What motivated the sharing of disinformation about China and Covid-19? A study of social media users in Kenya and South Africa

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Abstract

Throghout the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was inundated with disinformation related to the virus and its origins and possible remedies and cures. Much of the problematic information circulating on social media was related to China, the country where the first cases of the disease were reported. In this chapter, we look at how social media users in Kenya and South Africa engaged with disinformation about China and COVID-19. Both countries have seen in the last decade an increase in mediated engagements with China. 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 disinformation related to China during the first months of the pandemic. Finally, we use these data to better understand what motivated social media users to share hoaxes about China and COVID-19.

Concerns that disinformation[2] has been on the increase on the African continent, like in much of the rest of the World, have been at the forefront of academic debates for some time. Moyo, Mare & Mabweazara (2020:1), for instance, refer to a "crisis of disinformation" which has "ravaged electoral, social and cultural processes with devastating consequences". Other researchers have found high levels of perceived exposure to disinformation in several African nations (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). This happens as other socio-political factors impact on the media's ability to facilitate knowledge sharing in the interest of social progress. Globally, public perceptions about declining levels of trust in the media have been on the rise, with a range of surveys indicating public concerns about "impartiality, sensationalism, relevance and lack of depth" in the media (Fisher et al. 2020: 1). Research by the Reuters Institute (2021) suggests that, although trust levels in news media rebounded during the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of disinformation on social media, particularly messaging platforms in the Global South, continues apace. On the African continent, for instance, there is a long history of media that have been "captured" by elites and are seen not to work in the interest of the broader citizenry. This has led to differential levels of trust in public versus private media (Moehler & Singh, 2011).

The increased presence of Chinese media outlets in Africa has made some of these matters more complex. Since the 1990s, Beijing has embarked on a "going out" strategy in its international relations policy, which includes increasing the media footprint on the continent (Zhang, Wasserman and Mano 2016). African audiences and journalists have responded to this influx in different ways: some actively resist Chinese media, others take a sceptical stance, while some use Chinese media content in their own reporting (Madrid-Morales and

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[2] There has been much debate in the academic literature around terminology such as "fake news", dis-, mis- and mal-information. These terms refer to varying degrees of harm and falseness, and they that messengers have different intentions in sharing inaccurate information (Wardle and Derakshan 2017, 5, 20). To avoid confusion, we uses disinformation as an umbrella term to refer to all types of false information that have the potential to cause harm.

Wasserman 2017). Those who were resistant or sceptical have mostly expressed concerns about the negative impact that China's state-controlled media model might have on the fragile cultures of free expression and media independence on the continent (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017). Some of these processes have coincided with increasing tensions between China and Western democracies, notably the US (Thussu et al. 2020). Sino-American tensions have also 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).

In this context, recent events have created challenges for China's "going out" strategy. Allegations of ethnic cleansing in Xinjiang, suppression of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic through ongoing lockdowns[3] (Yang 2022) has made it harder for China to promote its image globally, including in Africa (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022). The global public image crisis experienced by the Chinese government has led to a more assertive approach to the management of foreign public opinion. Beijing has taken to more aggressively countering criticism through coordinated top-down information campaigns (Douzet et al. 2021), led by "Wolf Warrior" diplomats, and by "borrowing boats to sail overseas" (*jie chuan chu hai*), an expression that refers to inserting content in the domestic media in the target countries to promote ideas aligned with China's preferred strategic narratives (Rolland 2021).

It is against this background that China's attempts to steer specific narratives around COVID-19 should also be seen. Some of the resistance and scepticism about China's influence and its media presence in Africa has emerged in some of the disinformation campaigns, rumours and "fake news" circulating online (Yan & Sautman 2012). Given that China has often been perceived in global media discourses as the origin of the virus outbreak

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[3] China's 'zero-covid' policy led to widespread protests in November 2022 (Davidson 2022).

on the one hand, and as a global provider of aid and assistance on the other, the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak provides a suitable case study to understand how the discourses about the pandemic tie into wider geopolitical narratives. Within this broader goal, this chapter looks at the link between social media users' perceptions of and attitudes towards China and their motivations to share disinformation 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.

Kenya and South Africa have democratic political systems and robust citizen engagement in the mediated public sphere. The wide availability of and access to social media, mostly accessed through mobile phones, has facilitated public participation in political debates, but have also played a big role in the spread of disinformation. We find one such example in the the 2007–2008 elections in Kenya, where rumors about election rigging spread via SMS technology (Mäkinen & Kuira, 2008). Rumors and falsehoods circulating on these circuits of informal exchanges of information may result from the lack of trust in the mainstream news media, but could also be read as a result of political disillusionment with local politicians and elites, as well as global superpowers. Such rumors may arise as a result of feelings of disempowerment, and serve as an alternative narrative to better explain the causes of current circumstances.

Global Chinese Media, Public Opinion and COVID-19

The increased economic presence of China on the African continent, part of its larger "going out", has been a core component of Beijing foreign policy since the early 2000s (Cabestan, 2018). An important part of this strategy was the expansion of Chinese media outlets on the continent. This expansion of China's footprint in the African media sphere includes the establishment of the regional 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). In addition, Madrid-Morales (2021) has suggested that, since 2018, Chinese media and other actors working in engaging foreign audiences, have also been very active in "managing" foreign public opinion by other means, including multilingual coordinated campaigns on social media or paying news media outlets to run content created by Chinese media (Olander, 2021).

This expansion of China's media footprint should be seen as part of the broader 'soft power' (Bailard 2016). 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). Some NGOs and civil society organizations, like Washington-based Freedom House, have seen these mediated activities in Africa as part of a larger global campaign that is "leveraging propaganda disinformation, censorship, and influence over key nodes in the information flow", which undermines "democratic norms, erode national sovereignty, weaken the financial sustainability of independent media, and violates local laws" (Cook, 2021). Despite these concerns, little evidence exists of the actual impact of China's media on audiences. Only a few studies (e.g. Bailard 2016; Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2017; 2022) have begun to explore the influence of Chinese media on public opinion. These studies find a much less direct, causal and homogenous impact on African audiences than is often assumed.

Globally, attitudes towards China seem to have grown more negative in recent years, with the COVID-19 pandemic marking a significant inflection point. While an Afrobarometer survey of 16 African countries in 2014/2015 found respondents to have largely positive views of China's economic involvement on the continent (65% of respondents said China had a "somewhat" or "very" positive influence on their country), a subsequent survey (2018/2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic) found a decline in that number: only 60% of respondents across 16 countries thought that China had a positive influence (Selormey, 2020). Pointing in the same direction, Pew Research Center survey in late-2020 found that across 14 advanced economies, a majority has a negative opinion of China, the most unfavourable in a decade. These views appear to be 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).

What these data suggest, is that, despite the efforts China has made in recent years to extend its "soft power" in Africa, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic could potentially have damaged its image on the continent. The spread of disinformation 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. In light of this, in this chapter we first ask, *what were the prevailing views towards China and towards COVID-19 among South Africans and Kenyans during the first wave of the pandemic?* (RQ1).

There are multiple reasons why the COVID-19 pandemic provides an appropriate entry point into an analysis of African attitudes towards China and their views on disinformation as it pertains to China. China has been blamed for not only being the most likely origin of the pandemic, but also for covering up information about the virus, mishandling the initial outbreak, and punishing whistleblowers who raised concerns about its coming impact (Hamid, 20201). The pandemic has also given cause to some political leaders

to engage in anti-Chinese rhetoric and xenophobic discourse, for instance by labelling COVID-19 the "China virus" or refering to COVID-19 as "kung flu" (Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindaman 2020). In response to these accusations, China has relied on its global media network, diplomatic missions and social media users to to counter anti-Chinese rhetoric (Gill 2020; Madrid-Morales, 2021). Beijing has also engaged in disinformation campaigns to criticize the failures of democratic governments in dealing with the pandemic (Kurlantzick 2020). Simultaneously, disinformation campaigns aimed against China continue to gather momentum globally. In Africa, disinformation campaigns promoting anti-vaccination messages have drawn on existing anti-China sentiment. This includes social media posts blaming China (and India) for providing ineffective vaccines on Africans (Dube 2021). All of this leads us to ask our second research question: *to what extent did South Africans and Kenyans believe in disinformation related to China and COVID-19 on social media*? (RQ2)

For false information to spread and have an impact, it has to be shared and amplified. Understing what motivates the sharing is, therefore, important. When studying sharing motivations, it is important to insight into how media users reflect on sharing practices, how they display agency in choosing what information, true or false, to share, and how these practices relate to their trust in the news media. While there's abundant work on users' motivations to engage with disinformation, (see, for example, Madrid-Morales et al. 202), the COVID-19 pandemic might have brought to the fore new motivations. Given the blame placed on China for the origins of the pandemic and the accusations that it covered up the outbreak (Hamid 2020) 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 towards China by sharing disinformation relating to the country and its influence in Africa. These considerations lead us to ask our final research

question: *what were the prevailing motivations expressed by South Africans and Kenyans to share disinformation about COVID-19 and China on social media*? **(**RQ3).

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) distributed among adults 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. In addition, post-stratification weights (by gender and age group, were used during the data analysis process. All the results presented below are done with weighted data. Despite our efforts to draw a diverse, representative and inclusive sample, 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) in his study of nation branding and "soft power" to measure how attractive nations are overseas. Survey respondents were asked about their level of agreement with five statements included in the original Anholt scale, plus one additional statement that referred 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 had a more negative view of China that they did of the U.S., even though differences between the two nations were most pronounced among 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 differences were statistically significant in both the Kenyan (t(1928.6) = -9.28, p < .001) and South African samples (t(1974.9) = -3.10, p < .005. Differences were most pronounced for the item "China/US is a country where I would like to live and work", while scores were most 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".

[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 differences between attitudes towards China and the U.S. An alternative explanation is that, despite all of China's efforts to boost its "soft power", 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 Trump administration responded to the crisis (see Table 2). South Africans 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 ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.06$), 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 to pinpoint what explains differences in attitudes towards US and China. However, and given respondents' relatively positive views on how the Chinese government responded to the crisis, a possible hypothesis would be that the differences (more positive views of the U.S. than China) existed before the pandemic. This gap in perceptions might have been made more evident given that many, even while acknowledging the effective response taken by the Chinese government, might associate the outbreak of the virus to China.

[Insert Table 2]

During the early days of the outbreak, a significant amount of the information circulating online on COVID-19 and China could have been labelled as disinformation. Two of the most prevalent topics in news stories included discussions around the origins of the virus, and (often xenophobic) comments that contributed to the stigmatizations of East Asians (Ong, 2021). In Table 3, we present a summary of Kenyans' and South Africans' views on these two issues. We asked respondents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with a list of statements that either referred to conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus, or xenophobic attitudes towards Asian communities. We adapted the statements 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 ($M = 2.11$; $SD = 0.89$),[4] nor in their level of agreement with xenophobic responses to the pandemic (Kenya: $M = 2.03$, $SD = 0.84$; South Africa: $M =$

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[4] This measure is the average mean score of the last four statements (*conspiracy beliefs*) in Table 3.

2.02; $SD = 0.78$).[5] While, overall, the average scores in both countries fell right at the middle of the scale (from 0 to 4), there were some differences between participants' support for 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 (39% of South Africans strongly agreed with the statement "One of the best ways to reduce the spread of COVID-19 is to stop immigration into our country", and 49% of Kenyans), even though there is limited evidence that this measure could in fact help stop the spread of the virus once it was already circulating domestically.

[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. 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 social media posts. The Wuhan "lab leak theory" has since been refuted by scientific evidence (Holmes 2022). At the same time, in an apparent contradiction, most respondents in both countries (Kenya: 55.4%; South Africa: 40.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "The scientific community is spreading fake news about COVID-19". The prevalent view of the scientific community regarding the origin has been that the virus was not engineered in a laboratory (Dwyer 2021).

Hoaxes 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-

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[5] This measure is the average mean score of the first four statements (*xenophobic beliefs*) in Table 3.

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, around 10% referred to information about China. For example, "Chinese influencer caused the new coronavirus outbreak after eating bat soup" or "Chinese scientists expelled from a Canadian microbiology lab took the novel coronavirus strain with them to China."[6] Using a list of hoaxes, fake social medias posts, digitally manipualted screenshots and similar materials collected by AFP Fact Check, an international fact-checking organization, 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 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 against some groups of African residents that occurred in the Southern Chinese city of Guangzhou (Li, 2020).

We tested the believability of these hoaxes (RQ2) by asking survey respondents to indicate how accurate they thought a series of social media posts were. We showed participants four posts, each of which refers to one of the four disinformation narratives listed 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.[7] To avoid survey fatigue, each participant only saw two posts selected randomly. After seeing each post, respondents were asked about their accuracy of (on a scale from 0 very inaccurate to 4 very accurate).[8] We summarize the percentage of responses in Figure 1. On average, Kenyans were significantly

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[6] 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/.
[7] The list is available at https://factcheck.afp.com/Covid-19-debunked-rumors-and-hoaxes.
[8] At the end of the survey, all participants were debriefed about the nature of the posts and made aware that they were hoaxes.

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 (below the mid-point of 2 in our scale) indicate that, overall, the majority of survey respondents did not believe the posts to be accurate. However, some differences emerge when we compare the perceived accuracy of different posts.

Two of the hoaxes referred directly to Africa and/or Africans. One, a tweet by a Kenyan social media user, appeared to depict a street fight between Kenyan and Chinese couples in Wuhan. While the video claimed to be from April 2020, it was in fact a much older recording unrelated to COVID-19. 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.. The other post related to Africa was a screenshot of a Facebook message shared on WhatsApp that claimed to show the arrival of Chinese vaccines in Burundi. The post asked why the vaccinations would be first distributed in Africa, instead 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 appeared to be marginally more likely to believe the message was accurate than South Africans, but the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant ($t(938.6) = -1.409$; $p = .159$). Furthermore, the percentage of respondents who believed the vaccine 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 as the least accurate was the screenshot of a video posted on Facebook by an obscure TV network by the name of MOB TV. 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. 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 an American songwriter who linked 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. More than 30.9% of Kenyans and 21.7% of South Africans gave some credence to the tweet. While these two hoaxes referred to China, they were part of wider global narratives, and might reveal less about Kenyans' and South Africans' imaginary of China and Africa-China relations than the first two.

Sharing Disinformation to Discuss, Connect and Take a Stand

Based on the data we collected, it is safe to say that a large majority of Kenyans and South Africans 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 some level of accuracy to the posts. These values went up significantly when we asked participants about their sharing intentions, that is, how likely they would be to share the social media post with family, friends, coworkers and/or community/church members. Over 45% of Kenyans and slightly over 32% of South Africans in our survey said they would be "likely" or "very likely" to share the posts they saw, even though many perceived them as inaccurate. Sharing intention was highest with friends (Kenya: 54%; South Africa 38%), and lowest with community/church members (35%; 24%). Sharing intention with family (49%; 38%) was higher than with co-workers (46%; 29%)

In this final section of the chapter, we focus on understanding what motivated some survey participants to say they would share the hoaxes they were presented with (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 identify users' sharing motivations, we make use of

responses to the question "You said that you'd be likely/very likely to share the post above

with {family; friends; coworkers; community/church members}. Could you briefly tell us

why?", which was posed to survey participants after they saw two of the hoaxes. Each open-

ended response was classified by one of two coders using a taxonomy of motivations that was

derived from that introduced in Madrid-Morales et al. (2021).[9] We identified fourteen

motivations. In Table 4, we offer a breakdown, divided by social media post, of frequencies

of motivations invoked by those users who said they would "likely" or "very likely" share

one of the posts they were exposed to (N = 4,917 statements). Because some of the responses

were rather detailed, more than one motivation was identified for several of the posts.

[Insert Table 4]

The prevailing motivation was the desire to inform others about current events, keep

them in the know and helping them make more informed decisions related to COVID-19

(e.g., "I like to share important information with people I know" or "So they can share it with

their families to make them aware"). Overall, around 24% of responses belong to this

category, followed by responses that we labelled as "to make a statement" (18%). As shown

on Table 4, this motivation was most prevalent amongst those who saw the hoax about a

racist incident in Wuhan (over 31% for Kenyans, close to 26% in South Africa). Many

participants made it clear that they would share the post—even in instances where they were

not sure about its accuracy—to make a broader political statement (e.g., "That is racism, and

therefore there is need to spread the news maybe for justice"), 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

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[9] The coders underwent multiple rounds of training until they reached a satisfactory level of intercoder
reliability (ICR). After the final round of training, ICR stood at 92% agreement and Krippendorff's α = 0.90.

barely get mistreated in Africa"). Discrimination also featured in responses to other posts, for example, a South African respondent who saw the hoax about vaccine trials in West Africa, wrote: "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". Around 5% of all the statements mentioned China explicitly. Of those, 87% were labelled as "to make a statement", with views ranging from "China must be exposed" to "Kenyans do not like or trust Chinese" and "Chinese have really help[ed] Africa".

The third most common motivation was "to spark discussion" (16.8 %) followed by "duty to warn" (15.3%). Respondents tended to refer to their civic/moral duty to warn others 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 where the most likely to share it "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").

We identified two additional motivations that had not been included in previous literature on the topic. The first one, which we labelled as "connecting and caring" accounted for around 9% of all responses. This response may be indicative of the strong cultural value of *ubuntu,* a relational ethic found in African societies, according to which "human beings have a dignity in virtue of their capacity for community, understood as the combination of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them" (Metz 2011: 532). In some cases, respondents referred directly to how important family, friends and others were to them

(e.g., "Because I care for them" or "To create positive hope"); in other cases, there was a religious component to care and connectedness (e.g. "So that we can pray for Africa and Africans in diaspora" or "For spiritual connection comfort in this needy period"); while, in some other instances, responses elicited a desire to build or strengthen ties with others (e.g. "Mostly to spread friendships around the neighbourhood by learning from other people" or "Community is supposed to be there for each other"). We also identified a numbers of users (5.3% overall) who said they would share the hoax to seek the help of others in verifying its veracity. This type of engagement with disinformation was a lot more prevalent than correcting/confronting (2.6%). Some researchers have indicated than in more group-oriented and collectivistic societies, social media users tend to avoid correcting others or confronting posters, as this might break important social ties (Duffy, Tandoc and Ling, 2020).

To further understand how each the motivations to share inaccurate information connects to attitudes towards China in general, we fitted a series of regression models.[10] A summary of these analyses is presented in Table 6. We did not observe any consistent relationship between attitudes towards China and any specific motivation to share inaccurate information on social media. Negative attitudes towards China did not consistently explain why some users decided to engage and share with the hoaxes. As could be expected, the strongest predictor of sharing was respondents' perceived accuracy of a social media post. Those who believed the post to be true were consistently more likely to say that they were sharing it as a "duty to warn", to "make a statement" or pass information along. On the other hand, lower levels of perceived accuracy of the posts were associated with users sharing a post to "warn it was fake" or "spark discussion". After controlling for multiple other explanations, South African respondents appeared to be significantly less likely than Kenyans

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[10] We fitted one model for each motivation, measured as the total number of times a survey respondent referred to that motivation.

to share content as a "duty to warn" others, to "spark discussion", "to make a statement" or "to connect and care". Age did not play any role in explaining users' engagements with the posts, but gender identity did. Female-identifying participants were more likely to share a post to spark discussion, while male-identifying respondents were more likely to share a post to make a statement .

Conclusion

This chapter examined the rise of disinformation globally, with a specific focus on Africa, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We argued that the intersection between 1) an increased presence of China in Africa in recent years as part of its geopolitical strategy, 2) the intensification of tensions between China and Western democracies like the USA, and c) the wide circulation of disinformation around China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic, provided a useful lens through which to view the motivations for social media users to share false information. We posited that, disinformation 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.

Data presented in this chapter show that both Kenyans and South Africans had a predominantly negative view of China, which may have been amplified by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although respondents also 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 (see, for example, Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2017), the country's appeal among other sectors of the population might also be relatively low.

Despite the robust criticism offered by South African news coverage (Wasserman et al. 2021), 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 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.

With some exceptions, 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. 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 others 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 want to share to make a statement about their political views. We also identified two motivations that had not been included in previous literature on the topic. Media users indicated that they would share disinformation because it made them "connect and care". We also found users who said they would share hoaxes in order to seek help in verifying its veracity.

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 (Madrid-Morales et al. 2021). 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 disinformation by applying existing taxonomies to one case study, and by showing that, when it comes to disinformation about China and COVID-19, existing attitudes towards China might not be the main drivers in information sharing, but that contextual factors such as social and cultural motivations play an influential role in 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 n = 970		South Africa n = 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 $n = 970$	South Africa $n = 991$
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

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

	Kenya *n* = 970	South Africa *n* = 991
Xenophobic beliefs		
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
Conspiracy beliefs		
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 and country (in percentages)

	Arrest of scientist		5G and COVID		Racism in China		Vaccine trials	
	KE	SA	KE	SA	KE	SA	KE	SA
Duty to warn	16.6	15.2	4.6	4.7	13.8	11.8	22.9	18.1
Connecting & caring	9	3.8	7.3	3.7	8.4	4	9.5	6.6
Social currency	0.7	0	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.9	0.2	0.3
Just for fun	0.7	1.6	0.7	2.6	3.3	5.4	0.4	1.2
Just in case	4.4	4.9	2.8	3.3	1.2	1.3	3	3.1
Sharing everything	0.8	1.6	1.4	0.9	0.2	3.8	0.6	1.4
To make a statement	13	13.7	12.4	13.6	31.4	25.9	13.3	15.9
Information is to be shared	22.8	29.9	31.1	34.3	19.2	23.4	25.2	27.2
To warn the post is fake	1.5	2	5.3	4.2	0.4	0.4	4	1.9
It's the truth	2.2	2.4	2	1.2	2.1	2	1.2	1.4
It's interesting/relevant	1.9	5.7	2.5	7.2	1.5	8.3	0.4	4
To spark discussion	20.6	13.4	21.3	15.9	13.2	10.3	14	12.7
To verify	5.4	5.5	7.8	7.5	4.4	0.9	4.4	4.5
Other	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.7	1	1.6	0.9	1.6

Table 5. OLS Regression results for selected motivations to share disinformation related to COVID-19 and China

| Predictor	Duty to warn	Sharing information	Spark discussion	Make a Statement	Connecting & caring	Warn it is fake
	b	b	b	b	b	b
(Intercept)	-0.35*	0.05	1.12**	-0.09	-0.11	0.25**
Gender (0 = Female)	0.04	-0.10	-0.24**	0.21**	-0.01	0.04
Age	0.00	0.00	-0.01*	0.00	0.00	-0.00
Country (0 = Kenya)	-0.15*	0.03	-0.22**	-0.17*	-0.19**	-0.03
Attitudes towards China	0.04	0.19**	-0.04	-0.04	0.06*	0.00
Chines government's response	0.01	0.01	0.07**	-0.05*	0.01	0.00
Xenophobic attitudes	0.05	0.09*	-0.06	0.04	0.06**	-0.02
Views on origins of virus	0.03	-0.01	0.02	0.06	0.01	0.01
Perceived accuracy of posts	0.31**	0.24**	-0.07*	0.33**	0.09**	-0.08**
R^2	.090**	.049**	.042**	.090**	.050**	.039**
				$N = 1,278$		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Figures
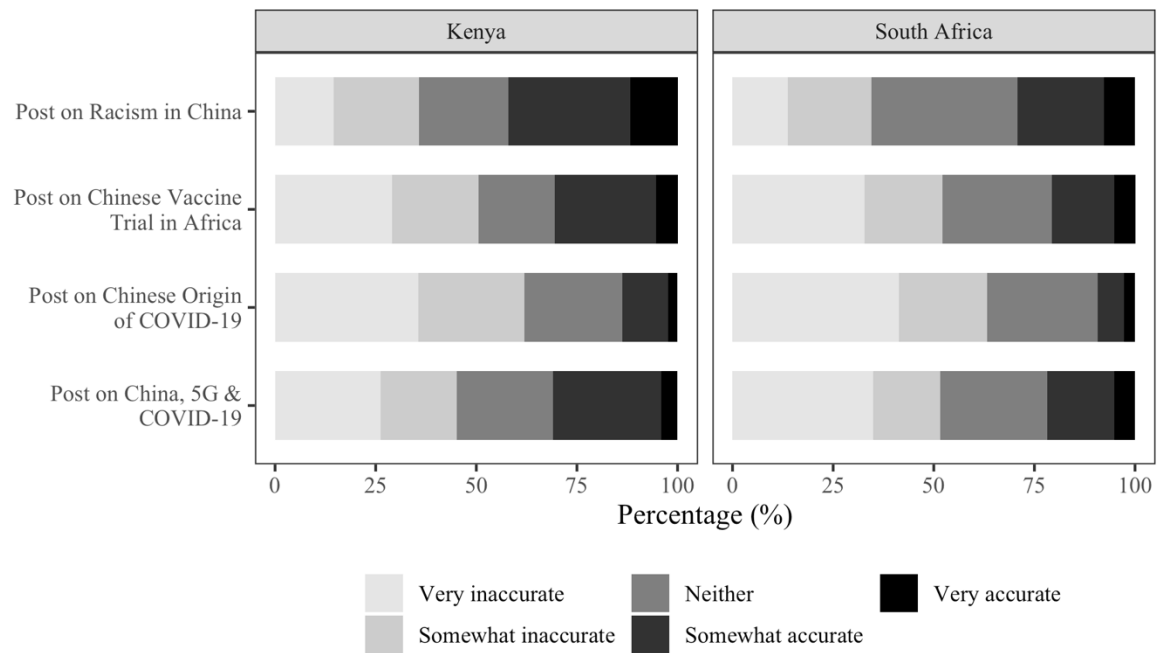
Figure 1. Perceived accuracy of hoaxes on social media about China and COVID-19 among Kenyans and South Africans