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Huawei knowledge transfer in Africa: Corporate communication and users' responses on social networks

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Abstract

This article focuses on the launch by the Chinese company Huawei of ICT academies in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), and Kenya especially. Existing literature shows contrasting findings concerning the impact of such formation and recruitment centres. Through high-level thematic and sentiment analyses, this article examines various Huawei accounts on social networking sites (SNSs) – that is, Facebook and Twitter – in order to better assess: (1) the kind of online corporate communication unfolded by the company with particular regard to these centres; and (2) how the advertising of such centres is perceived by users. The results suggest that Huawei's online corporate requires better fine-tuning with local SNSs' users.

Keywords

China, corporate communication, Huawei, ICTs, Kenya, knowledge transfer, social networks, sub-Saharan Africa

This article focuses on Kenyan Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), a sector in which the Chinese tech giant Huawei has been investing since 1998. While, in the beginning, investments were mainly devoted to develop and consolidate ICT infrastructures, more recently, Huawei has focused on knowledge transfer by launching training meant to form a Kenyan ICT-skilled workforce. While there are general overviews on such forms of training (King, 2010, 2013), what is lacking is an assessment of their impact on the Kenyan community. In this respect, the article aims to better understand

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the extent to which Huawei's presence in Kenya is perceived as beneficial, notably with regard to the company's commitment to train (and possibly hire) a new generation of Kenyan ICT-skilled workers. In order to do that, a high-level thematic analysis of Huawei's accounts on Facebook and Twitter is conducted to examine how these initiatives are promoted online and what kind of feedback they receive from Kenyan users. More specifically, the goal of the article is two-fold: on the one hand, it aims to identify the kind of corporate communication strategy that Huawei adopts on Facebook and Twitter and the weight carried by posts related to training and recruitment in this strategy; on the other hand, it strives to assess how Kenyan users respond to the initiatives on training and recruitment promoted by Huawei through social networking sites (SNSs) in order to better assess, through the lenses of online platforms, how Huawei is perceived by the Kenyan community.

The article is structured as follows: Section 1 unpacks China-Kenya relations in the context of ICTs; Section 2 provides an overview of Huawei's role in Kenya's ICTs and the company's commitment towards ICT training; Section 3 outlines the theoretical horizon of the analysis by discussing corporate communication on SNSs; Section 4 presents the method followed for the high-level thematic analysis (and subsequent sentiment analysis) of Huawei's various accounts on SNSs; Section 5 delves into Huawei's online communication, with particular attention to ICT-training posts; Section 6 discusses the findings; Section 7 wraps up the discussion; and Section 8 looks at the limitations of this study and possible further lines of research on the topic (especially through on-field ethnography).

China-Africa relations

For quite a long time China has been accused in the West of pursuing a disguised colonisation of Africa. Differently from Western countries, whose actions in the continent often presuppose top-down relations, China has been said to exert soft power in Africa by establishing peer-to-peer relations both at the continent and at the state levels. These relations promote aid and investments 'with no strings attached' (Gagliardone, 2019; Zhang, 2013), meaning that China is committed to develop African infrastructure and services in a number of sectors, fostering agreements that keep African actors in business.

Beyond such macro understanding, the idea of a homogenising 'soft power' needs to be further unpacked. In fact, such a label can hardly account for the variety of and real-politik behind Chinese investments in the continent. This means that not only that it would be too simplistic to consider Chinese companies as the *longa manus* of the Chinese government in Africa, but that the idea of China exerting its soft power in Africa is valuable only insofar as it constitutes the entry point for exploring the diverse initiatives of Chinese actors, which are not exclusively political or economical, but also focused on forms of cultural exchange and experience sharing.

China-Africa relations are often conceived, since their programmatic documents, as forms of mutually beneficial cooperation. Gu et al. (2016: 25) write that 'the Chinese state has engaged in unprecedented economic diplomacy in Africa'. Here the

keyword is ‘diplomacy’, which conveys the idea of a flexible approach on the part of the Chinese authorities to African economies and societies, rather than one that presupposes a unique, top-down relationship. The authors continue by arguing that ‘this [diplomacy] has two aspects: multilateral (pan-African) and bilateral (state-to-state) diplomacy. The former is driven through the FOCAC framework, a dialogue and institutionalised process for cooperation established in 2000. The latter is driven by extensive tours of African states by Chinese state and party officials and bilateral cooperation agreements’ (p. 25). With regard to the fifth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the document analysis conducted by King (2013: 6) stresses the frequent use of words such as ‘mutual trust’, ‘understanding’, ‘accommodation’ and ‘learning’, thus marking the desire of all parties involved to (at least discursively) shape the China-(pan-)Africa cooperation as a symmetric one. Most interestingly, in the 2015–2018 plan, which followed the sixth FOCAC, the strategic decision to turn the Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation into an official sub-forum of FOCAC was announced. This shift highlights the extent to which both China and the African countries consider ICTs to be a crucial sector in their mutual cooperation.

At the same time, beyond this pan-Africa framework, China is increasingly committed to fostering bilateral agreements with individual African states. The goal is to adapt to each context without imposing an agenda, but rather seeking a convergence between China’s own interests and those of local actors. On this point, Gagliardone (2019: 56) claims that ‘a continental overview of China’s engagement. . . corroborates the impression that China is not trying to impose a blueprint . . . Rather, [it] has produced specific and individual responses in different African countries’. King (2013: 11) notes that the Chinese model of tailoring its interventions to a single state’s needs does not only involve economic issues, but has to do more broadly with ‘a landscape of common endeavours, learning and exchange’. This means that China-Africa cooperation stretches well beyond economy and politics and comes to encompass education, knowledge transfer, training and the sharing of cultural values. Hence, it is relevant to explore China-Africa relations by contextualising them within a precise sector – that is, ICTs – and country – that is, Kenya – in order to assess their impact.

Kenya’s ICT sector and Huawei’s role

Together with Nigeria and Egypt, today, Kenya has the highest internet access rate in all of Africa and it holds one of the highest rates in mobile penetration (We Are Social, 2019). China’s presence in Kenya’s ICT sector has become crucial over the last two decades (Brautigam, 2009; Gagliardone, 2019; Oreglia, 2012). Here, Huawei – the major Chinese private ICT company – provides both backbone and last mile solutions (Oreglia, 2012). Indeed, it was in Kenya that Huawei began its African investments in 1998, anticipating the advent of other American and European actors. At present, Huawei is in charge of Phase 2 of the National Optic Fibre Backbone Infrastructure (NOFBI), a project that is expected to link all 47 counties by implementing an extra 1600 km of optic fibre. Beyond that, Kenya is committed to promoting leading ICT policies not only at the national level, but for the whole East Africa region.

Beyond commercial and economic agreements, China's cooperation with Kenya includes a wide and diversified range of initiatives meant to support Kenya's human resources development. As King (2010: 489) contends, these initiatives have to do with the 'provision of school buildings, university link projects, Chinese language training', as well as with 'short- and long-term training provision, not just linked to the needs of the Ministry of Education or Higher Education', but 'enterprise-based training associated with the spectrum of Chinese companies'. In fact, big Chinese companies are more than happy to launch training initiatives which not only 'create competitive advantage through transferring their reconfiguration knowledge relevant to local [needs]' (Rui et al., 2017: 133), but also help them to gain visibility among the population and political leverage with the local authorities (Corkin, 2012). Training can take the form of on-site education, academies and vocational schools (Agbebi, 2018; Musyimi et al., 2018; Rui et al., 2017).

Chinese businesses in Kenya employ an average of 360 local employees, far greater than the average 147 local employees employed by foreign-invested enterprises. One of the objectives Huawei claims is to train and hire a local ICT-skilled workforce. In Huawei's 2017 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) document, the company reiterates its commitment to training: 'In 2014, Huawei launched its global flagship programme "Seeds for the Future" ICT training programme in Kenya. Each year, Huawei selected outstanding ICT major college students and sent them to its headquarters for professional training; some of them had already joined Huawei or other companies to contribute to the development of Kenya's ICT industry. . . . Huawei is also a long-term contributor to the development of ICT talents in Kenya as a member of the Presidential Digital Talent Program'. To be sure, as King (2013) notes, these initiatives are not regarded as aid from donors, rather, they are framed within a logic of synergy that spans beyond economy and comes to encompass the cultural sphere of mutual understanding between China and Kenya.

However, what remains to be seen is the effective impact that this training has on Kenyans, as well as the effective (economic and social) return Huawei gets from such initiatives. In fact, not only do managerial roles in Chinese ICT companies remain heavily occupied by Chinese people (Makundi et al., 2016), but the knowledge transfer that such training provides is debatable, varying according to the companies involved and the countries studied. Some scholars have found the benefits of such knowledge transfer to be limited (Cheru and Obi, 2010; Gagliardone, 2019; Shen, 2013; Taylor, 2006), while others are rather supportive of it (Agbebi, 2018; Gu, 2009; Li, 2007; Musyimi et al., 2018). A balanced summary comes from King (2010: 494), who notes that 'there are different approaches to overtime and working hours, as well as to timing and target orientation. There is recognition by Chinese officials that the transfer of Chinese labour practices to Kenya can lead to friction, and they provide advice about this. On the other hand, there seems to be a good deal of admiration for the Chinese determination to start and finish a job on time and on budget'.

One way to look at the impact of Huawei training and formation in Kenya – beyond or even before further ethnographic research – it to look at how the Chinese company promotes its training and formation on social networks (SNSs) and how such communication is perceived and responded to by African users.

SNSs and corporate communication

Facebook and Twitter are two widely popular social networking sites (SNSs). Facebook is by far the most popular SNS globally. In fact, at the end of 2019, Facebook counted 2.45 billion active users each month (Statista, 2019a). Twitter, on the other hand, had 330 million active users on a monthly basis. The breaking down of these data in terms of demographics shows a parallelism by age: the majority of users on both Facebook (57%) and Twitter (54%) are aged between 18 and 34 (Statista, 2019b, 2019c). However, Twitter is, above all, popular among powerbrokers, celebrities and political leaders, while Facebook appeals to a transversal audience (Sprout Social, 2018). This is because of the different functionalities and relations that the two platforms support. While Facebook is a space that favours the building of symmetric relations (Halpern et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2012), Twitter is a less reciprocal space and promotes asymmetric relationships (Davenport et al., 2014; Kwon et al., 2014; Logan, 2014). This also means that Facebook privileges more the peer-to-peer social side of sharing, while Twitter's communication is conceived as a top-down, matter-of-fact delivery of information (also due to the limitation of the number of characters that can be used in a tweet). Moreover, Twitter fosters a much faster communicative environment than Facebook, one in which influencers and businesses can hone and spread their message rapidly across their followers' base, while Facebook foregrounds the enjoyment of moments of deeper engagement with one's friends network (Sprout Social, 2018). In fact, research that examines the profiling of users on the two platforms (Hughes et al., 2012) finds that Twitter followers use the platform when consciously looking for information, while Facebook users tend to use the platform for a less conscientious and more socialised – and thus more accommodative – sharing of opinions.

Facebook and Twitter in sub-Saharan Africa

When it comes to SNS penetration in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), South Africa often plays a leading role. However, Kenya too shows increasing digits. While, in South Africa, 40 per cent of the population is making use of SNSs, Kenya, at 16 per cent, comes just behind Ghana (19%) (We Are Social, 2019). Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of Kenyan users access these platforms through their smartphones, signalling a predominant preference for mobile connections over household ones. By looking closely at Facebook and Twitter, we can see that 88.5 per cent of Kenyan SNS users resort to Facebook (80% on a daily basis). As for what Kenyans do on the platform, 31 per cent (the relative majority) uses it to obtain information. Twitter, on the other hand, is used by 27.9 per cent of the active population on SNSs, behind Instagram (39%), but well ahead of LinkedIn (9.3%), which is Twitter's main competitor when it comes to the professional realm. Remarkably, among the population aged 21–35 years, Twitter is used more than Facebook: in fact, between the ages of 26 and 35, 39.3 per cent of users use Twitter, while only 34.6 per cent uses Facebook (Simelab, 2018).

Corporate communication on SNSs

Literature identifies two major corporate communication strands representing the two poles of a spectrum of possible communication strategies to be adopted by companies:

'standardization' and 'adaptation' (Hatzithomas et al., 2016). The former assumes that a company, especially when it is a global one, focuses on the similarities shared by different audiences and markets so as to create a consistent message and identity projection (Agrawal, 1995; Alden et al., 1999). The adaptation strand argues that advertisers take into account the specific characteristics that make each market and audience unique and tailor their advertising strategies accordingly (Leonidou et al., 2010).

The spreading of SNSs as a means of communication has reshaped not only how we interact with each other at the individual level, but also how companies project their identity online and (are required to) interface with customers/users. In fact, SNSs constitute a double-edged tool: on the one hand, they are platforms that allow a fast and potentially global communication with little external gatekeeping (Alfonso and Suzanne, 2008; Taylor and Perry, 2005), while, on the other hand, because of the virality they promote and the interactivity they permit/demand (Sung and Hwang, 2014; Xia, 2013), SNSs can represent a risk factor for companies' corporate communication to external audiences in case of wrongly shaped messages (Ngai et al., 2015), or untimely responses (Park, 2017).

Thus, in discussing companies' communication through SNSs, it is necessary to take into account SNS features because these impact on the overall corporate communicative strategy. As scholars have pointed out (Meister and Willyerd, 2010), the acquisition of corporate communication skills has become a key asset for both communication experts and companies' employees. At stake is the ability to manage corporate reputation online (Aula, 2010) as well as to boost the company's image through SNSs by customising messages according to the adopted platform (Kietzmann et al., 2011) and cultural context.

When looking at the kind of messages posted on SNSs, existing literature identifies three kinds of corporate communication (Yuan, 2019): (1) Corporate Ability (CA); (2) Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); and (3) a mix of both CA and CSR. Corporate ability is characterised by a majority of posts that stress the company's expertise, products and service quality (Brown and Dacin, 1997). Corporate social responsibility aims to highlight the company's social side, that is, its commitment towards society and social welfare via the promotion of specifically designed projects, products and services. The third is a communication strategy that presents a balanced mix of the two (Kim and Rader, 2010). Despite (or maybe because of) the fact that SNSs are open to interaction with customers/users, studies (Kim et al., 2014; Tao and Wilson, 2015) suggest that companies tend to adopt CA communication on SNSs. This means that the communication tends to be identity-centred, betraying an attempt to remain in control of the communicative horizon by posting core corporate messages, rather than dwelling on socially-oriented topics that may give rise to online debates and confrontations. The present analysis will discuss the extent to which this applies to Huawei, with specific regard to its communication aimed at the Kenyan community.

Method

Huawei has launched a number of accounts on both Facebook and Twitter over time. These can be differentiated geographically (continents, regions, states) or according to their thematic focus ('mobile', 'IT service', 'Enterprise', 'Facts'). The focus of the

Table 1. Thematic categorisation of posts.

Category	Definition	Grouping
<i>TRAINING/ RECRUIT</i>	Posts that advertise recruiting events, courses, or internships led by Huawei	CSR
<i>COMPETITION</i>	Posts that celebrate employees, students or affiliates who have been successful within the company or as part of its training events	CSR
<i>CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY</i>	Posts that focus on the actions, events and goals of the company as part of its commitment towards local communities	CSR
<i>PROJECTS</i>	Posts that outline future goals and plans of the company	Hybrid
<i>EVENTS</i>	Posts that relaunch events organised and sponsored by Huawei, or ino which the company took part	Hybrid
<i>IDENTITY</i>	Posts that stress Huawei's corporate self-representation	Corporate Ability
<i>SALE</i>	Posts that advertise products/services	Corporate Ability
<i>CRISIS</i>	Posts that relate to the US ban and its consequences. These posts were categorised because they did constitute a theme on thseoirwn, but they were not directly addressed in the analysis.	Corporate Ability

present analysis is mainly on the accounts 'Huawei Southern Africa', 'Huawei Kenya' on Facebook and Twitter and 'Huawei ICT Academy' on Facebook.¹ Overall, these accounts were surveyed over a period of 3 months (mid-March 2019 to mid-June 2019); this time frame was relevant also because it was in mid-May 2019 that the United States imposed a commercial ban on Huawei, which had economic repercussions worldwide (for an in-depth discussion, see Calzati, 2020).

All posts on all accounts were screenshotted and categorised (Table 1) according to their theme (validation was strengthened by cross-referencing among the accounts), in line with existing studies (Calzati and Simanowski, 2018; Hatzithomas et al., 2016; Roshan et al., 2016; Yuan, 2019). Then, following the discussion in the previous section, posts pertaining to 'identity' and 'sales' were ascribed to 'Corporate Ability'; posts tagged as 'training/recruit', 'CSR' and 'competition' were subsumed under 'Corporate Social Responsibility' insofar as they all foreground the social-community commitment of the company more than its core business; and 'event'- and 'project'-related posts were considered as 'hybrid', a mix of both social and business. As for posts dedicated to the US-Huawei crisis, this constituted, in fact, a different realm of corporate communication in that the 'normal' flux of posting was disrupted by an exterior unexpected episode. Hence these posts were categorised, but not included specifically in the analysis.

Next, a high-level analysis was conducted in which posts were categorised according to broad thematic categories without delving into the specific topic of each post, thus also leaving to further research a possible discourse analysis.

Table 2. The surveyed Huawei accounts on Facebook and Twitter.

	HUAWEI SOUTHERN AFRICA		HUAWEI KENYA		HUAWEI ICT ACADEMY	
	FACEBOOK	TWITTER	FACEBOOK	TWITTER	FACEBOOK	TWITTER
CREATION	February 2019	January 2018	July 2014	March 2019	February 2016	No account
FOLLOWERS	100k+	31k+	3000+	300+	8k+	
POSTS	n.a.	500+	n.a.	100+	n.a.	

Subsequently, for each post, the number of ‘likes’, ‘comments’ and ‘shares’ were recorded in order to get an overview on which posts were the most engaging on each account and depending on the SNS platform used. It must be noted that it could be the case, at least in theory, that non-Kenyans replied to Huawei’s posts, which could then lead to debates or even online contestation. Given the limited number of followers of Huawei’s Kenyan accounts, the thematic ‘locality’ of the posts, and the overall lack of contestation, it was assumed throughout the analysis that the engagement did come indeed from Kenyans.

With specific regard to the account, ‘Huawei ICT Academy’, a sentiment analysis of the comments on the most commented training-related post was conducted. This allowed for a deeper assessment of the engagement and ‘mood’ of the users (beyond mere likes and sharing) with regard to the way in which Huawei training initiatives are perceived and responded to by users.

Huawei on social networks

Table 2 provides a schema of the major accounts surveyed. The date of creation of each account, the current number of followers (as of September 2019) and, in the case of Twitter, the overall number of tweets and likes for each account (such data is not provided openly by Facebook) are singled out.

Huawei Southern Africa

The account ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ identifies an interregional dimension that is smaller than the whole continent and bigger than any of its state or regional subdivisions, that is, East Africa, West Africa, North Africa, Central Africa and South Africa. It can thus be understood as including all the sub-Saharan African countries.

Overall, 60 posts on Facebook and 74 posts on Twitter were recorded during the 3 months under survey. This means less than a post per day on each platform: while these data confirm the statistics about Facebook’s average posting (one post per day), they diverge from Twitter’s average posting of 15 tweets per day (Coschedule, 2019). The highlighted quantitative discrepancy between the two platforms is in line with their different features, with the latter favouring a more immediate posting and the former privileging a slower publication pace. Significant also is the fact that while 14 posts are unique to

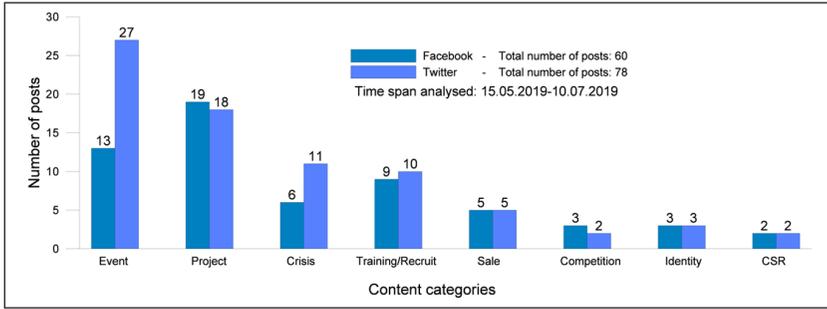


Figure 1. Number of posts per content category for the accounts ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ on Facebook and Twitter.

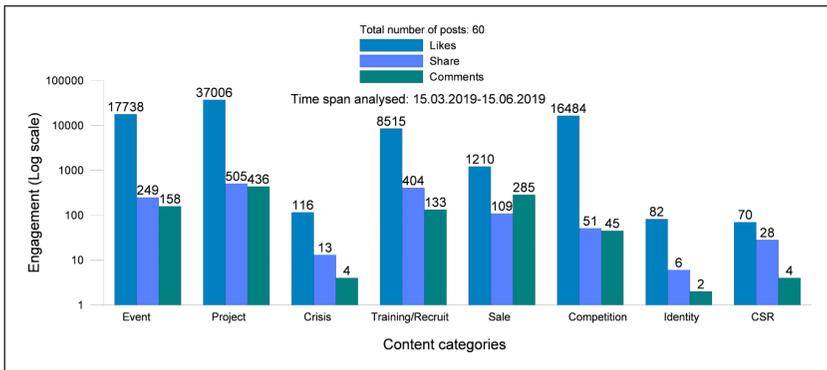


Figure 2. Engagement per content category for the account ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ on Facebook.

Twitter, out of the 60 posts appearing on Facebook, 12 of them (25%) have not been cross-shared on Twitter. As for the content of the unique posts, on Facebook, half of them were concerned with new projects, while on Twitter, the majority had to do with events organised by Huawei or in which Huawei took part. This signals that beyond differences in the frequency of posting, a substantial thematic overlap between the two platforms can be detected, despite the fact that, as seen above, they aim at different audiences.

As Figure 1 shows, on these accounts, Huawei tends to give prominence to events and projects. From the graph, it also emerges that the number of posts dedicated to ‘training/recruit’ meets the average, while ‘identity’ and ‘CSR’ posts, which are at the core, respectively, of the ‘Corporate Ability’ strategy and the ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ strategy, are at the bottom of the graph on both platforms.

In terms of feedback received from users in the form of likes, comments and sharing, the two platforms manifest relevant differences, as can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. On Facebook, the ‘project’ category gets by far the highest number of responses, while on Twitter, this category comes only fourth. Combining the two platforms, it is the ‘event’

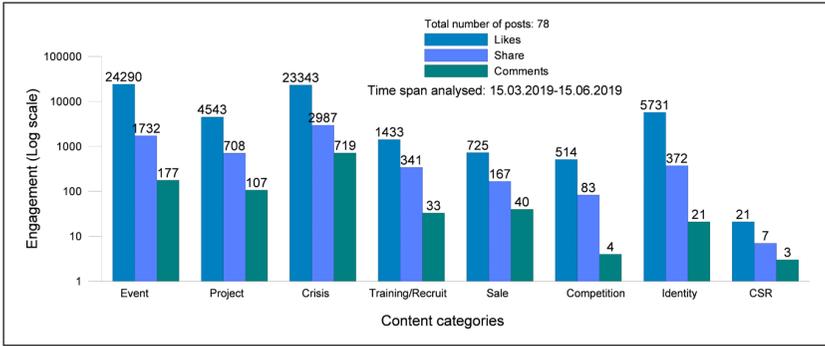


Figure 3. Engagement per content category for the account ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ on Twitter.

Table 3. Engagement per post and content category for the accounts ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ on Facebook and Twitter.

FACEBOOK	Likes/ post	Sharing/ post	Comments/ post	TWITTER	Likes/ post	Sharing/ post	Comments/ post
Competition	5494	17	15	Identity	1910	124	7
Project	1947	26.6	22.9	Event	899.6	64.1	4.3
Event	1364	19.1	12.1	Competition	257	41.5	2
Training/Recruit	946	44.8	14.7	Project	252	39.3	5.9
Sale	242	21.8	57	Sale	145	22.4	8
CSR	35	14	2	Training/ Recruit	143.3	34.1	3.3
Identity	27.3	2	0.6	CSR	35	3.5	1.5

category that seems to appeal most to the users (being second on Facebook and first on Twitter).

However, when looking at the number of likes, comments and shares received by *each* post in each category, the findings tell a different story (Table 3). In the lead in this case on Facebook is the ‘competition’ category, with ‘project’ and ‘event’ coming second and third, respectively. Moreover, on Facebook, ‘CSR’- and ‘identity’-related posts are those that stir the least interest both in total and per post (consistently with the amount of posts published), while on Twitter, the ‘identity’ category comes in at third position in total and first when considering the number of likes, comments and shares per single post (with the ‘event’ and ‘project’ categories in second and fourth position, respectively).

As for the ‘training/recruit’ category, it is again in the middle of the graph (in total), appealing more to Facebook users (fourth position) than those on Twitter (fifth position). And yet again, when breaking down these data per single post, the divergence between Facebook and Twitter increases. On Facebook, ‘training/recruit’ posts remain in fourth position considering the likes per post, while these same posts are those mostly onwards

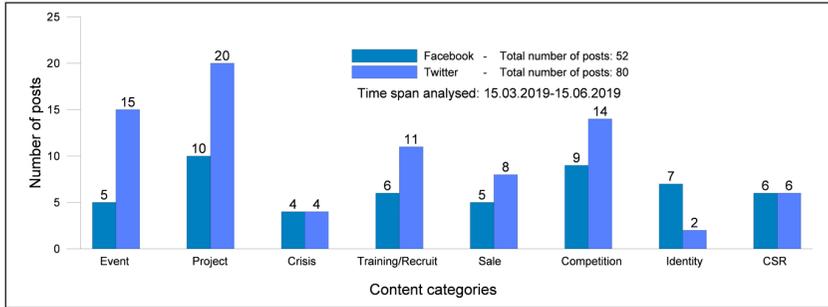


Figure 4. Number of posts per content category for the accounts ‘Huawei Kenya’ on Facebook and Twitter.

(44.8%), thus manifesting the social outreach of the platform. On Twitter, the likes, comments and shares received by each ‘training/recruit’ post is rather low, placing this category in the second-last position, just above ‘CSR’ posts.

Huawei Kenya

The accounts ‘Huawei Kenya’ on Facebook and Twitter show a reciprocal temporal discrepancy, with the former having been online since July 2014, and the latter only since March 2019 (Table 2). Despite this, on a closer look, it emerges that posting on a regular basis on both platforms started in March 2019, thus showing synchronisation between the two.

In the period from mid-March to mid-June 2019, 52 posts were found on Facebook and 80 on Twitter. Most of the time, Twitter posts that are also found on Facebook precede them by a few days, stressing the fact that on Facebook, posts usually wrap up a whole topic after its conclusion, while Twitter tends to unpack and follow the topic for its duration. As was the case with ‘Huawei Southern Africa’, it is possible to attest to a strong overlap between the posts published on the two platforms: indeed, out of the 52 posts on Facebook, only ten are unique to the platform (while 28 are unique to Twitter), signalling once again a limited content diversification across platforms.

As Figure 4 shows, the ‘project’ category is the one that attracted the most posts on both platforms. ‘Event’ posts come second on Twitter, but they are sixth on Facebook, behind ‘competition’, ‘training/recruit’, ‘identity’ and ‘CSR’. In fact, adding up the posts per category on the two platforms, it is the ‘competition’ category that follows the ‘project’ one. As was the case with ‘Huawei Southern Africa’, the ‘training/recruit’ category is in the middle, with almost twice the number of posts on Twitter than on Facebook. Overall, the post distribution across topics is more balanced than on ‘Huawei Southern Africa’, especially in the tail of the graph, with the ‘CSR’ category totting up a total of 12 posts.

If we now look at the feedback received by the various posts (Figures 5 and 6), we see that the ‘competition’ category is the most appealing on both platforms. This is mostly evident on Facebook – as was the case with the account ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ – while

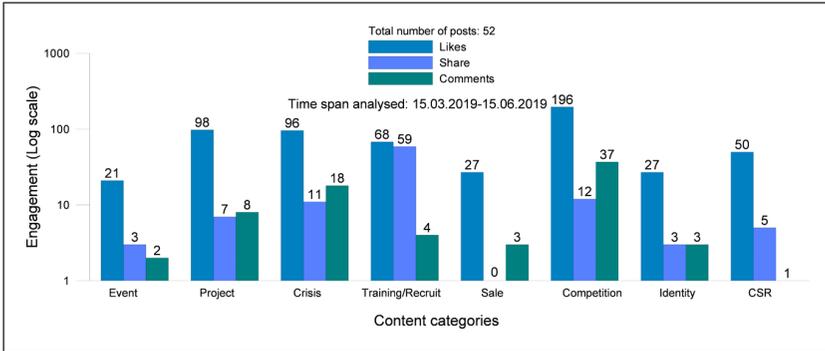


Figure 5. Engagement per content category for the account 'Huawei Kenya' on Facebook.

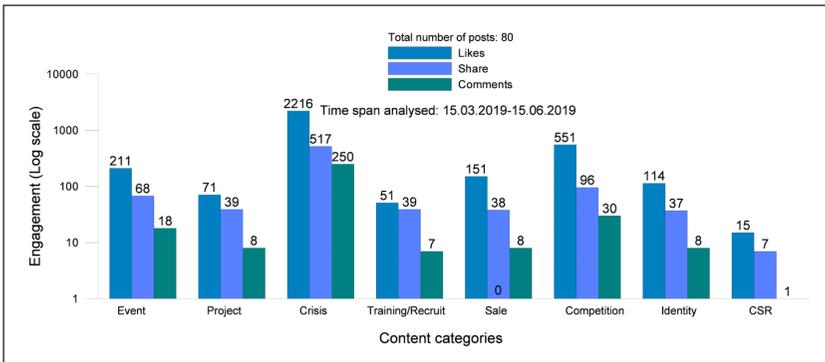


Figure 6. Engagement per content category for the account 'Huawei Kenya' on Twitter.

on Twitter, posts that advertise or celebrate competitions get almost twice as much feedback in total (likes, comments, shares) as 'event' posts, which come second.

Beyond 'competition', the comparison between the other categories on the two platforms is rather polarised. While 'project' posts receive a good number of responses on Facebook (second in total), they do not appeal much to Twitter users (fifth in total). In fact, similarly to 'Huawei Southern Africa', 'event' posts are preferred on Twitter to 'project' posts; at the same time, 'CSR' posts are of much more interest to Facebook users than Twitter consumers. The 'identity' category shows a significant difference in the quantity of posts on Facebook and Twitter (7 vs 2): this difference is even more striking when considering the fact that the feedback received is more modest on Facebook than on Twitter.

As for the 'training/recruit' category, these posts are rather popular on Facebook (third in total), registering the highest amount of sharing; by contrast, these posts obtain mild responses on Twitter (sixth in total), along the lines of what was detected on 'Huawei Southern Africa'.

Table 4. Engagement per post and content category for the accounts ‘Huawei Kenya’ on Facebook and Twitter.

FACEBOOK	Likes/ post	Shareinsg/ post	Comments/ post	TWITTER	Likes/ post	Sharing/ post	Comments/ post
Competition	21.7	1,3	4.1	Identity	57	19.5	4
Training/ Recruit	11,3	9.8	0.6	Competition	39.3	6.8	2.1
Project	9.8	0.7	0.8	Sale	18.8	4.7	1
CSR	8.3	0.8	0.1	Event	14	4.5	1.2
Sale	5.4	0	0.6	Training/ Recruit	4.6	3.5	0.6
Event	4.2	0.6	0.4	Project	3.5	1.9	0.4
Identity	3.8	0.4	0.4	CSR	2.5	1.1	0.1

When looking at these data per single post, it is evident from Table 4 that the ‘competition’ category is the most stable, coming first on Facebook and second on Twitter. On Twitter, although only two posts focus on ‘identity’, it is the category that receives the most response,. Once again, this trend aligns to the findings discussed for the account ‘Huawei Southern Africa’.

Twitter users tend to overlook ‘project’ posts, and the number of responses for this category come second last, just before ‘CSR’ posts, even though the ‘project’ category is by far the most commented upon on Twitter. On the other hand, ‘sale’ and ‘event’ posts are more popular than ‘training/recruit’, conforming to the results of the analysis of the account, ‘Huawei Southern Africa’.

As for Facebook, on average ‘training/recruit’ posts come in at second place for comments and likes received, while they are still first in terms of shares. Also popular are the ‘project’ and ‘CSR’ posts, with the latter coming fourth despite the limited number of posts. On this point, it is also notable that ‘identity’ posts, albeit more numerous than ‘CSR’ ones, are the least appealing to Facebook users.

Feeling the pulse: Comments on training-related posts on ‘Huawei Kenya’. Combining Facebook and Twitter, there are 17 posts on ‘training/recruit’ on ‘Huawei Kenya’: six on Facebook and 11 on Twitter. These are less than those posted on ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ (19), suggesting that Kenya is, in fact, one of the countries in which Huawei is investing the most on creating an ICT-skilled workforce.

Users left 11 comments to ‘training/recruit’ posts on ‘Huawei Kenya’ (Facebook plus Twitter). Specifically, the Facebook posts received four comments, but these posts were the most reshared; the posts on Twitter received seven comments in total. Five posts are unique to Twitter and these posts received four comments.

When looking closer at the kind of comments published, we see that out of the four comments on Facebook, two are not related to the topic of the post. One reply, which is dedicated to a post on ‘Huawei team mentoring students at the Mpesa Foundation Academy Careers Day’ (30 March 2019), reads: ‘Are we getting huawei

P30 pro in kenya?’ The other unrelated reply is to a post that advertises ‘Huawei Technologies Kenya Management Trainee Program’ (2 April 2019), and it is from a user who asks for repair suggestions: ‘Hey my y6 has cracked the back camera glass how do I repair it’.

Both comments are questions concerning products or services, which would best fit into other accounts, since they do not engage with the specific issue of ICT training. On this point, however, it must be noted that ‘Huawei Mobile Kenya’ is only active on Twitter. Considering that over 3 months, 75 comments were recorded, 21 of which were unrelated to the topic of the post and 17 asked specific questions on products or services, the lack of a dedicated account also on Facebook is evident.

By contrast, the other two comments on Facebook are related to the topic of the post. This is a post dedicated to ‘Huawei job fair’ in Kenya, dated 23 April 2019. The two comments are, respectively, in the form of a tag to a friend who might be interested in participating, while the other reads: ‘Thank you Huawei for this great opportunity. This opportunity will go along way in enhancing students skills in ICT’. It must be noted that Huawei did not reply to any of the comments on the account, either pertinent or unrelated to the published post.

On Twitter, a post dated 28 March 2019 and unique to this platform talks about ‘Youth mentorship’. This post received two comments: the first one is from ‘Huawei Kenya’, which integrates the information contained in the post, stating that the foundation ‘@SamburuGirlsFDN has also created an environment for them to receive education from the primary to the tertiary level’. To this comment, a user simply replied with a greeting, reasserting the extent to which comments on SNSs are mostly phatic (Calzati and Simanowski, 2018). Subsequently, we find a post on 2 April 2019 focused on ‘Huawei Technologies Kenya Management Trainee Program’, which is the same as the one appearing on Facebook. Here the post received one comment from a user asking for more information (‘What about diploma graduates can they apply’). Just like on Facebook, ‘Huawei Kenya’ did not provide any answers.

Then, on 6 May 2019, a post advertising a job vacancy, ‘Data Center Facility Solution Architect Manager’, was published on both Twitter and Facebook. On Facebook, the post did not trigger any reply, while on Twitter, a user expressed his ‘interest’. This comment did not lead to any development, neither in the form of a request for further information from the user, nor from the company.

The post that got the most comments on Twitter is dated 6 June 2019 (the same post was also published on Facebook but did not received any comments). The post advertises ‘a project to empower 400 vulnerable students of Bosco Boys Kuwinda in October 2018 over a period of 1 year. Through provision of technology, science education, ICT, soft & life skills and mentorship’. This initiative was conjointly launched by various actors (ICT Authority Kenya, Huawei Kenya, ema Kenya, TotoSciA), thus highlighting Huawei’s ability to foster synergies within the country. In fact, the three comments to the post are from ‘Huawei Kenya’ itself, which followed up the initiative by posting pictures and further information. In this case, then, it is Huawei that responded to its own post by crediting the other partners of the initiative; these comments, however, did not trigger any engagement from users or these partners.

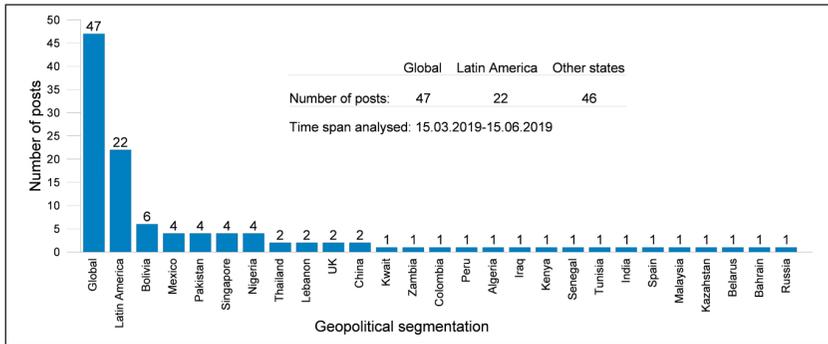


Figure 7. Further breaking down of the geopolitical segmentation of the posts, especially the ‘state’ dimension.

‘Huawei ICT Academy’

The ‘Huawei ICT Academy’ account on Facebook has been active since February 2016 and it had more than 8000 followers as of September 2019; there is no corresponding account on Twitter. The account has a global dimension in that it publicises the initiatives – in the form of training, competitions and events – which Huawei supports all around the world in partnership with academies, colleges and universities for the delivery of ICT-related courses and certifications on topics such as ICT security, big data storage and cloud computing. As delineated in the ‘info’ section of the account, the goal is to foster ICT-skilled students who can be employed in the ICT emerging markets worldwide.

Over the 3 months surveyed, 115 posts were recorded. This is high as compared to the other accounts surveyed. This is due to the fact that on ‘Huawei ICT Academy’, the company seeks the active participation of users. In fact, it publishes the type of content that is intended to stir engagement from users, insofar as posts are focused on people involved in either competitions or training, thus getting users to comment or share.

To this it must be added that, being active only on Facebook, the company tends to follow the initiatives in their durative length *as if* they were publicised on Twitter. This has the result of keeping users engaged over longer periods of time and spreading their interactions over many posts dedicated to the same topic. A good example is the number of posts dedicated (from 23 May 2019 to 3 June 2019) to the finals of an ICT competition gathering teams from all over the world. Over 10 days, 60 posts were published, showing a frequency much higher than the average of one post per day that is otherwise typical of the platform.

The table included in Figure 7 shows the segmentation of the posts according to three major dimensions: ‘global’, ‘interregional’ and ‘state-level’. The ‘global’ dimension is the one to which the highest number of posts is dedicated (47), although the sum of posts dedicated to a single country is quantitatively similar (46). Concerning the ‘interregional’ dimension, Latin America monopolises the account with 22 posts, while ‘Southern Africa’ does not appear at all.

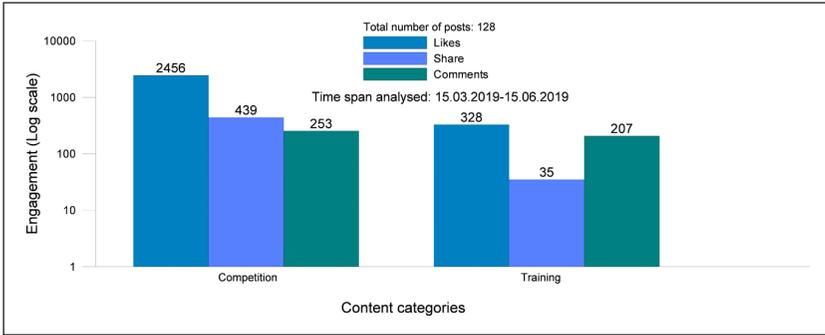


Figure 8. Engagement per content category for the account ‘Huawei ICT Academy’ on Facebook.

Table 5. Engagement per content category per post for the account ‘Huawei ICT Academy’.

		HUAWEI ICT ACADEMY	
		CONTENT	
		Competition	Training
ENGAGEMENT PER POST	Likes	24.3	23.4
	Comments	2.5	14.7
	Shares	4.3	2.5

The graph in Figure 7 shows the further segmentation of the state dimension: seven posts are dedicated to countries in SSA, with Nigeria playing a major role and Kenya having only one post. On a broader level, it is interesting to note that the great majority of posts are dedicated to non-Western regions or countries: only three posts (two dedicated to the UK and one to Spain) focus specifically on Western countries, while Europe and North America as regions are overlooked altogether.

Overall, when looking at the content of the posts, the huge majority (101 posts) is centred on ‘competition’, while the remaining 14 are focused on training. A closer look at the engagement (Figure 8) shows that ‘competition’ triggers a stronger response from the users. However, when these data are weighed per post, the scenario appears much more balanced (Table 5). The average amount of likes received by each post is similar for the two categories (24.3 for ‘competition’; 23.4 for ‘training’); sharing is higher for competition-related posts (4.3 vs 2.5), while training-related posts are much more commented upon (14.7 vs 2.5).

Sentiment analysis of ‘Huawei ICT Academy’. To better assess the type of feedback provided by users, a sentiment analysis of the comments on the most commented training-related post was conducted, that is, the post published on 29 April 2019. The post received 36 likes, 115 comments and it was shared six times. To be precise, this was a hybrid post

that mixed training and competition (i.e. online free training in view of a competition) and it called for the participation of users, in that Huawei ‘will select two friends who have asked questions to send free HCIE written vouchers in the comments below’. This is likely the main reason why the post stirred up so much engagement. Over 115 comments, 53 are in the form of questions. Interestingly, however, Huawei only replied five times, showing its willingness to maintain the communicative flow rather univocal and asynchronous on the platform (although a live chat room was open during the training).

The sentiment analysis was conducted on all 115 comments through the free online tool, Parallel Dots. According to the analysis, the comments were mostly ‘positive’ (69.30%), with a minor percentage of ‘neutral’ comments (29.10%) and close to no negative comments (1.60%). Overall, then, it is possible to suggest that such initiatives are well received and responded to by users/participants.

More generally, on ‘Huawei ICT Academy’, the company makes full use of the sociality favoured by the platform, centring the whole communication around ‘CSR’-based posts. It remains to be seen how effective is the transfer of knowledge provided by these forms of training, whether online or offline.

Discussion

The two accounts ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ on Facebook and Twitter give discursive shape to an interregional dimension that, while not encompassing the whole African continent, may be said to coincide with the sub-Saharan African countries.

By looking at the distribution of posts across all the identified categories, it can be suggested that Huawei tends to adopt a ‘hybrid’ strategy on these accounts. This trend goes against existing literature (Kim et al., 2014; Tao and Wilson, 2015), according to which such a strategy is the least adopted online by companies.

Events are particularly relevant on Twitter, possibly due to the immediacy promoted by the platform, which makes it easier to follow live an event and/or have it rapidly retweeted by other accounts. Projects, on the other hand, are more numerous on Facebook, and a reason for that might be that these posts contain a more ‘static’ type of content, that is based on descriptions more than interactions, and eventually more fitted to a platform like Facebook.

At the same time, although SNSs may be regarded as tools in the hands of the company for consolidating its brand image – for example, ‘identity’ posts – and/or for disseminating information about initiatives that foreground the company’s social commitment towards the community – for example, ‘CSR’ posts – Huawei tends to do this minimally on both Facebook and Twitter. This might be due to the meso interregional dimension of the accounts, which, by blurring geographical boundaries, makes it hard to develop highly adaptive communication strategies.

When considering the engagement, both in total and per post, Huawei’s communication on Facebook is more aligned with what users demand, in comparison with Twitter, where the divergence between the quantity of posts for each category and the amount of feedback received, especially per single post, signals that the communication may need some adjustments to become more effective. Notably, the great interest of Facebook users in posts dedicated to ‘competitions’ and ‘projects’ is symptomatic of the fact that

the platform is perceived and used as a social and entertaining space (Hughes et al., 2012). At the same time, however, the limited amount of feedback received by 'CSR' posts may induce the company to open a thematic account, with the goal of reframing their corporate social responsibility communication regarding SSA.

On the other hand, Twitter is a more business-related space (Kwon et al., 2014; Logan, 2014). In this respect, posts dedicated to 'events' and 'projects' fit well into the platform's focus, while the company might think of stressing more its brand-related posts. At the same time, the limited interest stirred by 'training/recruit' posts, which are directed towards users who are (still) *out of* the platform target audience, could make Huawei consider the possibility of posting this kind of content on Facebook only.

It is also significant that posts dedicated to 'sale' are those mostly commented upon on both platforms. Beyond the marketing potential of SNSs, these data suggest that product- or service-related posts are significant for seeing the company's online exposition increased. This trend diverges from the findings of existing literature (Yuan, 2019), according to which, on Facebook, 'events' attract the most response from users, while on Twitter, it is sale-related content that accounts for the highest amount of feedback.

Concerning 'Huawei Kenya', the fact that posting on a regular basis on both platforms began only with the launch of 'Huawei Kenya' on Twitter – 55 months later than Facebook – is symptomatic of the company's new corporate online communication strategy. At the same time, this strategy might need to be better integrated across platforms because, as was the case with 'Huawei Southern Africa', contrasting trends can be detected. Again, it was on Facebook that the communication was more aligned to the taste of the users, while on Twitter, the categories with more posts were not those that attracted the most attention.

Indeed, while 'projects', the category notching up most posts on both platforms, is appealing to Facebook users, it is not so for Twitter users. Similarly, 'CSR' posts stir more interest on Facebook than on Twitter and yet they are published equally on both platforms.

Overall, on 'Huawei Kenya' too, the company's communication results are 'hybrid'. Given the limited number of posts focused expressly on Kenya, the suggestion would be to polarise the two platforms, favouring a CSR-based communication on Facebook and a CA-based communication on Twitter.

Focusing specifically on 'training/recruit' posts, they strike the average across all categories in terms of quantity on both accounts on both platforms. On 'Huawei Southern Africa', we have 19 posts (nine on Facebook and ten on Twitter) out of 158 posts; on 'Huawei Kenya', we have 17 posts (seven on Facebook and 11 on Twitter) out of 132 posts.

As for the engagement, on both Facebook and Twitter, users seem mildly attracted by these posts. This is particularly evident on Twitter with regard to the engagement stirred by each post, which positions 'training/recruit' posts second last on 'Huawei Southern Africa' and in fifth place on 'Huawei Kenya'. This suggests that, despite being posted more on Twitter, 'training/recruit' posts are definitely a Facebook 'thing' in that they promote bonds between the company and prospective employees by foregrounding the testimonies of previous or ongoing trainees. This is the reason why it would be preferable for the company to channel 'training/recruiting' posts only on a socially focused platform like Facebook and on state-level accounts.

Concerning the account ‘Huawei ICT Academy’, two main content categories were identified: ‘training’ and ‘competition’. While the latter was the most conspicuous of the two categories, engagement per post showed a more balanced ratio, with ‘training’ posts being less shared, but more commented upon than ‘competition’ ones (likes being similar across the two categories). In terms of geopolitical segmentation of the posts’ content, the majority of posts had a ‘global’ dimension, while none referred to Southern Africa. On the one hand, this data highlighted the global outreach of the account, while, on the other, it is worth noting the stress put by the company on Latin America in comparison to the SSA countries, especially considering that investments are significant in both regions.

When compared to the other accounts, ‘Huawei ICT Academy’ stirred a stronger engagement from users. There are two main reasons for that: (1) the account is thematic, meaning that users already know what kind of information to expect when following it. In other words, the audience is fidelized *ex principio* and more likely to express interest; and (2) the account is open on Facebook only, and on it the company unfolds a CSR-based communication strategy that demands the interaction of users. This is also why the posts dedicated to training are heavily commented upon and in a positive manner, as derived from the sentiment analysis.

Overall, it must be noted that, similar to what existing literature suggests (Nip and Sun, 2018), Huawei refrained to reply to comments on its SNS accounts, thus missing the chance (or consciously avoiding) to engage with the users. This was particularly evident on ‘Huawei Southern Africa’ and ‘Huawei Kenya’ on both platforms, where Huawei never replied to comments. By contrast, this occurred on ‘Huawei ICT Academy’, given the interactive nature of the posts, but Huawei did so minimally.

Conclusion

The objective of the article was two-fold: (1) to explore the online communication strategy of the Chinese company Huawei in relation to SSA and especially concerning its training and recruiting initiatives; and (2) to explore how African – especially Kenyan – SNS users reacted to the communication of these initiatives. Two platforms – Facebook and Twitter – and three accounts – ‘Huawei Southern Africa’, ‘Huawei Kenya’ and ‘Huawei ICT Academy’ – were considered, conducting a high-level thematic analysis of the posts published over 3 months (mid-March to mid-June 2019), as well as a sentiment analysis of the post on ‘Huawei ICT Academy’ stirring up most interactions from users (comments on the other accounts were so limited that a thematic analysis was sufficient).

Overall, the analysis showed that Huawei’s online communication on SNSs is not coherently planned across accounts and platforms, as it tends to disregard users’ engagement, especially on Twitter. In fact, communication was most successful when dealing with ‘CSR’- or ‘hybrid’-related posts on Facebook, while on Twitter, it was the ‘Corporate Ability’ posts that were the most appealing (in line with the features and audiences of the two platforms).

It is also worth noting that since mid-November 2019 (a few months after collection of the data), the ‘Southern Africa’ account on Facebook was taken down (it remains in place on Twitter). This strengthens the evidence that Huawei’s communication strategy

on SNSs is not integrated, but subject to a degree of autonomy across accounts and platforms. The (somewhat paradoxical) impossibility of contacting Huawei on SNSs for asking to elaborate on these issues, not only leaves room for supposing that the accounts might be managed by different teams, but also reasserts the predominantly one-way conception and use of these channels by the company.

Looking specifically at ‘training/recruit’ posts, on average, they elicited a stronger response on the state-level accounts as compared to the interregional one, even though the overall engagement was mild. The analysis also showed that these posts are more suited for Facebook than Twitter. It was indeed on the thematic account ‘Huawei ICT Academy’, which is found only on Facebook, that users showed warm interest and offered highly positive comments to ‘competition’ and ‘training/recruit’ initiatives.

Limitations

The analysis encompassed, overall, a rather limited period of time (3 months). In this sense, it might be useful to extend or replicate the longitudinal analysis over longer periods of time or also during different times in the year, so as to further compare the results. Moreover, despite the fact that various topic categories were identified based on a preliminary parsing of the accounts, the study remained at a high level of thematic analysis, without digging into the specific topic of each post. In this sense, to conduct a discourse analysis of the collected posts (and their comments) might provide new insights that intersect the findings discussed here in new ways. Lastly, it would be advisable to extend the designed analysis to SNSs other than Facebook and Twitter, especially those on which Huawei and Africans are mostly active, in order to assess the platform-specificity of the present results.

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Note

1. The collection of data was done in September 2019. Since mid-November 2019, the ‘Southern Africa’ account on Facebook has been taken down; it is still there on Twitter.

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