

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

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## *Abstract*

During the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was inundated with misinformation related to the virus and its origins, possible remedies and cures, as well as government's responses to the outbreak. Much of the inaccurate information circulating on social media was related to China, the country where the first cases of the disease were reported. In this chapter, we investigate how social media users in Kenya and South Africa engaged with misinformation about China and COVID-19. Both countries have seen in the last decade an increase in mediated engagements with China. During the first days of the pandemic, Chinese media, diplomats and public information officers were extremely active in their communication efforts towards African audiences with the goal of managing public opinion, and reducing the amount of criticism the country was facing, particularly on social media. Using survey data ( $N = 1,961$ ), we first examine attitudes towards China and COVID-19 among Kenyan and South African social media users. This is followed by an exploration of their views towards misinformation related to China during the first months of the pandemic. Finally, we use these data to better understand social media users' motivations for sharing some widely circulated hoaxes about China and COVID-19. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the implications of our findings for misinformation studies, as well as for scholarship on Africa-China relations.

Note:

The research described in this manuscript is a work in progress.

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The African continent, like much of the World, has seen an increase in the amount of misinformation in recent years. This occurs against the backdrop of several other factors that impact on the media's ability to facilitate knowledge sharing in the interest of social progress. Globally, the media are experiencing a crisis of trust, which provides a foothold to disinformation and 'fake news' to take root. On the African continent, this lack of trust is linked to long-standing mistrust of state-owned media, or media that have been 'captured' by elites and are seen not to work in the interest of the broader citizenry. Furthermore, in recent years many African countries have seen a regression in the quality of their democracy, with a decline in press freedom and a rise in threats to the news media. This has further eroded the trust that citizens have in the quality of information they receive via the media.

These developments take place amidst a steep increase in media relations between China and Africa, as well as rising global geopolitical tensions between China and Western democracies, notably the USA (Thussu et al 2020). Sino-American tensions have recently extended to the media industry, with both US and Chinese officials imposing restrictions on visas, operating licenses, as well as access to media products from each other (Gill 2020). For some time, China has embarked on a 'going out' strategy in its international relations policy, which includes an increase in its investments and economic activity in Africa. As part of the country's initiatives to increase its soft power, it has invested heavily in Chinese media outlets on the continent, including the wire service Xinhua, African bureaux for the television service CGTN and the newspaper *China Daily* (Wasserman 2015; 2016; 2018; Zhang, Wasserman and Mano 2016). This influx of Chinese media has been met with a range of responses from African audiences and journalists, ranging from resistance and scepticism to careful consideration and adoption (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2017).

These prejudices, ingrained biases and scepticism about China's influence and its media presence in Africa can also be seen in some of the content of disinformation campaigns, rumours and 'fake news' circulating in the African online and social media space (Madrid-Morales 2021; Subedar 2017). One of the reasons given for the circulation of these rumours about China's involvement in Africa may be protectionism against Chinese imports and stereotypes about the low quality of Chinese products, also a feature of popular political discourse in the USA and in other parts of the world (Bruns et al. 2020; Subedar 2017). The spread of misinformation relating to China's presence in Africa might therefore be linked to existing attitudes, perceptions and biases towards China on the continent and globally. The 2020 COVID-19 outbreak provides a suitable case study to understand these attitudes, given

China's central role (as the most probable country of origin of the virus outbreak, as a global provider of aid and assistance, and as a narrative 'Other' in political discourses worldwide).

This chapter investigates the link between social media users' perceptions of and attitudes towards China and their motivations to share misinformation related to COVID-19 and China. The focus will be on Kenya and South Africa, as examples of African countries with vibrant media environments and an active online community, and where Chinese media's 'going out' strategy has been most felt. We apply a taxonomy developed in focus groups in six sub-Saharan African countries (Madrid-Morales et al. 2021) to categorize open-ended questions included in surveys administered to respondents in the two countries ( $N = 1,961$ ) during April 2020. Respondents were exposed to "real" social media hoaxes related to China and COVID-19, and asked about the reasons to share such content. Our findings suggest that the willingness to share COVID-19 hoaxes related to China is slightly higher in Kenya than South Africa, with three motivations standing out: a perceived civic duty to make people "aware" of information, a desire to generate discussion on social media, and to make a political statement about issues such as systemic racism towards Africans. We also demonstrate the relationship between social media users' negative views on China and certain types of motivations to share disinformation related to COVID-19 and China.

### **Global Chinese Media and Public Opinion in Sub-Saharan Africa**

There has been much attention, both in the scholarly literature and the popular media, to the increased presence of China in Africa, mostly focusing on its economic activities. China's labour practices, the environmental impact of its industries and the extraction of natural resources on the continent have all been the topic of much controversy (French 2014). The increased economic presence of China on the African continent can be seen as part of its larger 'going out' strategy which has marked the country's international relations policy since the 1990s, and which has been reconceptualized in the more recent (since 2013) "Belt and Road Initiative" (Cabestan 2018). Both these initiatives are characterized by heavy investment in African countries in need of infrastructure and connectivity, and aimed at consolidating China's economic and diplomatic presence on the continent while helping China's state firms to internationalize and grow (Cabestan 2018, 592).

An important part of this strategy was the expansion of Chinese media outlets on the continent, and investments in African media and infrastructure projects, training and exchange programmes. This expansion of China's footprint in the African media sphere includes the establishment of the international headquarters of Xinhua news service and a

regional hub of China Radio International (CRI) in Nairobi, the development of Africa-focused programming by China Global Television Network (CGTN), production of journalistic content (e.g. *Chinafrica* magazine), content distribution (e.g. the StarSat satellite television platform), infrastructure development (e.g. cell phone networks), direct investment in African media (e.g. the Independent Media group in South Africa) and various training and exchange sponsorships of African journalists and students (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2018).

This expansion of China's media footprint should be seen as part of the broader 'soft power' initiatives described as 'people-to-people exchanges' in the third Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2006, which also includes diplomatic ties, training programmes, travel and tourism and the establishment of Confucius Institutes at African universities (Bailard 2016, 447). By promising better and more sympathetic coverage of both Africa and China, Chinese media outlets aim to build better relationships in the region and not only increase their market share internationally, but also bolster the country's discursive power in the global arena (Madrid-Morales 2016). In the process, Chinese media outlets like CGTN (previously CCTV) are competing with other global news networks such as BBC, Al-Jazeera and CNN for African audiences (Gorfinkel, Van Staden and Wu 2014, 81-2). China's efforts to extend its global media influence have however been fragmented, not coordinated very well and seemingly without a clear strategy (Madrid-Morales 2021, 2). Recently, efforts have been made to better coordinate the work of Chinese media actors, for instance through the creation in 2018 of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), which should oversee media development programs, and the establishment of a new China Media Group (sometimes called the "Voice of China") linking together CCTV, CRI and China National Radio (CNR), three of the country's leading media (Madrid-Morales 2021,14).

Despite the lack of coordination and cohesion, Chinese media activities in Africa have often been met by audiences and journalists with responses that go from resistance and scepticism to careful consideration and adoption (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2017). Where Chinese media extension was seen as a threat, it is because of its perceived potential to undermine freedom of speech and the culture of independent and critical journalism in African democracies. From this perspective, China's activities in Africa are seen as part of a global campaign aimed at 'leveraging propaganda disinformation, censorship ,and influence over key nodes in the information flow', and undermine 'democratic norms, erodes national sovereignty, weakens the financial sustainability of independent media, and violates local

laws' (Cook 2021). Chinese investments in human resource development and training programmes have been viewed as successful ways to socialise African journalists in 'Chinese values, norms, and expert knowledge' and 'build a positive image of China in Africa' (Benabdallah 2019, 495). These programmes create a new class of 'mediators' who can diffuse Chinese culture among African populations and promote Chinese government ideas and objectives (Diakon and Röschenthaler 2016, 96).

Very little evidence exists of the actual impact of China's media on audiences and journalists. Only a few studies (e.g. Bailard 2016; Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2017) have begun to explore the influence of Chinese media on opinion-making. These studies find a much less direct, causal and homogenous impact of Chinese media on African audiences than is often assumed. Using public opinion data and media access measures, Bailard (2016) investigated the correlation between opinion toward China in six African countries and media usage, as well as the change of these attitudes over time. Her findings suggest that the increase presence of Chinese media in Africa "*may have had the intended effect of improving African public opinion toward China*" (italics added). Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2018) find a nuanced spectrum of user profiles among South African media professionals regarding their views and adoption of Chinese media. These range from resisters to adopters and include unconvinced and pragmatic users of Chinese media. Overall, it seems that Chinese media investments and activities have had a limited direct effect. In a separate study, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2018) find Chinese media to have had little impact on youth audiences in two African countries.

A consequence of the limited impact of Chinese activities towards influencing public opinion is that stereotypes and misconceptions about China persist among African publics (Yeboah-Banin et al. 2019). These prejudices, ingrained biases and scepticism about China's influence and its media presence in Africa can also be seen in some of the content of disinformation campaigns, rumours and 'fake news' circulating in the African online and social media space (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019). One of the reasons given for the circulation of these rumours about China's involvement in Africa may be protectionism against Chinese imports and stereotypes about the low quality of Chinese products, which are a features of popular political discourse all over the World (Subedar 2017).

### **China, COVID-19 & Disinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Globally, attitudes towards China seem to have grown more negative in recent years. In an Afrobarometer survey of 36 African countries in 2014/2015 (Lekorwe, Chingwete, Okuru,

and Samson 2016), China's economic involvement on the continent was largely seen as positive, and China was ranked as the second-best development model globally (after the USA) for their own countries. Whereas Bailard's (2016) study of African attitudes between 2007 and 2013 suggested a shift towards more positive attitudes, linked to consumption of Chinese media, this positive view seemed to have declined in at least one African country. A recent study of attitudes in Namibia found that China ranked lower than the US and their former colonial power South Africa as a model for development (Keulder and Stoman 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic presents a significant inflection point in this regard. A Pew survey in late-2020 (Pew Research 2020) found that across 14 countries with advanced economies, a majority has a negative opinion of China, the most unfavourable in a decade. These views are closely linked to the Covid-19 outbreak – a median of 61% across these countries said they thought China did a poor job in handling the outbreak (Pew Research 2020).

These shifts in public opinion, as well as the Covid-19 outbreak, occur amidst a rise in disinformation globally. The World Health Organization (WHO 2020) warned against the threat of what they have termed an 'infodemic', or 'an overabundance of information about the Covid-19 pandemic. Much of the information circulating about the pandemic is 'misleading or even harmful', and the overabundance of information may also make it more difficult for people to identify accurate, evidence-based information, contribute to anxiety, worry and other mental health issues, prompt people to follow dangerous advice, or build fatigue, disinterest and animosity towards public health messages; and – importantly in the context of this study of African attitudes towards China – also 'encourage xenophobia, hate and exclusion' (WHO 2020).

Despite the efforts China has made in recent years to extend its "soft power" in the African region, including the media outreach described above, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic could potentially have damaged its image on the continent. The spread of misinformation relating to China's presence in Africa as well as the country's association with the origins of the pandemic, might have amplified existing attitudes, perceptions and biases towards China on the continent and globally. The 2020 COVID-19 outbreak provides a suitable case study to understand these attitudes, given China's central location in discourses around the pandemic - as the probably country of origin, as a global provider of aid and assistance, and as a narrative 'Other' in political discourses worldwide.

The first research question this chapter examines, aims to establish the attitudes of social media users towards China. The countries chosen for this study, Kenya and South Africa, represent geographical diversity (representing the East and Southern African regions

respectively) and both countries have seen significant inflow of Chinese media outlets, training programmes and investment. Nairobi, Kenya's capital, is home to the headquarters of CGTN Africa, Xinhua's regional headquarters and the location of the first international bureau of China Radio International. In South Africa, the most prominent, and most controversial, involvement of China in the media space was the investment by the China International Television Corporation the Independent News and Media (York 2013). Both these countries have a vibrant media, an independent press and a high degree of media freedom, as well as a lively digital media sphere. The active community of social media users in both these countries furthermore make them appropriate choices for the study of media users' views on online disinformation related to China. Our first research question is as follows:

**RQ1: What were the prevailing views towards China and towards COVID-19 among South Africans and Kenyans during the first wave of the pandemic?**

The heightened activity of China in the African media sphere occurs at a time where a 'crisis of disinformation' is rampant on the continent with 'devastating' political, social and cultural consequences (Moyo, Mare & Mabweazara 2020,1). Previous research (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019) in Kenya and South Africa has found a high perceived exposure to disinformation – higher than in the USA - and low levels of trust in social and national media. The levels of trust in African media, which have deteriorated in recent years, may result from historical and ongoing state ownership of, control over and pressure on the media (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019,120). This trust deficit may add to the allure of disinformation on the continent, as media users may rather turn to easy explanations for complex issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic, or information that confirm their social and political biases, than accept information provided to them by the mainstream media. Moreover, the threat of disinformation and the signifier 'fake news' has already given African governments and excuse to dismiss criticism aimed at them, intensify their clampdowns on free media and enforce internet shutdowns (Moyo, Mare and Mabweazara 2020,2).

Whereas African governments have a history of state control of critical media, China's media outlets on the continent are closely monitored for articles critical of China, and have to adhere to editorial guidelines set by the Communist Party. Non-political stories are however seldom interfered in, and a positive, 'constructive' editorial approach to reporting on Africa is followed (Madrid-Morales 2021,31). It can be argued that because China's media

tend not to be critical of African governments (Madrid-Morales 2021,32), media users in these countries may view its credibility as low because of its association with state power. In the context of this study, the question then arises how the rising tide of disinformation on the continent and the diminishing trust in the established news media may influence media users' views of Chinese media narratives, and outreach efforts to manage public debates around the handling of the virus. Previous surveys in African countries indicate lower levels of trust in CGTN than in other international broadcasters, for instance (Madrid-Morales 2021,33).

The Covid-19 pandemic provides an appropriate entry point into an analysis of African attitudes towards China and their views on disinformation. China has often been blamed for not only being the origin of the pandemic, but also for covering up the initial outbreak and hiding its mistakes in responding to the disease. The pandemic has also given cause to Western leaders like Donald Trump to engage in anti-Chinese rhetoric and xenophobic discourse, for instance by labeling Covid-19 the 'Chinese virus' (Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindaman 2020). In response to these accusations, China activated its network of global media, diplomatic missions and social media users (Madrid-Morales 2021,43) to counter anti-Chinese rhetoric. It also engaged in disinformation campaigns to criticize the failures of democratic governments in dealing with the pandemic (Kurlantzick 2020). Disinformation campaigns aimed against China continue to gather momentum in Africa. Already disinformation campaigns promoting anti-vaccination messages in Africa have drawn on anti-China sentiment to bring their point across. This includes social media posts blaming China (and India) for dumping ineffective vaccines on Africans (Dube 2021). All of this leads us to ask our second research question:.

**RQ2: To what extent did South Africans and Kenyans and Kenyans believe in disinformation related to China and COVID-19 on social media?**

### **Motivations for Sharing Disinformation**

The term 'fake news' has become problematic, partly because it has been weaponized by populist politicians, and partly because the term is seen as an oxymoron – for something to be categorized 'news', the argument goes, it per definition has to be verifiable. A more nuanced distinction has become common, namely between mis-, dis- and mal-information (UNESCO 2018):

- **Disinformation:** Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country
- **Misinformation:** Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing

harm

- **Mal-information:** Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation or country.

Using this distinction, the emphasis falls on the intention behind the creation and sharing of false information. For false information to spread and have an impact, it has to be shared and amplified. Little research has been done on why people share mis- and disinformation in the African context. What research has been done (e.g. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019) showed that perceived levels of exposure to dis- and misinformation in Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria were high. The same study also revealed that media users in these countries were likely to share misinformation, even when they knew it was inaccurate or made up.

There has been little research on the motivations for the sharing of disinformation in the African context. In other international settings such as the US and the UK, social identity and demographic factors such as race, age and gender have been found to play a role, as well as political positioning – conservative voters tended to be more likely to share misinformation (Bigman et al. 2019; Chadwick and Vaccari 2019). A study (Madrid-Morales et al. 2021) of six African countries - Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe – explored motivations for sharing misinformation among university students. Drawing on data from twelve focus groups in these countries, in which students were shown stimuli of misinformation examples, students were asked questions about their social media use and their news sharing practices. The study found that misinformation was a very common occurrence across these countries and part of students' lived experience. As for why media users share misinformation, the study made three key findings: 1) media users employ a wide variety of cues to determine the veracity of information; (2) the motivations to share a news item, even if users know the item to be inaccurate or false, depends on the topic; and (3) the political use of humour plays an important role when users choose to share misinformation.

Stories about health and food tended to be treated differently from political stories. Media users tended to share misinformation about topics such as health and food out of a sense of civic or community responsibility, even if they weren't convinced of its veracity. Students generally had a low level of interest in politics, but would share political stories if these aligned with their own political views. The prevalence of humour or parody as a motivation for sharing practices seems to stem from particular African communication contexts, where mainstream news was either associated with elites or captured by state-

owned media, and humour functioned as a way to communicate informally or undermine political narratives (Madrid-Morales et al. 2021).

Previous studies lacked more granular detail about why these sharing practices exist and persist in African settings. What is needed is more insight into how media users reflect on their consumption and sharing of mis- and disinformation, how they display agency in choosing what mis- and disinformation to share, and how these sharing practices relate to their trust in the news media. Further questions remaining unanswered in previous research (e.g. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019) include how users detect and define disinformation, why this type of information appeals to them and what prompts them to share it with other users. The Covid-19 pandemic might have brought further motivations for finding disinformation about China. Given the blame placed on China for the origins of the pandemic and its alleged covering up of the outbreak, social media users may find in China a scapegoat upon which to project their frustrations. The pandemic may also give cause to social media users to amplify existing stereotypes and biases (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2018a) towards China by sharing disinformation relating to the country and its influence in Africa. These considerations lead us to ask our third research question, pertaining to the motivations for sharing disinformation:

**RQ3: What were the prevailing motivations expressed by South Africans and Kenyans to share and not to share disinformation about COVID-19 and China on social media?**

We address each of the research questions separately in the next three sections. To do so, we refer to data collected in April 2020 through online surveys in Kenya ( $n = 970$ ) and South Africa ( $n = 991$ ) targeting citizens over the age of 18. Because online surveys tend to overrepresent urban and young residents, during the collection of responses, we enforced quotas around age, gender and region/province to better reflect each country's demographic breakdown. Our sample includes 51.1% women (50.9% in Kenya and 51.4% in South Africa), has a median age of 34 (31 in Kenya, 36 in South Africa), and features social media users from all South African provinces, as well as in all Kenyan counties, with the exception of Mandera and West Pokot counties. In, post-stratification weights were used during the data analysis process, and are reflected in the results presented below. All in all, our data can only speak about those Kenyans and South Africans with regular access to the Internet, and not the entire population. That said, and given that this study focuses on social media content, our methodological approach—while not ideal—can still provide a meaningful description of how social media users in the two countries engage with disinformation.

## Attitudes Towards China and COVID-19

At the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, attitudes towards China in both Kenya and South Africa were far from positive (RQ1). To measure these attitudes, we used a modified version of the scale developed by Anholt (2009; see also, GfK 2009) in his study of nation branding and “soft power”. Survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with five statements included in the original scale (attitudes towards China’s governance, respect of citizen rights, environmental policies, media freedom, and desire to live in China), plus one additional statement that referred specifically to China’s influence on Africa. The scale ranges from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). We present a summary of the results in Table 1, which also includes, for comparative purposes, a summary of responses to the same prompts about the United States. In all questions, both Kenyans and South Africans appeared to have a more negative view of China than they did of the US, even though differences were most pronounced amongst Kenyans than South Africans. For example, to the item “China/US is competently and honestly governed”, both Kenyan and South African respondents gave a higher score to the United States than China (Kenya:  $M_{China} = 1.79$ ,  $M_{US} = 2.35$ ; South Africa  $M_{China} = 1.44$ ,  $M_{US} = 1.67$ ). The difference between the scores for the US and China was statistically significant in both the Kenyan ( $t(1928.6) = -9.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and South African samples ( $t(1974.9) = -3.10$ ,  $p < .005$ ), but much wider in the former. Differences were most pronounced for the item “China/US is a country where I would like to live and work”, while scores were more similar, with differences not statistically significant in the South African Sample ( $t(1963,1) = -1.43$ ,  $p = .153$ ), for the item “China/US has a positive economic and political influence on Africa”. In other words, respondents appeared to acknowledge the positive impact of Chinese engagement with Africa but were still relatively critical with Beijing’s policies on other domains.

[Insert Table 1]

As we noted earlier, public sentiment towards China in several African countries appears to have been in decline in recent years. This trend might have been accentuated because of COVID-19, and therefore help explain the significant differences between attitudes towards China and the US that we found in our data. An alternative explanation is that, despite all of China’s efforts to boost its “soft power” and cultural appeal in Africa, Kenyans, and South Africans—with all their nuanced views—still gravitate more towards US cultural products and social/political values, and therefore exhibit more positive attitudes towards the United States. This might be occurring even though, to many Kenyans and South

Africans, Washington did not handle the pandemic well. When asked about government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, survey respondents appeared to be particularly critical about the way the Donald J. Trump's government responded to the crisis (see Table 2). South African participants gave the highest score to their own government's response ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ), followed by the World Health Organization or WHO ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) and China ( $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ), leaving the US last ( $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ). In the case of Kenya, the rank was WHO, China ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ), Kenya ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) and, finally, the US ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). Without longitudinal data to compare views before and after the pandemic, it is difficult unequivocally pinpoint what explains differences in attitudes towards US and China in Kenya and South Africa. However, and given respondents' relatively positive views on how the Chinese government responded to the crisis, a possible hypothesis would be that the differences already existed before the pandemic, and they might have been made more evident given that many, while acknowledging the effective response taken by the Chinese government, associated the outbreak of the virus to China, given the amount of information on social media that discussed the link between COVID-19 and China.

[Insert Table 2]

In fact, during the early days of the outbreak, a significant amount of the information on COVID-19 and China on social media could have been labelled as either mis- or dis-information. Two of the most prevalent topics included discussions around the origins of the virus, and (often xenophobic) comments that contributed to the stigmatizations of East Asians. In Table 3, we present a summary of Kenyans' and South Africans' views on these two issues. We asked survey respondents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with a list of statements that either referred to the origins of the virus, or discussed xenophobic attitudes towards Asian communities. We adapted the statements (four for each of the "themes") from those developed by Priniski and Holyoak (2020). There were no significant differences in the average support for conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus between South Africans ( $M = 2.05$ ;  $SD = 0.91$ ) and Kenyans ( $M = 2.11$ ;  $SD = 0.89$ ), nor in their level of agreement with xenophobic responses to the pandemic (Kenya:  $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ; South Africa:  $M = 2.02$ ;  $SD = 0.78$ ). While, overall, both countries fell right at the middle of the scale (from 0 to 4), there were some differences between the level of support of different items. When it comes to xenophobic responses, the predominant view was that referring to the virus as the "Chinese coronavirus" or to COVID-19 as the "Wuhan disease" was racist (38% of Kenyans strongly agreed with the statement, and 33% of South Africans).

At the same time, however, many supported the closing of borders to foreigners, even though there is limited evidence that this measure could in fact help stop the spread of the virus (39% of South Africans strongly agreed with the statement, and 49% of Kenyans).

[Insert Table 3]

There is also some discrepancy in the views of Kenyans and South Africans regarding conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus. While, just as we saw with views around xenophobic responses, the average score of the four statements falls right at the middle of the scale, when looking at individual items, some contradictions emerge. For instance, a majority of Kenyans (52.2%) and a large number of South Africans (42.4%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “COVID-19 was engineered in a laboratory” as was often posited on misleading social media posts. At the same time, in an apparent contradiction, most respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “The scientific community is spreading fake news about COVID-19” in both countries (Kenya: 55.4%; South Africa: 40.6%). The prevalent view of the scientific community regarding the origin has been that the virus was not engineered in a laboratory (Dwyer 2021).

### **Perceived Accuracy of Hoaxes and Rumours about China and COVID-19**

Between January and August 2020, the 88 organizations that belong to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) looked into the veracity of more than 8,000 claims about COVID-19. Two fact-checking organizations based in Africa, PesaCheck and AfricaCheck, verified the accuracy of at least 180 claims, that is, approximately one per day during the first six months of the pandemic. Out of the 8,000 claims collected by the IFCN, almost 5,000 circulated on Facebook, and over 1,000 were shared on WhatsApp. Just below 10% of these fact-checks (705) referred to information about China. For example, “Chinese influencer caused the new coronavirus outbreak after eating bat soup”, “A Chinese woman from Wuhan arrived in France with suspected symptoms of coronavirus”, “Chinese scientists expelled from a Canadian microbiology lab took the novel coronavirus strain with them to China.”<sup>1</sup> Using a list of hoaxes, fake social medias posts, photoshopped screenshots and similar materials collected by AFP Fact Check, we identified four recurring themes in inaccurate information about COVID-19 and China during the early days of the pandemic: theories about the origin of the virus; unproven claims that there is a link between 5G networks and

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<sup>1</sup> The authors were granted access to this unpublished dataset of fact-checks through the Poynter Institute in late 2020. Since then, another version of the database has been made available to the general public at <https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/>.

the outbreak of COVID-19; conspiracies related Chinese vaccines and therapeutics; and, instances of racism against Africans in China, beyond the proven cases of discrimination that occurred in the Southern Chinese city of Guangzhou (Li, 2020).

We tested the believability of these hoaxes and debunked rumours (RQ2) by asking survey respondents to indicate how accurate they thought a series of social media posts were. In Figure 1, we present the social media posts we used in our study. Each of them refers to one of the four misinformation themes identified above. These were “real” posts shared on social media that we retrieved from the collection of fact-checks available on the website of AFP Fact Check.<sup>2</sup> Two avoid survey fatigue, each participant only saw two posts selected randomly (Racism in China:  $n_{KE} = 470$ ;  $n_{SA} = 475$ ; Arrest of a Chinese scientist accused of “creating” the virus:  $n_{KE} = 476$ ;  $n_{SA} = 483$ ; COVID-19 and 5G:  $n_{KE} = 468$ ;  $n_{SA} = 467$ ; Chinese vaccine trials in Africa:  $n_{KE} = 464$ ;  $n_{SA} = 480$ ). After seeing each post, respondents were asked about their perceived accuracy of the post (on a scale from 0 very inaccurate to 4 very accurate).<sup>3</sup> We summarize their responses in Figure 2. On average, Kenyans were significantly more likely to believe that the posts they saw were accurate ( $M = 1.55$ ;  $SD = 1.04$ ) than South Africans ( $M = 1.39$ ;  $SD = 0.91$ ). The differences between the two countries were statistically significant ( $t(1949.7) = 3.035$ ;  $p < .005$ ). These scores indicate that, overall, in both countries the majority of survey respondents did not believe the posts to be accurate. Some difference emerge when we compare the perceived accuracy of different posts.

Two of the hoaxes we used in the survey referred directly to Africa and/or Africans. One, a tweet by a Kenyan social media users, appeared to depict a street fight between a Kenyan and Chinese couples in Wuhan (Figure 1c). While the video claimed to be from April 2020, it was in fact a much older recording that was unrelated to any incident of COVID-19 related racial discrimination. Nonetheless, and maybe because other instances of racist responses had occurred against Africans in China in the weeks before we fielded the survey, approximately one quarter of respondents believed the post to be accurate. Kenyans ( $M = 2.04$ ;  $SD = 1.57$ ) were more likely to believe the post was accurate than South Africans ( $M = 1.88$ ;  $SD = 1.27$ ), even though the difference was not statistically significant ( $t(934.7) = 1.857$ ;  $p = .064$ ). The other post related to Africa was a screenshot of a Facebook message shared on WhatsApp that claimed to showcase the arrival of Chinese vaccines in Burundi (Figure 1d). The post asked why the vaccinations would be first distributed in Africa, instead

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<sup>2</sup> The list is available at <https://factcheck.afp.com/Covid-19-debunked-rumors-and-hoaxes>.

<sup>3</sup> At the end of the survey, all participants were debriefed about the nature of the posts and made aware that they were hoaxes. We provided them with a link to fact-checks for further information.

of Europe or “America”. The images, however, were not from Burundi, and did not depict the delivery of vaccines, which were yet to be developed in April 2020. As with the case of the previous post, Kenyans ( $M = 1.56$ ;  $SD = 1.66$ ) appeared to be more likely to believe the message was accurate than South Africans ( $M = 1.41$ ;  $SD = 1.52$ ), but the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant ( $t(938.6) = -1.409$ ;  $p = .159$ ). Nonetheless, the overall percentage of respondents who believed the post to be somewhat or very accurate was much smaller (Kenya: 30.6%; South Africa: 20.8%) than for the post about alleged racial abuse in Wuhan (Kenya: 42.1%; South Africa: 29.2%).

The social media post that was perceived the least accurate in both countries was the screenshot of a video posted on Facebook by an obscure TV network by the name of MOB TV (Figure 1a). The post claimed to show a press conference by the US Department of Justice to discuss the arrest of “A Chinese Scientist That Created Coronavirus”. Only a very small fraction (Kenya: 13.7%; South Africa: 9.3%) labelled this post as accurate even though, as we saw earlier, a sizeable amount of respondents seemed to agree that “COVID-19 was engineered in a laboratory” and that “The global spread of COVID-19 was planned and orchestrated”. Just as with those two statements, Kenyans were overall more inclined to believe the Facebook post was true than South Africans. This also held true for the final post, which depicted a (real) tweet by Keri Hilson, an American songwriter linking 5G towers and the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, and used a statement by philanthropist Bill Gates as proof of the veracity of the claim (Figure 1b). More than 30.9% of Kenyans and 21.7% of South Africans gave some credence to the tweet.

### **Perceived Civic Duty to Share Disinformation**

Based on the data presented so far, it is safe to say that a large majority of Kenyans and South Africans in our sample did not believe in hoaxes and rumours on social media about COVID-19 and China. Still somewhere between a third and a quarter of survey respondents did attribute the posts some level of accuracy. These values went up significantly when we asked participants about their sharing intentions, that is, how likely would they be to share the social media post with family, friends, colleagues and community/church members. Just short of 50% of Kenyans and slightly over 32% of South Africans in our survey said they would be likely or very likely to share the social media posts they saw, even though many perceived them as inaccurate. These differences between countries are similar to the ones reported by Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019), who found that Kenyans were more likely than

Nigerians and South Africans to share political news stories they knew to be made up and political news stories that they found out to be false only after sharing them.

In this final section, we seek to understand what motivates these individuals to share disinformation (RQ3). We also explore the connection between some of the variables described earlier (attitudes towards China, views on conspiracy theories and xenophobic responses) and the different motivations to share disinformation. To this end, we make use of open ended responses to the question “You said that you'd be likely/very likely to share the post above. Could you briefly tell us why?”, which was posed to survey participants after they saw one of the four hoaxes described earlier. Each of the open ended responses was manually coded using a taxonomy of motivations to share disinformation first introduced in Madrid-Morales et al. (2021), which we expanded for this study. The ten motivations we identified are:

- Sharing as a civic/moral duty and to create awareness
- Sharing as a form of social currency
- Sharing for fun
- Sharing “just in case” and regardless of the accuracy
- Sharing to make a (political) statement
- Sharing because information should flow freely
- Sharing to warn others a post is “fake”
- Sharing because the post is “true”
- Sharing to generate discussion and gather people’s opinions.

In Table 4, we offer a breakdown, divided by social media post, of frequencies of motivations to share invoked by users who said they would likely or very likely share one of the posts they were exposed to. Because some of the responses were rather detailed, more than one motivation was identified for several of the posts.

The prevailing motivation we identified was a perceived civic duty to inform others about current events, and to create awareness about an issue. This might take the form of trying to “protect” others in matters related to their health (e.g., “My family has the right to know everything that is connected to the pandemic so that they are able to act safe when it is necessary to do so.”), or to make them aware of racial injustices (e.g. “I would share this with family so they know the happenings around the globe and be aware of the things

Americans are going to bring into Africa”). Overall, around 47% of responses belong to this category, followed by a desire to generate discussion and gather people’s opinions on the post (31%). No noticeable differences were observed between the two countries in their motivations for sharing. However, respondents tended to refer to their “civic/moral duty” more often when they described reasons to share a post with family members, and they appeared most likely to refer to their desire to spark debate when explaining why they would share it with friends. In line with what Madrid-Morales et al. (2021) found through focus group discussions, we observed differences between the motivations for sharing posts related to health, and those that might be of a more political nature. For instance, those who saw the post about the conspiracy theory around the links between 5G and Covid-19 were the most likely to share the “just in case” it turned out to be true (e.g., “It is better they know than if [t]hey don't. We share info, even rumours”; and, “better to be safe than sorry and if it turns out true, we would be on the safe side.”).

When it came to posts about racism, a large number of participants made it clear that they would share the posts—even in instances where they were not sure about their accuracy—to make a broader political statement (e.g., “That is racism, and therefore there is need to spread the news maybe for justice”), to call for action against racism (e.g., “To fight for our right and lives”), or to express their discontent with the way they perceived Africans were treated by other countries, including China (e.g., “To show them on how fellow Africans are being mistreated in China while [C]hinese people barely get mistreated in Africa”). A quarter of those who saw the post of alleged racial tensions on the streets of Wuhan noted that they would share it to make a statement (Kenya: 22.5%; South Africa 23.1%). The number of people who said they would share the posts to generate discussion dropped significantly for South Africans, where open discussion on social media of racial injustices might be frowned upon by some. Differences between Kenyans and South Africans in this case, might also be explained by the fact that the post referred explicitly to Kenyan citizens. Equally worth noting is the fact that around one tenth of the sample said they would share the post for fun or entertainment, the highest value across all social media posts.

To further understand each of these motivations, we fitted a series of regression models to explore the relationship between motivations and a set of demographic and attitudinal predictors. A summary of these analyses is presented in Table 5. We did not observe any consistent relationship between attitudes towards China and any specific motivation to share inaccurate information on social media. As could be expected, there was a significant association between respondents’ perceived accuracy of a social media post and

their motivations to share it. Those who believe the post to be true appeared to be more likely to say they were sharing it as a “civic/moral duty” and to “make a statement”. On the other hand, lower levels of perceived accuracy were associated with users sharing a post to “warn it was fake” or to “spark discussion”. Many of those who said they would share it with others, said they would do that to find out more about the post and discuss their accuracy. In terms of demographic variables, as we noted earlier, after controlling for multiple other explanations, South African respondents appeared to be significantly less likely than Kenyans to share content both as a “civic/moral duty” and to “spark discussion”. Age and gender (the reference group were women) were negatively associated with sharing post to “spark discussion”. In other words, younger respondents as well as women were those most likely to elicit this motivation. The effect of age and gender went in the opposite direction in the model that had “make a statement” as a dependent variable: all other things constant, men and older respondents were more likely to share a post to make a statement than women and younger respondents.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to build on previous explorations for African social media users’ attitudes towards misinformation, with a specific focus on China in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study further aimed at extending previous work on African social media users’ motivations for sharing misinformation, seeking to provide more granular insight into the agency and choices these social media users display when engaging with misinformation. Misinformation about Covid-19 and China provided an entry point into a more broad-ranging analysis of media users’ attitudes towards China, its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and its cultural attractiveness in general. These attitudes are also linked to the motivations media users display for sharing misinformation about China. As may be expected from a more detailed study of motivations and agency, some nuanced and at times even contradictory findings emerged.

It is clear that both Kenyans and South Africans have a broadly negative view of China which may have been amplified by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although respondents displayed strongly critical views about how the US handled the pandemic, they still viewed China in a more negative light overall than the US. This finding may suggest that, similar to the limited impact that China’s soft power attempts have had on journalism on the continent (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2017; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2018a), the country’s cultural appeal is also fairly low among media users in Kenya and

South Africa. These attitudes are likely to pose significant challenges for the soft power strategies of Chinese media on the continent in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Notwithstanding their overall cultural preference for the USA above China, respondents in our study were very critical of the way that the US government handled the Covid-19 crisis. Despite the robust criticism offered by South African news coverage (Wasserman et al. forthcoming) South African participants gave the highest score to their own government's response to the pandemic, with the US in last place, after the World Health Organization (WHO) and China. The US was also in last place of the ranking offered by Kenyan respondents. The positive views of China's handling of the crisis, despite respondents' overall negative attitudes towards the country, may have influenced the resistance to xenophobic messaging and implied attribution of blame towards China for the Covid-19 pandemic. The predominant response of media users in South Africa and Kenya was that references to the SARS-Cov-2 virus as originating in China or linked to Wuhan were racist. Somewhat contradictorily, respondents from both these countries demonstrated a more xenophobic attitude to foreign travelers, despite limited evidence that halting international travel would mitigate the spread of the virus.

Although there were some exceptions (e.g. the high degree of support for the misleading social media post that Covid-19 was engineered in a laboratory - 52.2% of Kenyans and 42.4% of South Africans were in agreement), a large majority of Kenyans and South Africans in our sample did not believe in hoaxes and rumours on social media about COVID-19 and China, but they did show interest in sharing these posts. Kenyans were significantly more likely to believe in hoax posts than South Africans, although on the whole the majority of the respondents in these countries (taken together) also trusted the scientific community for not spreading false information about the pandemic. It is also instructive to understand the reasons that those who indicated that they would share one of the posts they were exposed to, would do so. We found that the most prevalent motivations were a sense of "moral/civic" duty to share information and make other aware, and a desire to spark discussion, debates and gather other people's views. We also saw differences between the types of posts, with those about racial injustices making people more likely to share to make a statement about their political views.

Overall, our study provides new evidence about Kenyans' and South Africans' engagement with disinformation. In line with our previous work (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019), we show that a significant number of social media users do share content that they might consider inaccurate. Our findings are also in line with previous research about

what motivates social users to share content. We provide quantitative evidence to support the findings of previous qualitative studies suggesting that a sense of “moral/civic” duty to share information and to create awareness is what drives most sharing on social media. This study further contributes to studies of misinformation by applying existing taxonomies to one case study, and by showing that, when it comes to misinformation about China and Covid-19, existing attitudes towards China might not be the main drivers in information sharing, and that a perception that sharing misinformation might fulfill a civic duty is a key factor shaping sharing practices.

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## Tables

Table 1. Attitudes towards China and the United States in Kenya and South Africa (0 to 4 scale)

	Kenya <i>n</i> = 970		South Africa <i>n</i> = 991	
	China	US	China	US
X is competently and honestly governed.	1.79	2.35	1.44	1.67
X respects the rights of its citizens and treats them with fairness.	1.65	2.83	1.44	2.07
X behaves responsibly to protect the environment.	1.59	2.66	1.33	1.88
The media in X are free and objective.	1.42	3.00	1.26	2.20
X has a positive economic and political influence on Africa	2.53	2.88	2.14	2.23
X is a country where I would like to live and work.	1.10	2.97	1.03	2.26

Table 2. Kenyans' and South Africans' assessment of government responses to COVID-19 (0 to 4 scale)

	Kenya <i>n</i> = 970	South Africa <i>n</i> = 991
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

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Table 3. COVID-19 related attitudes in Kenya and South Africa (0 to 4 scale)

	Kenya <i>n</i> = 970	South Africa <i>n</i> = 991
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
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

Table 4. Motivations for sharing hoaxes related to China and COVID-19 by type of social media post (in percentages)

	Arrest of scientist		5G and COVID		Vaccine trials		Racism in China	
	KE	SA	KE	SA	KE	SA	KE	SA
One's Civic Duty	39.6	44.1	51.7	48.4	58.6	46.4	48.3	38.0
A form of social currency	1.3	2.1	0.7	0.9	0.0	1.0	1.3	0.9
Just for fun	1.3	4.8	2.2	2.8	0.7	2.4	8.1	9.0
Just in case it is true	7.8	4.3	10.3	12.4	6.5	8.6	4.4	8.6
Make a statement	2.2	6.4	3.7	4.6	17.3	17.2	22.5	23.1
Information should be free	3.9	5.3	3.0	10.1	4.3	8.1	3.0	3.6
Warn others post is fake	6.5	6.9	3.3	1.8	4.3	2.9	1.0	1.4
It is the truth	9.6	10.6	4.4	3.7	5.4	2.4	3.4	4.5
Generate discussion	40.9	30.3	42.4	27.6	29.1	28.2	29.2	17.2
Other motivations	13.5	9.0	10.3	11.1	6.5	12.0	7.4	13.6

Table 5. OLS Regression results for different motivations to share misinformation

	<i>Civic/Moral Duty</i>	<i>Spark discussion</i>	<i>Make a Statement</i>	<i>Just in case</i>	<i>Just for fun</i>	<i>Warn it is fake</i>
Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>
(Intercept)	0.06	0.97**	-0.05	0.07	0.05	0.17**
Gender (0 = Female)	0.02	-0.14**	0.08**	-0.07**	0.04*	0.02
Age	0.00	-0.01**	0.00**	-0.00	0.00	-0.00
Country (0 = Kenya)	-0.12**	-0.16**	-0.00	0.02	0.02	-0.01
Attitudes towards China	0.03	-0.03	-0.02	0.01	-0.02*	-0.00
China's government response	0.04**	0.03	-0.03**	0.00	0.00	0.00
Xenophobic attitudes	0.04	-0.06**	0.00	0.02*	0.01	-0.02
Views on origins of virus	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.00
Perceived accuracy of posts	0.23**	-0.05*	0.10**	-0.01	-0.01	-0.04**
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.107**	0.050**	0.082**	0.018**	0.019**	0.035**
<i>N</i> = 1,278						

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

# Figures

a. Arrest of a Chinese scientist



b. Links between 5G towers and COVID-19



c. Racial tensions between Chinese and Africans



d. Chinese vaccine trials in Africa



Figure 1. Social media posts collected from AFP Fact Check that were used in the survey

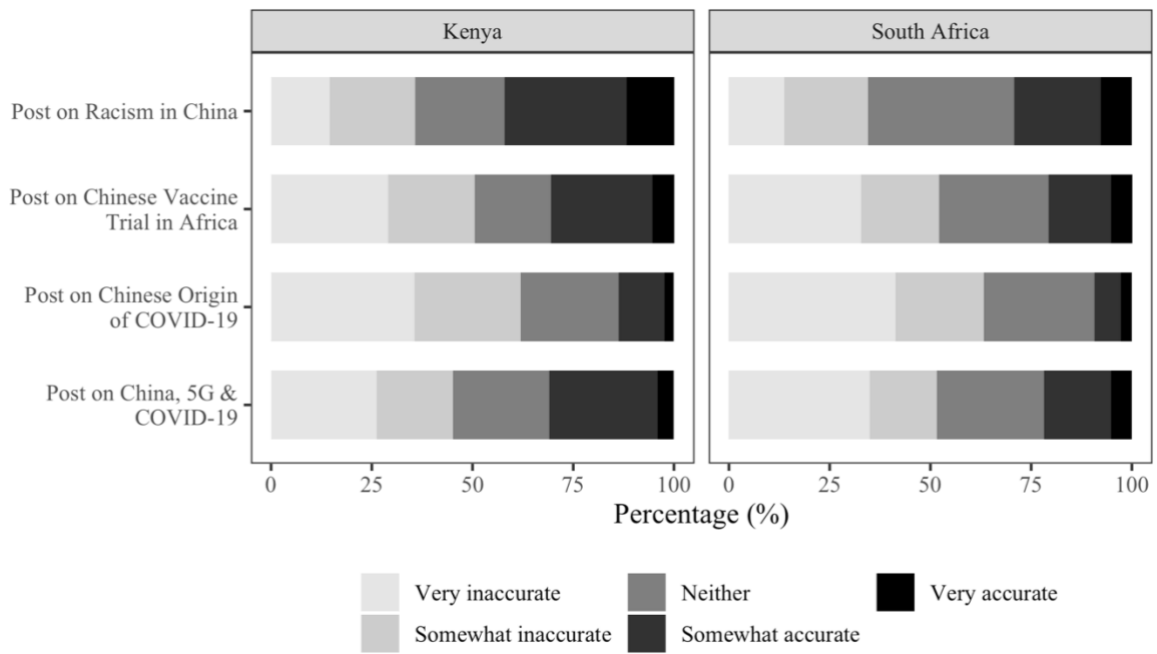


Figure 2. Perceived accuracy of hoaxes on social media about China and COVID-19 among Kenyans and South Africans