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COVER SHEET
UNIT 2: Content, communications and engagement

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Title

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<th>Universities getting social on social media</th>
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<td>Thought leadership article</td>
<td>2,002</td>
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<td>Statement of personal reflection</td>
<td>2,102</td>
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Thought leadership article

Universities getting social on social media

Social media has evolved into a powerful communications and public relations (PR) tool. It is generally expected that if you are on social media, then you must keep it ‘social’. Maintaining the ‘social’ on social media means sustaining the conversations and engagements with the audience.

The current uniRank analysis indicates that an impressive 86% of universities in the world are on one or more social media platforms. Steve Nicholls in his book *Social media in business* writes that social media may have its risks but the greatest risk of all is not to embrace it. Therefore, universities need to set aside that cap and tassel and get into the depths of social media where conversation is king and produce the right content at the right time, on the right platform.

From an interview, Dr. Sam Kamau, a social media researcher, says that Kenyan universities have embraced social media, but they have not fully leveraged on its power. A content analysis of the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages of four Kenyan universities, namely: Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), University of Nairobi (UoN), USIU Africa and Strathmore University (SU), revealed that universities do not have interesting ways of engaging their audience.

To have a standard on what this should look like, I carried out a cursory study of the Twitter handles of two Kenyan companies believed to have engaging and entertaining social media activities. The tweets by KCB Group (@KCBGroup) and Safaricom Limited (@SafaricomLtd) are believed to best describe what being ‘social’ on social media means. Actually as I write this paper, KCB’s cover photo is a mobile phone, with white earphones and a red heart shaped candy and three simple words- ‘KCB loves you!’ Safaricom’s cover photo is of two young boys wearing hoodies and caps, mid-air with their skateboard floating there and a moving message- ‘when we come together, great things happen.’
The screenshots of the cover photos of @KCBGroup) and @SafaricomLtd on Twitter.

The two companies use creative comments, jokes, photographs, videos and ride on trending topics and hashtags to not only engage their audience but also push their products. They respond to queries and complaints as would a person face-to-face.

@KCBGroup using a GIF in a tweet to promote the KCB App.
On his expert assessment of Kenyan universities on social platforms, Dr. Kamau argues that while most universities have embraced social media in general, the pages are rarely updated and the feedback is occasional or never prompt. The updates mostly focus on reporting events, are generic, one-way and dull. He observed that most universities have not built online communities and there is very little engagement on the pages. They are not ‘social’ on social media.

Harvard University’s social media activities are the best case scenario of what being ‘social’ means. On June 28, 2017, Harvard shared a post on a study on the health benefits of moderate chocolate intake. The post received 12,400 likes, 669 shares and 120 comments on Facebook in a span of 24-hours. On July 19, 2017 Harvard let Julius, a sophomore, give a campus tour on their Facebook page through the live option. The post received 78,000 views, 2,600 reactions, 180 shares and 569 comments.

![Screenshots of the campus tour post on Harvard’s Facebook page.](image)

What are universities doing on social media? In an interview, Stephen Musyoka, the Social Media Strategist at teamTRINC, observes that universities are using social media to enhance their brand recognition through marketing themselves to potential students, partners and donors and to reach alumni. He says that because of its speed of feedback, low costs and wide reach, universities can use social media as news channels for announcements and advertisements instead of the traditional memos and posters.
Dr. Kamau proposes that universities can use social media for research purposes. They can gather research ideas, conduct online polls, recruit research participants, disseminate research findings and develop innovative drives. Social media is an effective customer service tool in which the universities can engage the community by responding to queries and driving discussions based on the current trends and insights.

Ngechi Gichomo, Strathmore’s social media director, observes that social media can turn universities long perceived to be ‘serious’ academic bodies into ‘friendly’ organizations providing universities with the endless potential to build relationships outside the lecture halls and campus grounds.

Given the organizational structure of most universities, streamlining the social media activities poses a big challenge. However, operating various social media platforms for the different departments in the institution is an appropriate strategy as it will give the departments the luxury to focus on their areas of specialization. It is good practice for the different departments to sell the same key messages to its publics. Successful campaigns are hinged on stakeholders being able to easily identify a brand’s key message. Therefore, caution should be taken to ensure that an institution’s key message cuts across all its communication platforms including the traditional media. A consistent key message mitigates the risks of misinterpretation and misrepresentation on social media for the universities as publics easily identify the powerful narrative and brand DNA. To achieve this, universities must develop social media strategies that are linked to the overall organizational strategies.

From discussions with the four directors charged with managing their institution’s social media pages, it emerged that only SU and USIU have mentioned social media in their communication policies. Dr. Kamau observes that it is unfortunate that universities have put very little thought into the strategic aspects of reaching certain communication goals through social media platforms. Is social media viewed as an ‘informal’ communication channel that does not need clear policies and strategies?

Social media presents high impact risks that can damage an organization’s reputation. Dr. Isaac Abwoli, a legal practitioner, warns that operating without policies on their social media activities is a risky affair. The risks are mostly legal issues ranging from intellectual property infringement and content ownership, errors in engaging directly with stakeholders in real time which can lead
to falling out of favour with the social media community, leakage of confidential information,
flooding of false information about the organization and security threats such as hacking.
To ward off these risks and protect their brand reputation, universities through PR should
develop social media policies as formal management systems. With such guidance, social media
managers will remain guided even as they fully engage their audience but the use of social media
must comply with other relevant university policies.
Musyoka however cautions universities not to be too rigid in their social media policies.
Universities must give room for flexibility and creativity and avoid too much bureaucracy in
implementing ideas. A social media policy should not be long and dull. The policy should be
engaging and it must empower the employees to use social media freely.
Before developing any strategies, PR must understand how each social media platform is used
and have a plan that encourages two-way conversations to take place. What matters is everything
that happens after the post is made.
In a book article published in *Share this: the social media handbook for PR professionals*, Katy
Howell challenges PR practitioners to understand how the rich and complex picture of social
media is changing and that the sites are the vehicles and not the destination. Howell writes that
people connect and technology facilitates. Therefore, it is important for PR to carry out research
on stakeholder mapping and conduct a brand audit to establish the brand ‘attributes.’ The
findings will help PR determine which social media platforms they should include in their mix
and the best brand voice and tone to use across the various social media channels.
Simon Sanders, in his article ‘kick-start your social media strategy’ in the book *Share this: the
social media handbook for PR professionals*, highlights some key issues PR can consider in
social media planning. First, PR should clearly identify the other departments within the
organization that they can work with on social media. After which, the team should develop
social media goals and draft a plan on how they will be achieved. Having established this, PR
can develop a social media content calendar which allows one to plan out the posts ahead of time
and avoid blank days and share quality content across the social channels thus engaging the
audience and attracting new ones.
To fully maximize on the power of social media, universities need to also invest in human
resource capacity such as JKUAT’s social media department. The team comprises four members.
Namely, the social media manager who oversees operations, the social media officer who handles content distribution on all platforms and engages the audience, the video production officer who creates the video clips and the content manager who creates the content.

In a 2016 blog post on Sprout Social, Michael Patterson shares the experiences presented by four social media managers in the higher education space at a roundtable discussion on social media in higher education. According to Patterson, universities can plan their social media content calendar up to two months in advance. He says that universities can leverage on the already planned out events such as graduations, career fairs, sport days, etc. In the article, Patterson writes that the panelists encouraged the users to ride on hot topics and have conversations and engagements. They also noted that social media is all about engaging with the audience one-to-one, and therefore, one cannot plan for that occurrence. Simply, for conversations to happen, universities’ social posts must really resonate well with the stakeholders. Dom Burch in a book article in *Share this too: more social media solutions for PR professionals*, writes that social media content should have a purpose - to inform, inspire or entertain.

There are many interesting and creative ideas on how universities can use social media to engage more with the stakeholders. Universities can run video and photo competitions engaging students to share their campus experiences and have days when stakeholders can interact with management. They can ride of trending topics and hash tags, weekly social post inspiring life quotes, funny videos that best describe a certain situation in real time, use humour, share inspiring stories of people and ride on popular social trends such as ‘throwback Thursday’ (#TBT).

*A screenshot of UoN’s Instagram page of a #TBT post.*
For the alumni, partners and general public, universities can run fundraising or donation challenges and use social media to reach a wider audience. Social media also works best in crisis communication.

With the social now happening on-line, it will be important for PR to monitor the conversations, mentions and buzz. Sanders says that PR should have a ‘listening’ plan just to get to know what is being said before engaging in conversations. So what is the best framework to measure how social an organization is on social media?

Avinash Kaushik, the Co-Founder and CEO, Market Motive, in a 2011 blog post, identifies distinct metrics for measuring the impact an organization has on social media. The parameters he proposes are the measuring rates in terms of amplification, conversation, applause rate and the economic value. Applying Kaushik’s proposition, in order to determine the extent to which an organization is social on social media, challenges organizations to think beyond celebrating the number of likes and followers on their platforms. Organizations need to have an impactful connection by engaging the audience and maximizing on this online relationship to convert the engagements into sales and add to the company’s bottom-line. Kaushik’s idea is one that PR can consider implementing as part of their social media monitoring strategy.

Social media presents great opportunities that universities can take advantage of. Social media sites are not like websites where information is posted and left to stand on its own; conversations must take place and universities must find interesting ways of engaging their audience. Social media calls for creativity, universities need to come up with creative ways to consistently engage their stakeholders as this builds trust and conveys authority.

(Word count-2,002)
Personal reflection

Introduction
My everyday job involves managing the social media platforms of a premier university in Kenya. Part of the responsibility is to update the stakeholders on university events, announcements and news and responding to queries, complaints and compliments. It is therefore my considered opinion that social media is meant to be fun, engaging, entertaining and informative, contributing to the organization’s bottom line. But this is not the case. Universities are not fully tapping into the power of social media.

This research undertook a content analysis of the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages of three USA universities namely; Harvard University, Yale University, Stanford University and four Kenyan universities which are University of Nairobi (UoN), USIU Africa, Strathmore University (SU) and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) to get a better understanding on the current use of social media by universities. I sought to find out the value of social media to an institution of higher learning, the best practices, the strategies and policies and the challenges, the opportunities and the key lessons learnt.

The Study
Content analysis has been perceived by mass media researchers as one of the most ideal techniques to measure media messages (Macnamara, 2005, p.1). Riffe, Lacy and Fico (2014, p.32), further elaborate this by stating that content analysis may be extended to social media to specifically analyze, capture and explore the content.

Through an elaborate social media content analysis code sheet, data was collected from the universities’ Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages from June 19, 2017 to June 30, 2017. The data was captured over the ten weekdays for a 24-hour period by seven research assistants, assigned to each monitor a particular university.

Each university’s social media site and each tweet or post acted as a unit of analysis. The content analysis assessed the descriptive features of the universities’ social media posts. Under investigation was the frequency of the posts, timings, nature of the posts, targeted audience,
number of interactions or engagements that the posts attracted within a 24-hour period and the links and photos accompanying the posts.

The findings from the content analysis were backed up by key informant interviews held with various directors of the four Kenyan universities. The directors are charged with managing the institution’s social media pages and it was perceived that the interviews will paint a better understanding of these universities and their social media activities.

The findings

Likes and followers (as at July 5, 2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No. of Facebook likes</th>
<th>No. of Twitter followers</th>
<th>No. of Instagram followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harvard</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>5 million</td>
<td>744,000</td>
<td>449,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1.2 million</td>
<td>346,000</td>
<td>153,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1.2 million</td>
<td>552,000</td>
<td>247,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UoN</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>31,000</td>
<td>869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USIU Africa</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>4,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>1,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JKTUAT</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>2,700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident that the seven universities are active, to some degree, on social media sites. UoN, Harvard, Yale, Stanford and JKTUAT had an average of five to nine different posts per day. However, on certain days, some universities had zero or one post. There was consistency and professionalism in the branding of these pages. In Harvard, Yale, Stanford, UoN and SU, the profile and cover photos were the same, across the three sites. The general targeted audience includes the students, members of staff, alumni, media, general public, partners and collaborators.

Stanford’s 126th commencement held on June 18th was live on their Facebook page and a video of the same was uploaded on June 19th. The university posted three short video clips of various highlights during the ceremony including the ‘whacky walk’, a part of the fanfare. On Twitter,
Stanford made 27 posts during the ceremony and shared 4 photos on Instagram which attracted 5,000 to 9,000 likes. The university continued posting on the commencement until June 21st. Yale University celebrated 20 years of women's health research. Social media posts were made from June 19th to 24th. Yale shared short video clips and photos highlighting achievements by the women researchers. JKVAT held their 29th graduation ceremony on June 27th while SU celebrated theirs on June 30th. During the events, the two universities tweeted as proceedings unfolded, sent out congratulatory messages and video clips. SU shared a live stream link for the event. Pre-event social posts by the two started on June 21st.

UoN ran a social media campaign across the three social sites to garner votes for the social media awards in Kenya. The posts ran from June 15th to June 21st. It seems the campaign was successful as UoN won the most social learning institution in Kenya award. USIU ran a registration campaign on social for the 3rd annual fun run to be held on July 8th. USIU posted about the event from June 20th. They had countdown posts as the event drew nearer.

The most impressive post was made on June 26th, by Harvard wishing Harry Potter a Happy 20th anniversary saying that “the wizarding world continues to inspire us muggles” and included a photo. On Facebook, the post got 20,507 likes, 1,279 shares and 360 comments. On twitter there were 3 comments, 148 retweets, 244 favourites and 29,537 likes on Instagram.

*The post by Harvard wishing Harry Potter a Happy 20th anniversary.*
Of the three networking sites, Twitter is the one most used. However, posts made on Instagram received the most comments and likes.

In conversing with the audience, we observed a general laze among all the universities. The researcher went further and counted a total of 107 complaints and queries that went unanswered.

**The interviews**

From the key informant interviews, it was clear that finding enough content to share every day on social media is the biggest challenge. SU director indicated that when the students are not in session, their social networking sites are inactive. SU and USIU directors explained that the number of interactions and engagement with the stakeholders on social media has always been low. Contrary to this finding, SU revealed that it was keen on using social media campaigns with lighter tones as part of reaching out to the younger generation.

It also emerged that holding conversations with their audience on social media is a challenge as most of the complaints that come in cannot be solely dealt with at the communications office. UoN director gave an example of an admission related issue whereby the communications office is not knowledgeable in some statutes and must therefore seek guidance from the admissions department. Such processes cause delays and queries go unanswered. In terms of general discussions with the audience, USIU and UoN directors highlighted bureaucracy as the major hindrance.

The universities have invested in human resource capacity for social media. USIU’s accounts are handled by four people while SU has five people who semi-handle the accounts, with one person doing majority of the work. JCUAT has a social media department comprising four members; namely: social media manager, social media officer, video production officer and content manager. UoN has a team of 16 people charged with managing the corporate and college social sites.

**The theory**

The uses and gratification theory propagates that media users seek out media that meets their needs and provides different forms of gratification. Quan-Haase and Young (2010, p.351)
categorizes the uses and gratification theory as the first theory to position audience as “active discerning and motivated.” Further, they argued that the development of the internet, particularly social network sites, proved the theory of the active audience.

Whiting and Williams (2013, p.363) identified 10 uses and gratifications of social media. They include entertainment, social interaction, pass time, information seeking, convenience utility, relaxation, communicatory utility, information sharing, expression of opinion, and surveillance about others. However, Sundar and Limperos (2013, p.522) argue that even though social media has many potential uses, it may or may not meet the expectations of the users for new need gratification.

Lipschultz (2015, p.69) highlights Brian Solis’ social media PR formula through the acronym ART- actions, reactions and transactions. ART can impact the outcomes of social media use.

The two-way symmetrical model
The two-way symmetrical model of PR by Grunig and Hunt, cited in Theaker (2012, p.36), is applicable in explaining how social media works. The model which is a two-way type of communication propagates that an organization can communicate and receive feedback from its stakeholders. This promotes mutual understanding, cooperation and respect between the two.

Opening up the organization to receive feedback, whether negative or positive, presents unique challenges. With just a negative comment, a brand’s reputation can easily be tainted. PR must therefore have a well managed social media plan that is run in a professional manner.

Social media best facilitates relational and dialogic models of communication. Kent and Taylor (2002, p.3) describe dialogue as communicating about issues with one’s publics. The tenets of a dialogic approach to communication include the recognition of organization–public relationships (mutuality), the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics (propinquity), the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests (empathy), the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms (risk) and the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics (commitment).
Personal learning

Swann (2010, p.82) notes that the popularity of social media has forced PR practitioners to embrace it. Social media has the potential to build mutually beneficial relationships with its publics online. Therefore, PR should guide the organization’s social media use. Smith and Place (2013, p.169) argue that PR stands to benefit from the use of social media. PR can tap into the power of social media to enhance PR functions such as media relations, crisis communication, corporate communication, event planning, reputation management, etc.

Garst (2015, p.23), explains that the social media winners are those ones who form meaningful, authentic relationships with their followers. From the research, Harvard has to a great extent gone beyond attracting millions of fans and followers to having quality interactions online. The researcher recorded the highest number of conversations with stakeholders from Harvard. A cursory survey of Harvard’s website revealed that the university has guidelines for using social media, a social media directory listing all the university’s official social media accounts and their addresses and their social media handlers’ email address. Harvard has approved images for their social media platforms.

The research findings show that social media does work for universities. There have been successful campaigns on social that have yielded results. The audiences are following and listening. A comparison between the American universities and their Kenyan counterparts clearly show that the latter have their work cut out for them. Kenyan universities need to rethink their social media strategies. From the interviews with the directors, the Kenyan universities have clearly invested in human resource; they now need to put in the funds to drive the strategies home.

I have learnt that before creating those social media accounts, a laid down plan is critical. Organizations need to have a good mix of content and this can only be achieved by developing social media calendar. Content is king. For any successful engagement, there must be a balance between the key message and the content assumed to be popular with the audience. Visuals such as photos and videos are the best to use. Have a plan for posting content and this can be advised by the platform’s analytics which indicate when your audience is online and the content that
engages them. The etiquette of social media should be followed. Social media should enhance the brand of the organization and give it a strong personality.

**Recommendations**

Universities need to develop social media guidelines that are simple yet actionable. They can set up a hub where the top social media activities are collected and shared. It is important to invest in social media by incorporating it in the communication’s budget and train staff handling the accounts. Social media calls for creativity, universities need to come up with creative ways to consistently engage their stakeholders as this builds trust and conveys authority.

**Conclusion**

It is therefore critical for universities to go back to the drawing board and reevaluate their social media plans and start on a more focused approach. Social media allows organizations to directly connect with the world. For an individual, it is easy to connect with friends on social. One would think it would be the same for organizations. This is not the case as many brands on social media do not actually get social with their audiences. Social media is all about creating relationships. Universities need to step out of their comfort zones and get social; listen and engage.

*(Word count- 2,102)*
References


‘List of universities and colleges on social media’, *uniRank*, available: http://www.4icu.org [accessed 26 June, 2017].


Interview questions for the social media experts

1. A look at the social media platforms owned by universities in Kenya, what is your overall expert assessment?
2. Do you think social media is a useful platform for institutions of higher learning?
3. In what ways can universities use social media to meet their goals?
4. What are some of the issues effective social media strategy address?

Interview questions for the university directors

1. As a university, why did you find it necessary to use social media?
2. For what do you use social media?
3. Do you have a written social media policy?
4. Do you have a dedicated social media budget for your overall communication budget? If yes, what does it cater for?
5. What key lessons have you learnt in using social media?
6. Are there specific challenges you have faced as a result of using social media?
7. What are some of the best practices you are implementing on social media?
### Appendix 2

#### Code Sheet: Social media content analysis

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<th>Variables</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Time of post</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nature of post (You can tick more than one)</td>
<td>○ Advertisement</td>
<td>○ Advertisement</td>
<td>○ Advertisement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Announcement</td>
<td>○ Announcement</td>
<td>○ Announcement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Event proceedings</td>
<td>○ Event proceedings</td>
<td>○ Event proceedings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Video</td>
<td>○ Video</td>
<td>○ Video</td>
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<td></td>
<td>○ Image</td>
<td>○ Image</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Other_________________</td>
<td>○ Other_________________</td>
<td>○ Other_________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Type of Post</td>
<td>○ Original post</td>
<td>○ Original post</td>
<td>○ Original post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Retweet “RT”</td>
<td>○ Share</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Reply ‘@’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Target audience (You can tick more than one)</td>
<td>○ Students</td>
<td>○ Students</td>
<td>○ Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Members of staff</td>
<td>○ Members of staff</td>
<td>○ Members of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Alumni</td>
<td>○ Alumni</td>
<td>○ Alumni</td>
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<td></td>
<td>○ General public</td>
<td>○ General public</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>○ Partners/Collaborators</td>
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<td></td>
<td>○ Media</td>
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<td></td>
<td>○ Other_________________</td>
<td>○ Other_________________</td>
<td>○ Other_________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Is there a link?</td>
<td>○ Yes</td>
<td>○ Yes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>○ No</td>
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<td>If yes, what does it link to?</td>
<td>If yes, what does it link to?</td>
<td>If yes, what does it link to?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>______________</td>
<td>______________</td>
<td>______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Number of interactions/engagements (24hours after posting)</td>
<td>Replies __________</td>
<td>Likes __________</td>
<td>Likes __________</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Retweets __________</td>
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