



COVID-19 Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This report seeks to communicate **operational recommendations** based on social media monitoring from January 1-7, as well as relevant information on current mis/disinformation.

Target countries include **Angola, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa (ENG), Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Cameroon, Mauritius, and Niger (FR)**. We have outlined what we mean by “engagements” and how we gather information in the methodology section at the end of this report.

CONCERNING TRENDS

- [Discussions regarding the IHU variant](#)
- [Potential impasse in vaccine uptake as a consequence of Omicron](#)

POSITIVE TRENDS

- [Accurate, sanctioned health information is getting traction](#)

TOPICS OF INTEREST

- Reports of a combination of having both influenza and coronavirus at the same time emerged in Los Angeles, California, U.S. last week. The combination has been termed “**Flurona**” but to date, there have been no reports of the double infection, but there has been a small spike in information searches regarding the potential “**twindemic**.” [\[LINK\]](#)
- Following the destruction of over one million COVID-19 vaccines last month due to a very short window of shelf life, President Muhammadu Buhari has stated that **Nigeria is working on developing its own vaccines** to keep up with the necessary doses required to combat the increase in COVID-19 cases. [\[LINK\]](#)
- In December, Togo’s Ministry of Digital Economy and Transformation launched PassCovid19TG, which is a simplified method to “easily upload, access, and present the COVID-19-related health information.” As many citizens across Africa have struggled to obtain and present vaccine cards at necessary checkpoints, the success in Togo’s multiple technological approaches has led to the second-highest vaccination rate in West Africa. [\[LINK\]](#)

POTENTIAL INFORMATION VOIDS (KEY QUESTIONS)

- The IHU variant has hit social media channels with minimal verified/accurate information alongside the new trend. The WHO has not declared the variant high-risk



at this time, nor has there been a concern that the variant is more resistant to vaccines. However, the viral nature of new COVID-19 rumors has led to assumptions and misinformation to fill the current information gaps as major media outlets have not kept up with the trend and promoted the available scientific findings at the same rate.

- The WHO's stance on the variant needs to be shared and promoted during this information uptick in order to try to curb fear and the widespread sharing of misinformation regarding IHU before it takes root and is more difficult to counteract.

TRENDS and TOPICS TO WATCH

- Sporting events continue to have a very strong impact on support for COVID-19 guidelines, as well as civil protests and backlash for the same restrictions set in place to try to limit the spread of the disease. AFCON, a continent-wide football tournament being hosted in Cameroon, has seen multiple positive cases for members of national teams, which is, limiting participation for some athletes and organizations.
- The Australian government is currently holding the #1 ranked tennis player in the world, Novak Djokovic in a detention hotel after he arrived to play in the Australian Open, an annual tennis tournament, without having proper COVID-19 clearance issued by the Australian health officials. This has led to protests in Australia and Djokovic's home country of Serbia, but his entrance will be decided on Monday, January 10. Djokovic's request for exemption from the requirement of being vaccinated for COVID-19 was based on his recent contraction of COVID-19. Djokovic claimed he has the adequate antibodies to combat the disease following his recovery, which leaves a politically sensitive debate in the hands of the Australian government.

Discussions regarding the IHU Variant

- **Cameroon**
 - The recently identified IHU variant was first found by French doctors in a patient that had recently travelled to Cameroon. Predictably, concern immediately rose for the implications for the football tournament AFCON, which is being held in Cameroon, and for possible travel restrictions for citizens that have come to the country to witness the event. In content shared by citizens *outside* of Cameroon, there are claims that the new variant is more resistant to vaccines and infections.
 - “BREAKING: A Covid variant has been discovered in France. It is called the IHU Variant.



It has 46 mutations.
It was seen in 12 people.
More infectious than Omicron.
First person allegedly from Cameroon.
It is yet to be seen in any other country.
2022 is just starting...Get ready.” [\[LINK\]](#)

- More Cameroonian social media users have focused on possible travel restrictions posted on African countries by Europe and the U.S. more than potentially severity of the variant. This is notable, as the reactions underscore potential obstacles for preventative health and safety measures that may be needed should a very severe strain emerge in the future.

- **Kenya**

- The IHU is being highlighted as “a normal mutation” by a large group of social media users in Kenya. However, there was a swift response that IHU is not real and the next cause for fearmongering to keep pandemic a priority.
- On the contrary, there has been a small outcry against political campaigning in Kenya that includes frequent face-to-face interactions. Citizens are claiming safety measures are not being adhered to during these interactions, and *are* highlighting the potential risk of spreading the COVID-19 Omicron variant. (The new variant, IHU, is rarely cited in these posts.)
 - “William Ruto. Just Quarantine. These kids won’t vote for you. Stop spreading Omicron Virus to young school going children of Western Kenya!!” [\[LINK\]](#)

What can we do?

Variations in COVID-19 have not changed the preventative measure protocols.

There is a constant ebb and flow of information around the disease, and more particularly, its variants. This can often cause confusion and frustration which can be quelled by a direct acknowledgment to that challenging information environment. While transmission, severity, and symptom information may change, preventative measures are constant and can serve as a level of comfort. Reassure that the best practices for keeping yourself as protected as possible remain the same throughout all of the emerging variants which will not likely subdue altogether anytime in the near future.

Share Viral Facts Africa videos on Omicron:

- [Viral Facts Africa Video Week 50 \(Twitter EN, Twitter FR, Facebook EN, Facebook FR\)](#)
- [Viral Facts Africa Video Week 49 \(Twitter EN, Twitter FR, Facebook EN, Facebook FR\)](#)
- [Viral Facts Africa Video Week 48 \(Twitter EN, Twitter FR, Facebook EN, Facebook FR\)](#)



Potential impasse in vaccine uptake as a consequence of Omicron

The Omicron wave of COVID-19 has brought in conversations in monitored social media platforms that underscore the deep divide between those willing to get vaccinated and those who continue to refuse. The share of anti-vaccine rhetoric versus pro-vaccine rhetoric shifts week to week, however, on average the relative shares are remaining consistent over the last several weeks. The Omicron’s intensified transmissibility had an initial impact on a surge of pro-vaccine content, but it has waned as anti-vaccine voices have increased. The primary criticism in the last two weeks cites the “mild” nature of the Omicron variant, which is being used as evidence that vaccines are not necessary, and that they are less effective than herd immunity that can be obtained by this less severe variant.

- **South Africa**

- A [study](#) has been circulated through South African social media as evidence of the mild nature of the Omicron variant. The study is also being praised as one that aligns with concern for citizens of South Africa rather than trying to

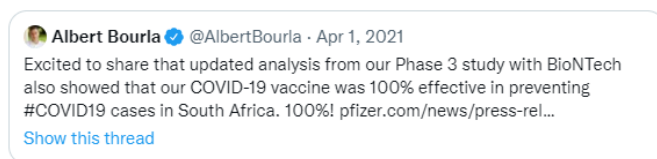
support a call for a larger role for pharmaceutical companies producing vaccines, boosters, and developing COVID-19 treatments. Responses to the study also highlight how those who are not vaccinated remained safe after not being swayed by the attempts of fearmongering.

CEO of Pfizer

Every lie will be revealed

You are all on RECORD

We Are Coming.



- Narratives originating from users in the UK, specifically the 100% efficacy rate of preventing COVID-19 cases in South Africa, have also been met with sharp condemnation from South African users. While Pfizer’s claim noted that the vaccine was 100% effective in cases where the B.1.351 lineage is prevalent, social media users were quick to push back against the claim.

- There are South African users that also rallying against the recent ANC push for vaccine mandates that they claim will “help restart the economy.” The push by the nation’s ruling party has not received



favourable feedback in social media channels, and some users are likening the mandates to “apartheid control.”

- **Democratic Republic of Congo**

- Recent reports of the Democratic Republic of Congo’s low vaccination rates have been mocked in regional WhatsApp channels, again highlighting the deep divide between pro-vaccine versus anti-vaccine schools of thought.
 - “The pandemic is not giving money. When it time for us to have pay we have all the COVID cases. The world needs the money now and then it will just be Africa. Then we will all have COVID so that is why we do not have vaccine.. we will never have the money if we have the vaccine.”

What can we do?

Continued efforts to show transparency around vaccines. Additional education on how vaccines are made, specifically how vaccines developed early in the pandemic can still be effective against a new variant of COVID-19.

- Produce content explaining **why vaccines are considered safe and effective**
⇒ Viral Facts example here

Viral Facts Africa video on **side effects**

- September 2021: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#)
- August 2021: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#)
- June 2021: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#)
- Clarify **indicators of potential side effects** for people to watch out for and **how to respond**
⇒ Viral facts example [here](#) and [here](#)
- Viral Facts video explaining why **vaccinated people can test positive** [here](#) and [here](#)
- Viral Facts video explaining that **vaccinated people don’t shed the virus** [here](#)
- A greater level of vaccine success stories. **Trusted figures that have taken the vaccine need a greater media presence.** Surrounding the confusion regarding the severity of Omicron, there has continued to be a decline in prominent influencers in the media space continuing to address the need for vaccinations and the positive impact it has had in their lives.

Accurate, sanctioned health information is getting traction

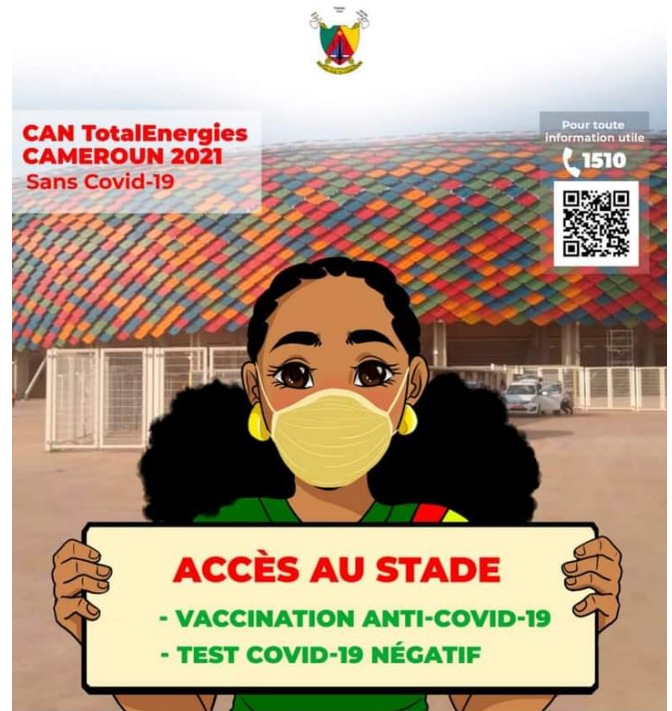
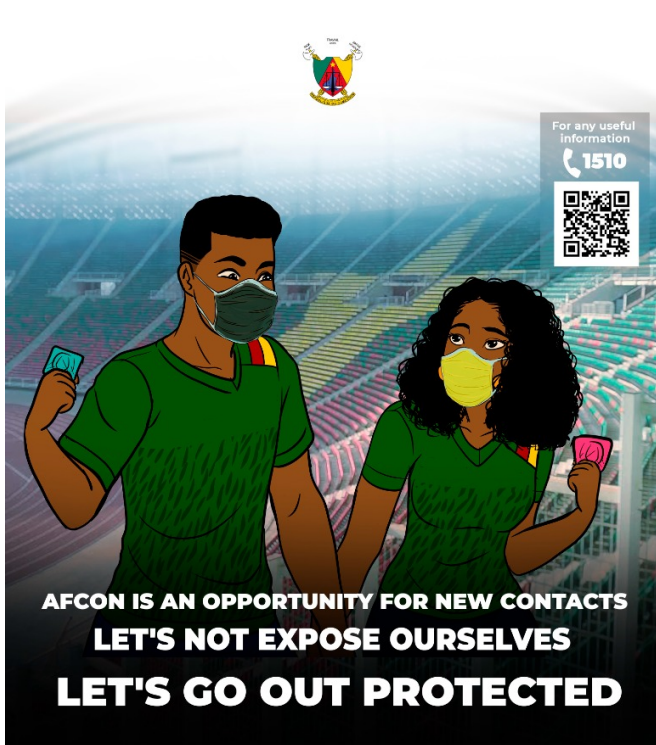
- **Cameroon**

- The Africa Cup of Nations football tournament, held in Cameroon for the 2022 competition, is facing early obstacles with members of some teams testing positive for COVID-19 and limiting their participation in specific events.



However, the Public Health Emergency Operations Coordination Center and Ministry of Public Health of Cameroon have produced a high volume of COVID-19 prevention and protection campaign on social media that has received primarily positive feedback.

- “To love is also to prevent, to love is to protect, to love is also to be vaccinated. La Can is from January 09 to February 06, 2022 in Cameroon.”



- The campaign has been highlighted by multiple high-profile social media accounts which have led to significantly higher levels of interaction with the content from users across Africa.
- The approach taken by the health institutes in Cameroon is different than many of the COVID-19 protection and safety campaigns in recent months, as it only references the pandemic as an obstacle to continue with the tournament. This seems to have resonated with regional social media users in particular, as there was significantly greater positive feedback in response to the graphics and messaging than observed negativity.



- This was likely supported by citizens with high interest in the event, but should not be construed with a lack of concern for COVID-19. Rather, both for COVID-19 and other potentially transmissible diseases, feedback is supportive and positive in hopes of a safe and minimally disruptive AFCON tournament.

What can we do?

Leverage this style and format

- The campaign highlights safety and protection measures against COVID-19 as a means to continue to enjoy the AFCON tournament, without harsh tones or fearmongering. This style and format are being received very positively and to date, this approach has been a success.
- The infographics give a very simple statement while still providing necessary information. The infographics are clear, highlighting vaccines, testing, and preventative measures to stay safe for AFCON.

PERSISTING ONLINE TRENDS

* bolded trends appear to circulate more this week

- **Debates on plurality of vaccines**
- Frustration with double standards around health and safety measures (e.g. politicians not wearing masks)
- **Frustration with slowness or mismanagement of vaccine rollout**
- **Vaccines don't prevent death or the virus' spread / vaccines are not effective**
- COVID-19 palliatives are being hidden/ denied to citizens
- Lockdowns are not an effective way of controlling COVID-19
- Clinical trials were rushed
- **Africans are lab rats or being used to test vaccines (Viral Facts response here)**
- New pandemic waves/ COVID-19 are caused by vaccines
- **Other issues and/or diseases are more important than vaccination**
- **Vaccines won't stop the need for protective measures, why bother (Viral Facts response here)**
- COVID-19 case numbers/ mortality rates are exaggerated
- **Foreign companies or governments profit from the vaccine rollout in Africa**
- **Fear of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects**
- COVID-19 does not exist (Viral Facts response here)
- Effectiveness of herbal remedies (Viral Facts response here)
- Effectiveness of ivermectin and alternative remedies (particularly in South Africa) (Viral Facts response here)
- Frustration with looting and mismanagement of COVID-19 funds
- Moderna vaccination pause in Finland ([here](#))



- The upcoming seasonal flu campaigns at global level ([LINK](#)), that may develop into potential discussions to be anticipated ([LINK](#))
- China's coronavirus patients subject to abuse and bullying as new outbreaks emerge ([LINK](#))
- A map of Africa's vaccine progress to date illustrates alarmingly low vaccination rates on the continent
- **Concerns emerge as COVID-19 mutates in HIV positive people here and here, complicating the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic**
- Hospital data in South Africa demonstrates that COVID-19 deaths primarily occur in unvaccinated individuals
- Claim that the NCDC Vaccination Department director stated AstraZeneca could be administered as a second dose for those who received the Sputnik V vaccine
- Claim that India plans to begin exporting vaccines again in October
- Amnesty International states that COVID-19 vaccine firms are fuelling a human rights crisis by refusing to waive intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccine technology

Methodology

AIRA has implemented a temporary new social media listening set-up to fill the gap left by the departure of the AIRA Social Data Analyst until a new full-time person is recruited.

The new temporary social media listening set-up relies on a split of social media analyses conducted for French, English, and Lusophone-speaking countries. The social media analysis for French-speaking countries is conducted by the AIRA Infodemic Manager Consultant based in Guinea, the one for Lusophone speaking countries by the AIRA Infodemic Manager Consultant based in Angola, and the one for English speaking countries by a WHO AFRO social media officer.

The final report is a combination of the three analyses and recommendations. The shift from a social media listening monitoring conducted by only one person for the whole African region into a combined one based on the analysis conducted by three different people may result in a less detailed and exhaustive report.

Engagements, otherwise known as interactions, **refer to the number of likes, comments, reactions, and re-shares on a post.** This is not a perfect measure of engagement:

- Some may have seen the post and chosen not to interact with it;
- Commenting on or re-sharing a post may constitute a more meaningful form of engagement than simply reacting to it;

- We are not systematically distinguishing between the types of responses that each engagement generates (e.g. while a post may contain misinformation, people may be countering/ debunking it in the comments).

We seek to mitigate these limitations by:

- Scanning comments and monitoring reactions to qualitatively evaluate responses to each post;
- Assessing the velocity of a post (i.e. how fast is it obtaining reactions, likes, shares) and the re-emergence of specific themes;
- Identifying whether the post is shared across a variety of platforms and sources (broad engagement), or simply soliciting a high level of attention within a given community/ platform (siloes engagement).

The monitoring reports are produced using NewsWhip Analytics, TweetDeck, Crowdtangle, Google Trends, UNICEF Talkwalker dashboards as well as the WHO EPI-WIN weekly infodemic insight reports and WHO EARS platform. As a result, data may be biased towards data emerging from formal news outlets/ official social media pages and does not incorporate content circulating on closed platforms (e.g. Whatsapp) or groups (e.g. private Facebook groups). We also rely on our fact-checking partners, who provide invaluable insights into relevant national and regional trends or content, as well as country-level reports, including the South Africa Social Listening Weekly Report and the Mali Social Listening Weekly Report.

In producing these summaries and recommendations, we have consulted community feedback survey reports, as well as monitoring and recommendations from AIRA partners. We also draw from WHO EPI-WIN weekly reports and UNICEF monthly reports to formulate recommendations. As we produce more content, we seek to triangulate and corroborate information across these groups to strengthen our infodemic response.

Our commercial social listening tools include:



WHO social listening tools:



**Early AI-supported Response
with Social Listening**

COVID-19 Infodemic Insight Report