them to the students. Below were their statements:

"The students are always encouraged to display Christ-like character at all times." - (P3)

"These are Chapel hour and daily morning devotions." - (P3)

These values were instilled in the students while they were still young, and teachers play a significant part in setting an example. However, the school tries its best to lead these students to the right direction, it is still up to the students to decide whether they will embrace the Christian values or not. These were some of their excerpts:

"It's up to them if they embrace it or not." - (P2)

"I think teachers have taught the Christian values but you can't force it." - (P5)

Interestingly, even if students who have already left the school still have that Christian foundation in them. They always know that God is real and can solve their problems whenever they face trials. P5 assured them that the school is always there ready to lead them back to the faith whenever they need to rekindle their faith and find forgiveness. Below were the statements of P5:

"There's this foundation that they can always come back to God instead of wallowing." - (P5)

"Whenever you need to come back to your faith, to find forgiveness, and to find God, the school is always there." - (P5)

In brief, nurturing and strengthening the spiritual foundation of students in school is very effective in building the holistic development of the students (Chapman & Miller, 2023, as cited in Barkin et al., 2015). As can be seen, spirituality must be included to produce well-rounded, morally upright individuals.

To sum it up, social, moral, academic, and spiritual values are important aspects that prepare the learners

to become morally upright, responsible, and productive individuals who can become agents of change in society.

Theme 4. Parental Involvement

Strong school-parent partnership creates long-term benefits in supporting student success that allows them to work together through an exchange of conversations to understand, resolve, and improve some issues (Patton, 2019). Having constant communication among the parents and teachers can greatly affect the students' lives and especially the schools' reputation. To achieve this, there must be constant updates about school and student progress from teachers (Deslandes et al., 2016).

In this section, it was revealed in this study that supportive parents and open communication were very evident in their school. Below were some vignettes revealed by the participants:

"Our parents are really involved in our academics even in our extracurriculars, they're really supportive." - (P9)

"There are activities. They come and join to show support." - (P2)

In addition to this, it was also revealed in this study that parents do not just attend only special events but also attend parent-teacher conferences to discuss and improve their child's behavior. These conferences are very important for both parties to build trust and a healthy relationship. Below were the statements given by the participants:

"There is an open communication between the teachers and the parents for the good of the students." - (P1)

"We call for a conference and then they come, they respond positively... the parents are conveying a strong message that they support us." - (P2)

However, parenting style comes in different ways that may affect the children's self-esteem, physical, and socio-emotional aspect. The way parents interact and discipline their children will leave a lasting positive or negative impact for the rest of their lives (Pinquart, 2016). Many studies revealed that self-esteem and anxiety are highly associated with parenting styles (Schubert & Bowker, 2017 as cited in Yaffe, 2020).

In this study, extreme parenting styles such as minimal involvement, permissive parents, and parental obstructive meddling were revealed by the participants that these were the challenges that their school has been facing. Below were their statements:

"Parents only get involved when their kids are in trouble." - (P5)

"They try to control their children so much and it's very toxic, so there are two spectrums, sometimes the parent can be too controlling or too distant." - (P5)

In addition, the siding of parents with their children, even when at fault, reflects the concept of permissiveness in parenting (Liu & Lu, 2017). As P5 described:

"Parents always take their side even when the teacher is right, and the student is wrong." - (P5)

In other words, the findings highlight the complex dynamics of parental involvement in this school. This emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and collaborative approach to enhance school culture. Addressing these issues may contribute to a more supportive educational environment. It's important that parents and schools stay in constant communication regarding academic difficulties and student behavior. This promotes a positive working relationship and lowers the possibility of miscommunication.

Theme 5. Leadership Roles

The roles and responsibilities of school leaders are immensely important in meeting the needs of different stakeholders that promote quality education (Villamor et al., 2022). To be effective school leaders, they must have the driving force to set the direction and lead the people to the right place at the right time (Kachchhap & Horo, 2021) and master the craft of some leadership practices to achieve organizational goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). According to Hanford & Leithwood (2013), leadership competence and skills can become evident when the teachers show respect and trust towards them.

In this study, most of the participants together with the key informants have revealed at least four things about school leadership. These were the following: supportive leaders; coaching, monitoring & feedbacking; continuous professional development; and school leaders' attitudes.

Based on the findings, supportive leaders were evident as they work harmoniously together as a school. Also, their presence in school activities were also appreciated by their teachers and supervisors. Lastly, the openness and approachability of these school leaders were felt by their teachers and staff.

"We are one family here and our goal is to work in harmony with anyone." - (P2)

"The principal and the department heads, they're very open and approachable." - (P5)

Furthermore, the role of instructional leadership is essential in giving quality education through intentional coaching towards teachers that makes an effective teaching learning process (Aguilar, 2013). The findings revealed that the participants commented that supervisors monitor the teachers' delivery of instruction through classroom observation and post-observation conferences as part of giving feedback. In this way, it would help the teachers to reflect and improve their teaching skills and strategies. These were their vignettes:

"Teachers are well-monitored in terms of our delivery of instruction, and we're given timely reminders and feedback by our supervisors." - (P3)

"The supervisors roam around and visit each classroom to supervise the teachers." - (P4)

Moreover, as part of coaching the teachers, they have annual in-service training for their continuous professional growth and development. These were their testimonies:

"I'm very blessed to be part of this institution because the school leaders have always desired my growth, professionally." - (P3)

"Before the start of the school year, teachers undergo training." - (K13)

However, according to some participants (P6 & P8), due to the immense responsibilities of their department head at that time seemed to be too busy or too detached that leadership presence was not even felt by the students and this was seen as negative because the students and parents don't know the exact performance of their department head in the area of monitoring the teachers. These were their statements:

"So, during my time, I don't think I really felt the coordinators because the teachers were quite dispersed.... in terms of academics itself, it was quite diverse because each teacher had their own plan for each class and the coordinator had too much of a load to think of each grade level." - (P6)

"Maybe at times, there are negative comments from other parents...at times, we also do not know what's going on inside." - (P8)

In other words, this study shows that instructional leadership is critical in ensuring quality education. This shouldn't be neglected amid the busyness in doing other functions. They play a crucial role in fostering a positive work environment, allowing teachers to feel heard, and positively impacting their well-being (Cann

et al., 2021). Their attitudes contribute to a more positive school environment (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). Below were the statements given by the participants as they described the Christ-like characteristics of these leaders that are evident in their lives.:

"The school leaders have set a godly example, and we have always exemplified Christ-like character." - (P3)

"They are very careful with what they say and how they react to certain things, so it's very evident." - (P5)

"They treat people very well." - (K13)

"For the supervisor, there is servanthood... you must be a servant and coach, taking care of what they need." - (K12)

In sum, regardless of different school leadership styles and personalities, there is one common denominator among them, and that is to lead and provide quality education with best school practices. Their Christ-like leadership set great example to their teachers and staff. It boosts the esteem of their team that inspires them to exhibit such positive attitudes also.

Theme 6. Technological Influences

The rise of technology in the past decades has greatly affected people's lives, specifically with its negative impact among young learners (Greenfield, 2015). The use of technology can either connect or isolate people. As Clement & Miles (2018 as cited in Hendry, 2019) pointed out in their research, students who used technology to get rid of their problems like sadness, loneliness or boredom decreases their chances of developing emotional strength such as resilience, grit, independence, etc.

In this study, it was commented by the participants (P3 & P4) that technology has drawn the learners away from family and school. They also commented that students' behaviors have changed that led them to a hard time to open-up about their emotions or any problems that they are encountering. As pointed out by P3, these are the challenges faced by the school that the students were influenced a lot because of too engaged in YouTube, television, and all the media. These were shared by P3 and P4:

"We want the students also to open up..." - (P3)

"Every year the students' behavior are changing probably because of time and influence of technology..." - (P4)

In sum, it must also be the combined efforts of school and parents in helping their children to be responsible users of technology. Parents must monitor and limit the screen time of their children. Teachers must also find

ways to keep the students engaged in class. Likewise, there must be intentional guidance period of teaching students how to become digital responsible citizens.

Theme 7. Cultural Diversity

The wide variety of cultural differences in school shapes the different beliefs and personalities of each student. According to Han et al. (2017), cultural diversity is vital and beneficial as it teaches every individual how to better socialize with people from all over the world that leads to harmonious relationships.

In this research, it was revealed that there are clashing personalities due to diverse cultures that may affect the classroom atmosphere. It has been pointed out by one of the participants that the presence of cultural diversity in this school is an avenue to help students develop their personality development in preparation for their future career to be globally responsible and caring citizens in the society. These were their statements:

"We are a big family, and we are comprised of individuals, with different personalities and different values system." - (P3)

"Even if this is a Christian school, our students have different backgrounds, different values, and beliefs." - (P2)

"It feels normal to have small arguments, not big arguments." - (K1& K12)

"You will be faced with the reality of the world..." - (K13)

Despite these obstacles, this private Christian school actively promotes equality and positive student interaction by embracing variety. The school is actively promoting diversity as evidenced by its dedication to reduce racial and ethnic gaps. By upholding Christian principles, the school creates a foundation for a happy and peaceful school culture by striking a balance between religious identity and the promotion of a diverse and courteous community.

9. Conclusion

Building a positive school culture is essential in creating a safe and healthy school environment that leads to student success and teacher's work satisfaction. This can be achieved with the combined efforts among the stakeholders that embraces values inculcation, teachers' professionalism, leadership roles, and cultural diversity to have a conducive learning environment.

Acknowledgment

We would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to the **Audacious Trailblazers** (Grade 12 students) of

Academic Year 2023-2024 in giving their best for this group research. We are grateful to this batch for being the trailblazers in this institution with the aim to publish this article in a scholarly manner.

These are their names:

Kieth Abay-Abay, Altair Boquia, Lyle Castro, Daniel Cañete, Joshua Changco, Aljun Dy Hong, Euan Edralin, Jerry Gidayawan, Mark Honoridez, Tom Ledesma, Renzo Legaspi, Jayson Li, Shaun Lu, Gaston Mercado, Kimjie Miao, John Louis Montecillo, Aaron Ong, Jershom Ong, Yanni Sy, Jonathan Tio, Kurt Tiu, Ray Yap, Keren Baloran, Sofia Donan, Mikeum Kim, Marianne Luy Tan, Kai Ong, Tashana Ong, Shane Ramos, Kaka Xu. We would also like to express our appreciation to the Journal of Harbin Engineering University (JHEU) for considering our work and providing the opportunity to publish our findings.

We would like to thank all the participants and key informants in this study for willingly to take part in the interviews and share their experiences. Without them, this study wouldn't be possibly made in helping us to explore the topic and draw meaningful conclusions.

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