

What motivates the sharing of misinformation about China and COVID-19? A study of social media users in Kenya and South Africa

Herman Wasserman | University of Cape Town | @hwasser
Dani Madrid-Morales | University of Houston | @DMadrid_M

Chinese media, African Audiences (I)

- Steep increase in **misinformation in Africa** in recent years
- Linked to **lack of trust** in state-owned, **suppressed** or elite media
- This is occurring against background of **increased media relations between China and Africa**:
 - Bureaux (Xinhua, CRI)
 - Content (CGTN)
 - Investments (Independent Media)
 - Distribution (Starsat)
 - Infrastructure (cellphone networks)
 - Exchanges

Chinese media, African Audiences (II)

- Part of ‘**soft power**’ initiatives and ‘going out’ IR strategy
- Often controversial, met with responses ranging from **resistance** and **scepticism** to **consideration** and **adoption**
 - Although impact limited
- Prejudices, biases towards China also in **content of disinformation**

China, COVID-19 & Disinformation (I)

- COVID-19 provides lens through which to study **attitudes and practices of disinformation**, given China's central role
 - Probable origin of outbreak, global provider of aid & assistance, narrative 'Other' in global political discourses.
- Overall **objective of this study**:
 - What is the link between social media users' perceptions of and attitudes towards China and their motivations to share misinformation related to COVID-19 and China?
- Focus on **Kenya & South Africa** – vibrant media environments, active online community, key targets of China's 'going out' media strategy

China, COVID-19 & Disinformation (II)

- African attitudes towards China **more negative in recent years**
 - Globally, Covid-19 led to lowest view of China in decade (Pew Research from 2020)
- At same time, rise of disinformation and ‘infodemic’: overabundance of information, leading to anxiety, uncertainty, fatigue and *xenophobia* (WHO)
 - Could damage image of China and reverse ‘soft power’ gains
 - Spread of misinformation relating to China’s presence in Africa, and country’s association with the origins of pandemic, might have amplified existing attitudes, perceptions and biases

China, COVID-19 & Disinformation (III)

- Pandemic occurs at time when **disinformation rampant** on African continent
- Previous research – **high perceived exposure to disinformation, low levels of media trust**, adding to the allure of misinformation
- China's media on continent associated with state power, low credibility
 - Anti-Chinese rhetoric by **Western leaders in context of pandemic**, China counters with public diplomacy and targeted disinformation
 - Anti-vaxx disinformation on continent already drawing on anti-China sentiment (e.g. dumping of vaccines)

Motivations for Sharing Disinformation

- For false news to make an impact, **it has to be shared**
- Previous research of African media users:
 - high likelihood to share misinformation, even knowingly
 - users employ variety of cues to determine veracity
 - motivations to share depends on topic (e.g duty to warn others, ‘just in case’, or ‘for fun’)
 - the political use of humour plays an important role
- More insight needed into how media users reflect on their consumption, sharing and verification practices
- Pandemic may have added **further motivations** for sharing misinformation on China

Research Questions

- RQ₁**: What were the **prevailing views towards China and towards COVID-19** among South Africans and Kenyans during the first wave of the pandemic?
- RQ₂**: To what extent did South Africans and Kenyans **believe in disinformation** related to China and COVID-19 on social media?
- RQ₃**: What were the prevailing motivations expressed by South Africans and Kenyans to **share disinformation about COVID-19 and China** on social media?

Method

- Two online surveys were conducted in **Kenya** ($n = 970$) and **South Africa** ($n = 991$) between May 6 and May 12, 2020.
- Quotas were used for age and gender based on census, but limited reach for those over 60.
 - Our data describes well “online population” of Kenya and South Africa, but not so well the “entire population”.



Methods – Stimuli

<https://factcheck.afp.com/Covid-19-debunked-rumors-and-hoaxes>

Keri Hilson @KeriHilson

People have been trying to warn us about 5G for YEARS. Petitions, organizations, studies...what we're going thru is the affects of radiation.

5G launched in CHINA. Nov 1, 2019. People dropped dead. See attached & go to my IG stories for more. TURN OFF 5G by disabling LTE!!!

Who invented 5g?

China

China. China has launched its **5G** national network and started commercial operation on 1 November 2019. At launch, Chinese state media called it the world's largest **5G** network outbreak. In a 2019 **Netflix documentary**, **Bill Gates warned against a global pandemic that could potentially originate in China**. A few weeks after the Wuhan outbreak started making headlines across the world, a generic mention of a possible outbreak had been spun into a myriad of online articles claiming that Gates...

6,715 8:58 PM - Mar 15, 2020

5,493 people are talking about this

China, 5G and Bill Gates

USA Arrested A Chinese Scientist That Created Coronavirus ... Mobtv

MOB TV 15 hrs · 🌐

USA Arrested A Chinese Scientist That Created Coronavirus ... Mobtv

👍👎👏👤 398 115 Comments 2.2K Shares

Share

Chinese scientist detained

Methods – Stimuli

Davy Kolo Wisdom is with Wisdom Davy.
April 10 at 5:07 PM · 🌐

AFRICANS.....ANYWAY GOD KNOWS.
CHINESE VACCINATION TO TEST COVID_19 HAS ARRIVED IN AFRICA STARTED IN BURUNDI UGANDANS GET READY IT'S A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH WHY NOT IN THEIR CONTINENT AMERICA OR EUROPE? PLEASE SHARE THIS POST SAVE MILLIONS OF AFRICAN LIVES 🙏
#CEO TGL



👍 🥰 😂 49 65 Comments 65 Shares

Share

China tries vaccine in Africa

ICEBOY™ 🇰🇪 🇨🇳
@Caleb_Waswa_ Follow

Kenyan couple exchange blows with a Chinese couple in the streets of Wuhan.... its survival for the fittest



10:25 PM - 12 Apr 2020

1,257 Retweets 2,026 Likes

🗨️ 418 🔄 1.3K ❤️ 2.0K

Racial tensions in Wuhan

Methods – Measures

- Motivations for sharing hoaxes
 - Open ended questions
 - Recoded using taxonomy of motivations from Madrid-Morales et al. (2021)
- Attitudes towards China (and the US)
 - Scale adapted from Anholt (2011)
 - Likert scale with 6 items measuring media, governance, rule of law...
- Attitudes on COVID-19 and China, and government responses
 - Scale adapted from Priniski & Holyoak (2020)
 - Likert scale with 8 items on racist responses & origins of virus

RQ1

What were the **prevailing views towards China and towards COVID-19** among South Africans and Kenyans during the first wave of the pandemic?

Attitudes towards China and US (0 to 4 scale)

	KENYA		SOUTH AFRICA	
	China	US	China	US
XXX is competently and honestly governed	1.79	2.35	1.44	1.67
XXX respects the rights of its citizens and treats them with fairness	1.65	2.83	1.44	2.07
XXX behaves responsibly to protect the environment	1.59	2.66	1.33	1.88
The media in XXX are free and objective	1.42	3.00	1.26	2.20
XXX has a positive economic and political influence on Africa	2.53	2.88	2.14	2.23
XXX is a country where I would like to live and work	1.10	2.97	1.03	2.26

Attitudes towards COVID-19 & China (0 to 4 scale)

		KENYA	SOUTH AFRICA
RESPONSES TO COVID-19	I am extra cautious around Asian people to protect against COVID-19	1.74	1.52
	One of the best ways to reduce the spread of COVID-19 is to stop immigration into our country	2.94	2.82
	Because of COVID-19, my country should reduce its interactions with China	2.01	2.19
	I find it racist when people refer to coronavirus as 'Chinese coronavirus' or 'Wuhan disease'	2.58	2.44
ORIGIN OF COVID-19	The global spread of COVID-19 was planned and orchestrated	2.23	2.10
	COVID-19 emerged from natural conditions	1.61	1.84
	COVID-19 was engineered in a laboratory	2.48	2.26
	The scientific community is spreading fake news about COVID-19	1.33	1.68

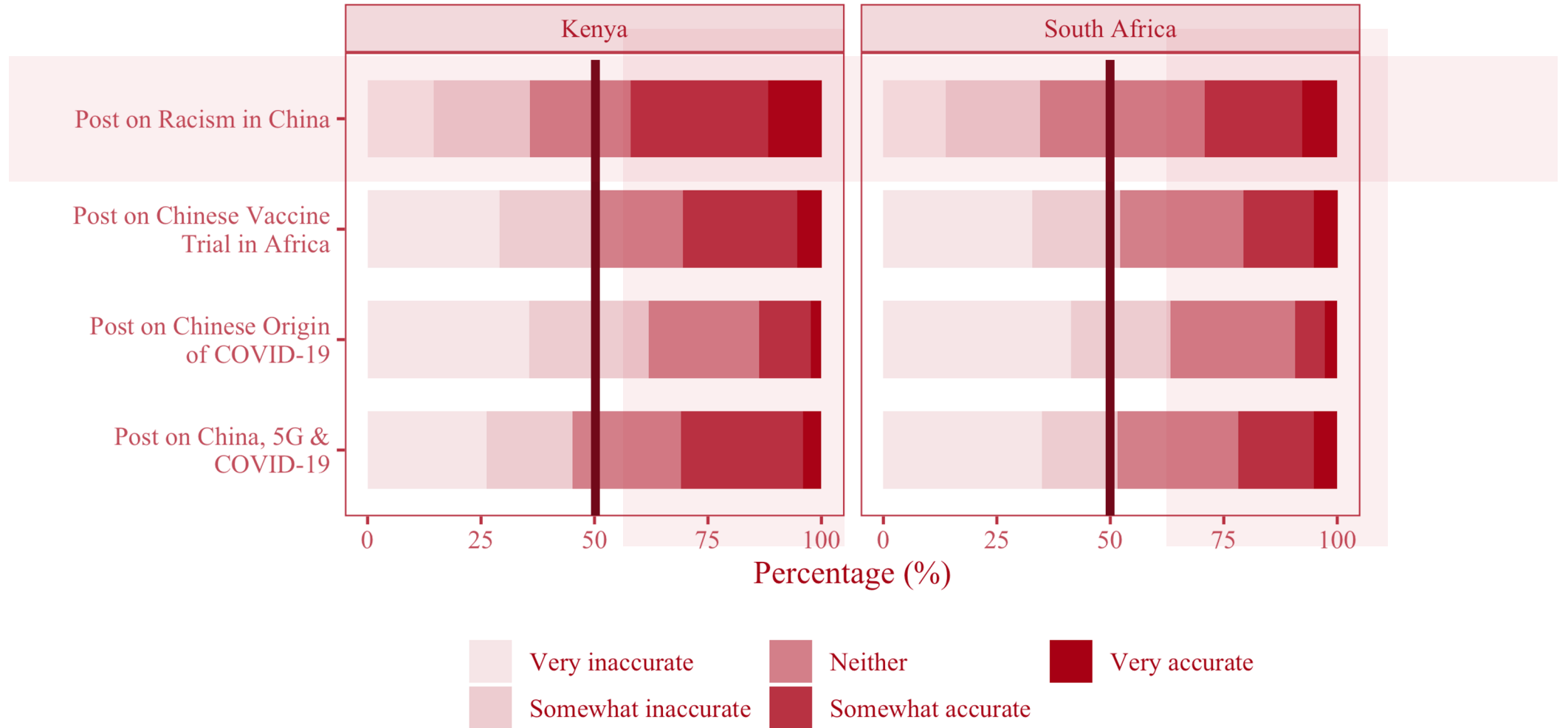
Government responses (0 to 4 scale)

	KENYA	SOUTH AFRICA
Chinese government response	2.38	2.07
US government response	1.89	1.51
WHO response	2.87	2.61
Own country's government response	2.22	2.77

RQ2

To what extent did South Africans and Kenyans **believe in disinformation** related to China and COVID-19 on social media?

Perceived accuracy of hoaxes



RQ3

What were the prevailing motivations expressed by South Africans and Kenyans to **share disinformation about COVID-19 and China** on social media?

Motivations for sharing hoaxes

- Motivation #1: **Duty to Share**
 - “My family has the right to know everything that is connected to the pandemic so that they are able to act safe”
- Motivation #2: **Spark Discussion**
 - “To hear what their opinion would be about it”
- Motivation #3: **Make a Statement**
 - “To show them on how fellow Africans are being mistreated in China while [C]hinese people barely get mistreated in Africa”
- Motivation #4: **Just in Case**
 - “It is better they know than if [t]hey don't. We share info, even rumours”

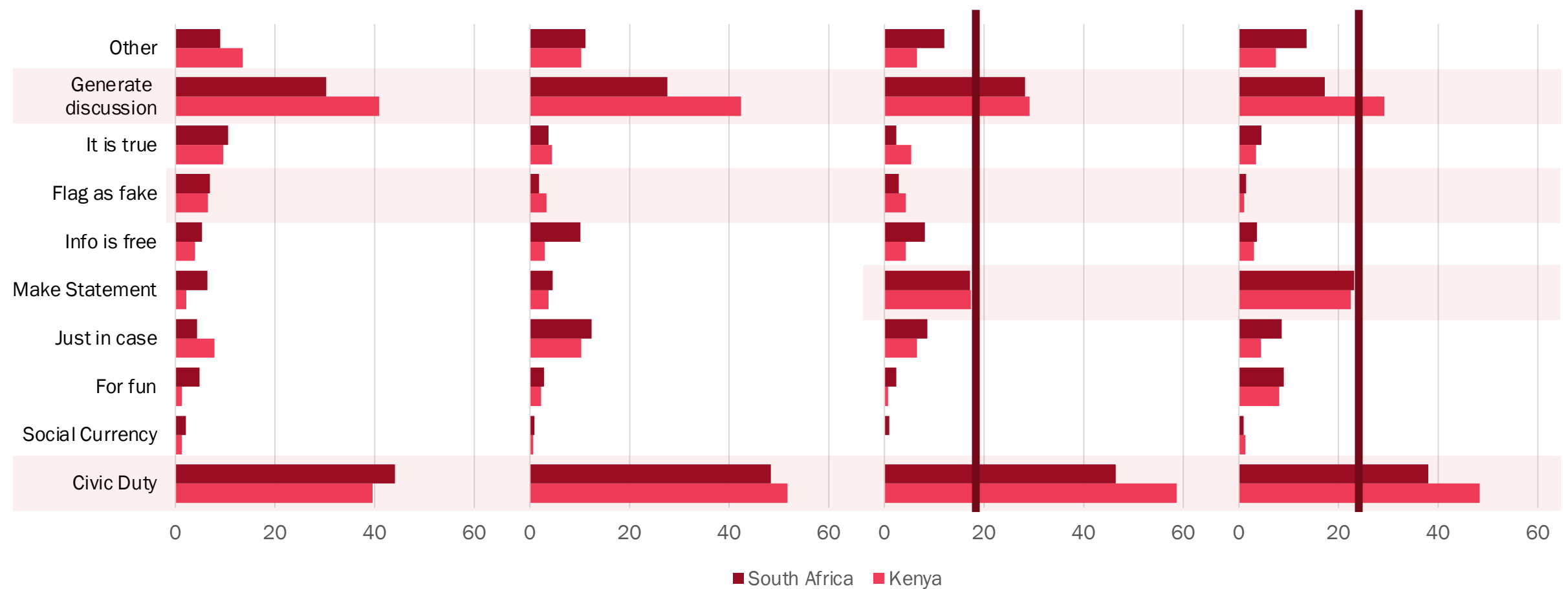
Motivations for sharing hoaxes

Scientist Arrested

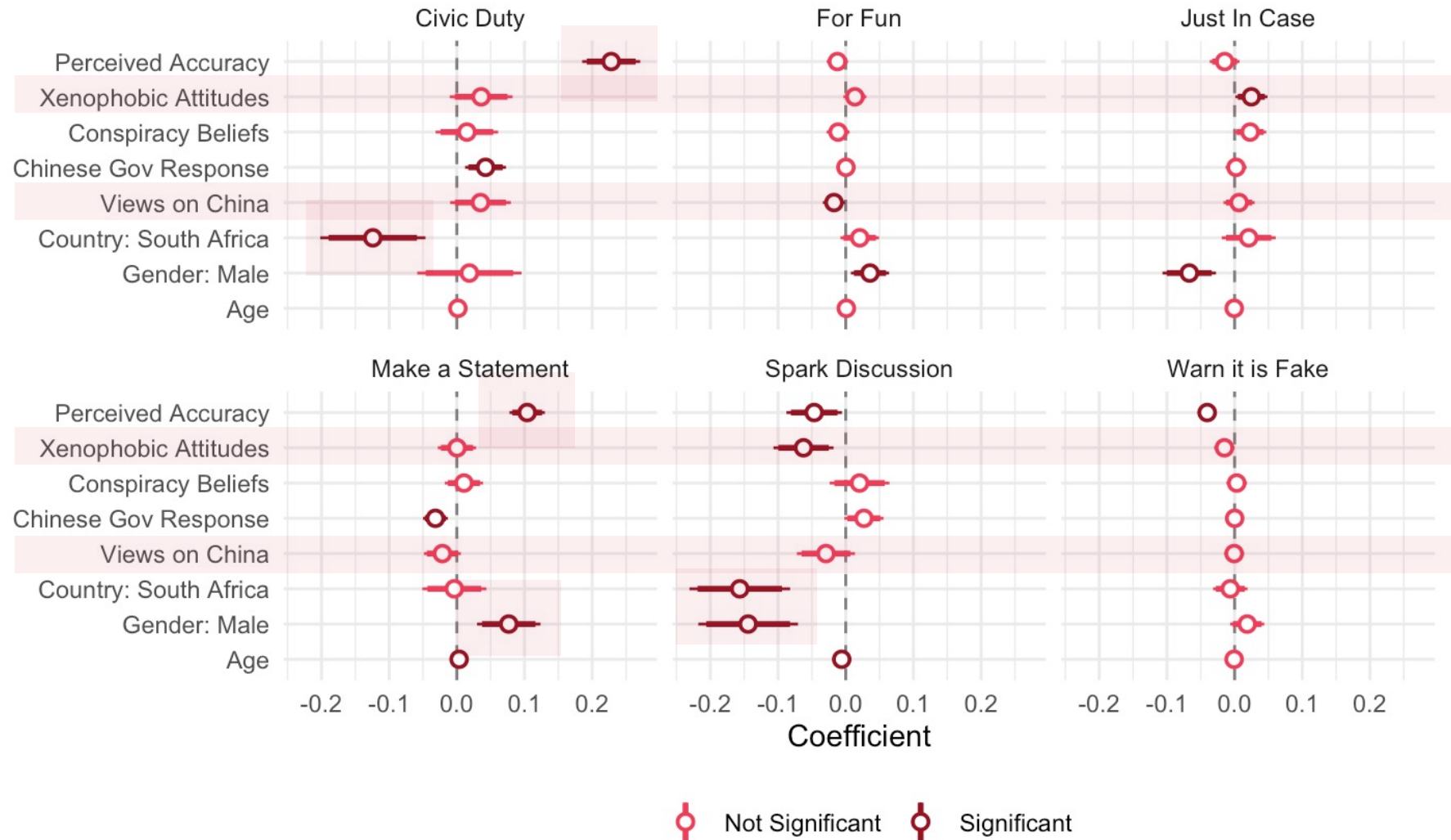
5G & COVID

Vaccine trials

Racism in Wuhan



OLS Motivations to share misinformation



Final Ideas (I) – Racism and Xenophobia

1. Misinformation on COVID-19 provided entry point into more broad-ranging questions on:
 - a. attitudes towards China
 - b. motivations for sharing misinformation
2. Both Kenyans and South Africans have **broadly negative view of China**, possibly amplified by pandemic
3. Cultural appeal of China fairly low – this **poses challenges for soft power** attempts
 - Nevertheless – **resistance against** xenophobic or racist messaging and attribution of blame to China
4. More xenophobic attitude towards **foreign travelers**

Final Ideas (II) – Motivations for sharing

1. Majority of South Africans and Kenyans **did not believe hoaxes or rumors** & Majority (taken together) trusted scientists
2. A significant number, however, **show interest in sharing hoax/rumor posts**
3. Main motivations:
 - “Moral/civic” duty to share information and make others aware
 - Desire to spark discussion, debates and gather other people’s views.

Final Ideas (III) – Motivations for sharing

4. Differences **between types of posts** – more likely to share posts about racial injustices to make a statement about political views
5. In line with previous findings – significant number of users share information **they deem to be inaccurate**
6. Quantitative evidence to support previous qualitative studies suggesting that **sense of “moral/civic” duty** to share information and create awareness is biggest driver
7. (**less so than attitudes towards China**)

What motivates the sharing of misinformation about China and COVID-19? A study of social media users in Kenya and South Africa

Herman Wasserman | University of Cape Town | @hwasser

Dani Madrid-Morales | University of Houston | @DMadrid_M

Full paper (draft) >> http://bit.ly/Penn_WassermanMadridMorales