

SOCIAL LISTENING REPORT ON
ONLINE CONVERSATIONS IN
EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

COVID-19 and other issues,
diseases and emergencies

MAY 2022

About this report

This monthly report provides key highlights of the digital conversations on COVID-19, other emergencies, diseases and issues in Eastern and Southern Africa.

The report builds on different categories of online signals including search trends, social media content (posts, comments) and digital news articles. Social media and digital news platforms monitored include digital news outlets, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (TikTok and Telegram are included but not monitored systematically). Twitter and digital news are mainly monitored using the social listening tool Talkwalker. Facebook and Instagram are mainly monitored using the platform Crowdtangle. WhatsApp is also monitored through third-party reports. Data collected are analyzed to identify rumours, questions or concerns related to COVID-19, other diseases and emergencies and are analyzed for volume, engagements generated, tone of conversation and user reactions, as well as themes. For Talkwalker, sentiment analysis is based on deep learning algorithms and advanced pattern recognition embedded in the tool. For Facebook, user reactions represent engagements to a post through the use of emojis. Search trends refer to user search interest on Google and YouTube that is related to COVID-19, other emergencies and issues. These are monitored using Google Trends.

The report includes key highlights and recommendations; a section covering COVID-19 online conversation, including vaccines; a section on impacts of COVID-19, including on sexual and reproductive health services and education; and a section on other issues, diseases and emergencies, including vaccine preventable diseases other than COVID-19, STIs and contraception.

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More information regarding conversations about immunization in ESAR can be found in the [Social listening dashboard on immunization in ESAR](#), which includes COVID-19 and other vaccines.

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Key themes

Long-term safety of COVID-19

vaccines. Questions about vaccine side effects were tracked in several countries, with many users wondering whether severe issues will emerge over time. Questions regarding the J&J vaccine were raised following a statement by the US FDA about the risk of potentially life-threatening blood clots in vaccinated individuals. Content questioning vaccine safety during pregnancy and among young children was tracked in multiple countries.

Parental consent for COVID-19

vaccination. Concerns that children are being vaccinated in schools without parents being informed were tracked in Uganda and Zambia.

Are we still in a pandemic?

Narratives that COVID-19 is no longer a threat were tracked in Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho and Namibia. Questions regarding the flu were circulating in Kenya, where experts were encouraging people to keep wearing a mask because the suspected ongoing flu outbreak may also be COVID-19. Some users argued that it is normal to get the flu in winter months and it's not Coronavirus going around.

Recommended actions

Share the message that serious health events following vaccination are rarely caused by the vaccine, and that reports of side effects are taken seriously and thoroughly investigated.

Disseminate localized evidence showing that severe side effects following vaccination are rare and that vaccines are safe.

Amplify vaccinated users sharing their positive experience to increase perception of COVID-19 vaccination as social norm.

Build literacy on how pediatric vaccines are tested to reassure parents that approved vaccines are safe for children.

Provide localized information on eligible children, vaccination sites, schedules, and procedures to ensure consent and assent are recorded.

Ensure that communication materials cater to parents so they can understand the benefits and risks of vaccination, which is central to informed consent and assent.

Underline that COVID-19 vaccines are a key tool to control the pandemic alongside other preventive measures.

Underline the importance of adhering to COVID-19 prevention guidelines, including mask wearing, to prevent infection, particularly in areas of high transmission.

Encourage users experiencing COVID-19 symptoms to get tested, follow quarantine guidelines and talk to a healthcare provider about approved treatments if needed.

Key themes

Question about sexual and reproductive health.

Questions about availability of HIV testing and other services were tracked in Kenya. Concerns about use of PrEP among young people in Kenya were discussed in a digital news article. Questions regarding symptoms of HIV infection were tracked in several countries in the region. A Ugandan user asked whether people would date someone with HIV; responses showed mixed opinions, with several users answering negatively.

Routine immunization. Searches for information on polio vaccines were rising quickly on Google in Mozambique and Tanzania. User questions tracked included: “Is the polio vaccine mandatory?”, “Is there a reason to panic?” and “How do we know it’s actually the polio vaccine being administered and not the COVID-19 vaccine?”. Conspiracy claim that HIV has been spread via polio vaccines was tracked in Kenya. Concerns for a measles outbreak in Zimbabwe and drop in coverage in South Africa were also discussed on social media.

Concerns for monkeypox virus outbreak. Interest in the monkeypox virus was rising in the region. Several conversations, particularly regarding spread and prevention measures, compared the virus to SARS-CoV-2.

Recommended actions

Provide localized information on how to access HIV testing and other services.

Amplify accurate information about pre-exposure prophylaxis, including that PrEP does not protect from other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and that condoms offer “dual protection” preventing both pregnancy and STIs like HIV.

Encourage parents to keep their children up to date with routine vaccination.

Reach healthcare professionals with information on how to respond to false claims regarding vaccines and provide training on how to approach conversations with their patients about misinformation.

Continue to build SBC evidence to understand logistical barriers to routine vaccination.

Closely monitor conversations and rumours regarding the monkeypox virus and potential implications on COVID-19 response measures.

Provide clear information on how the monkeypox virus spreads, what the symptoms are, and what is currently known and unknown about the outbreak.

COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines: online conversations in ESAR

Overview

📱 Conversations about COVID-19 generated over **5.3 million engagements** on social media and digital platforms in the region.

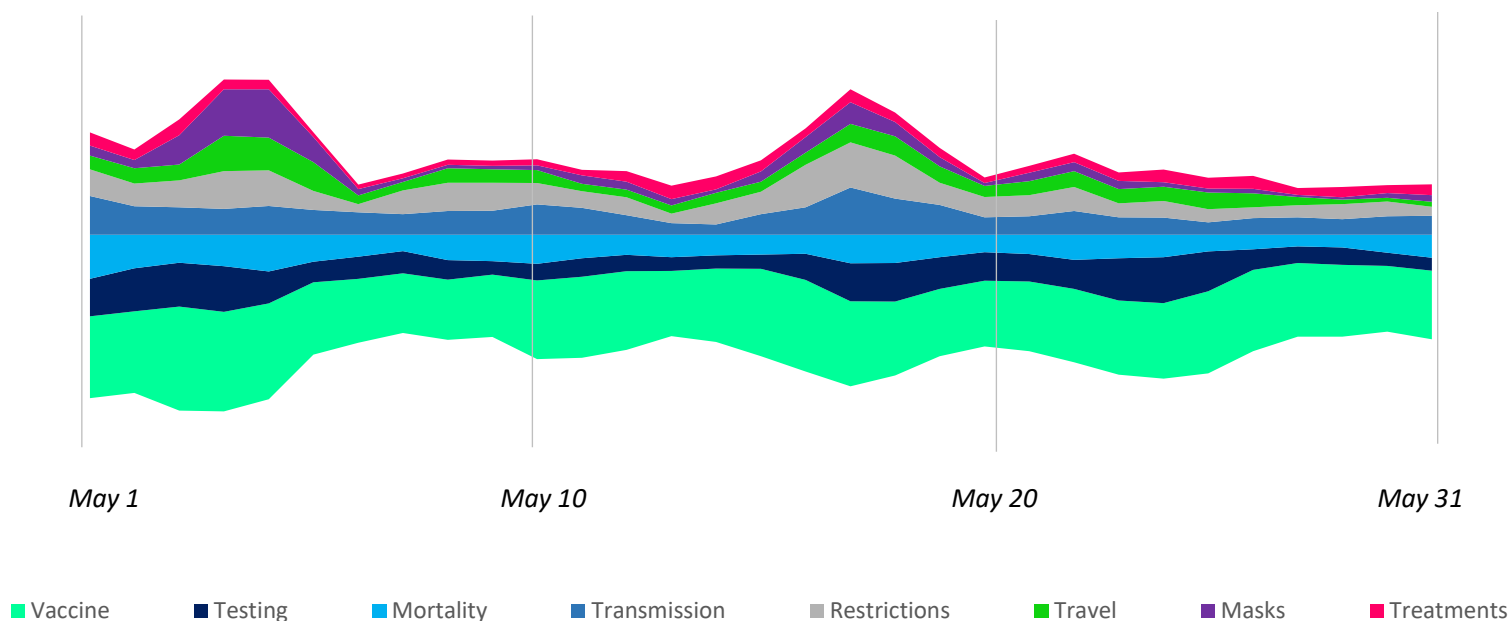
📈 This represented an **increase of 20%** compared to April.

🟢🔴 Sentiment was mainly **negative** (19% vs 12% positive sentiment) and peaks of negative user reactions were observed on Facebook on May 2 and 4, in reaction to posts from the World Health Organization about vaccine effectiveness, and on May 11 in reaction to a South African TV personality saying they are afraid to get COVID-19 for the second time.

♀️👤 On Twitter, gender disaggregated data showed a **higher participation of male users** over female users engaging with COVID-19 content (64% male vs 36% female, in overall sample of 20k users).

▶️ Conversations about **vaccines** against COVID-19 represented the largest share of engagements among all COVID-19 related conversations (14%), followed by content about **testing** (12%) and conversations around COVID-19 **mortality** (11%).


Stream graph of engagement by COVID-19 subtopic




COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines: online conversations in ESAR

Questions, concerns and rumours


Is the Covid vaccine safe in the long term? Questions about vaccine side effects were tracked in several countries, with many users wondering whether severe issues will emerge over time. Search queries tracked on Google included “long term effects of Covid vaccine”, “Side effects of Covid vaccine” and “J&J vaccine side effects”. Questions regarding the J&J vaccine emerged following a [statement](#) by the US FDA about the risk of potentially life-threatening blood clots in individuals vaccinated with the shot. See [Viral Facts Africa](#) for an example of content responding to concerns around vaccine safety.

 Botswana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Uganda

Is the vaccine safe during pregnancy and for young children? [News](#) that three doses of the Pfizer vaccine are effective for children under 5 generated some angry reactions on social media. The company made an announcement ahead of the US Food and Drug Administration meeting to weigh vaccine authorization for kids 6 months - 5 years old. Comments tracked in relation to the news included: “Sterilizing them at an early age”, “What about the report that revealed over 2000 side effects?” and “Where is their natural immune system?”. A post from the South African site vukasa.org.za claiming that the Pfizer vaccine is not safe during pregnancy and that efforts to promote vaccination of expectant mothers is “Covid misinformation” was circulating on Telegram. False [claims](#) that Pfizer has evidence its vaccine can harm fetuses were circulating in Tanzania. See [Viral Facts Africa](#) for an example of content responding to pregnancy-related claims.

 Botswana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania

Parental consent for vaccination. Questions regarding parental consent for COVID-19 immunization in schools were tracked. A [post](#) about a vaccination team going to a primary school in Zambia to administer COVID-19 jabs generated some questions about parental consent. Similar [questions](#) around parents being informed about vaccination of their kids were raised in Uganda, where the Ministry of Health has finalized plans to roll out the vaccine with school-going children with or without parental consent, according to [news reports](#). In an [article](#) from the Monitor in Uganda, some interviewees argue that informed consent cannot even be given because pharmaceutical companies are withholding information about the risks of the vaccine for children.


 Uganda, Zambia

COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines: online conversations in ESAR


Are vaccines really effective? Claim that Pfizer lied about its COVID-19 vaccine efficacy data and that the shot is only 12% effective was shared in South Africa and Tanzania.

 South Africa, Tanzania


Questions about vaccine access. Questions about how and where to access the vaccine were tracked in several countries including Angola, Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, and South Africa. According to a [news article](#), the Ugandan government has allowed private hospitals to charge people seeking COVID-19 vaccination, to cover for overhead costs. Some users questioned whether people will be willing to pay to get the vaccine. [News](#) that Botswana is going to establish a vaccine manufacturing facility to produce COVID-19 shots (Pula Corbevax vaccine) generated high interest on social media. A user commenting on the post questioned the need given that “Covid is gone”.

 Angola, Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda


Are we still in a pandemic? Concerns regarding a new wave of cases in the region were tracked in [Zimbabwe](#) and [South Africa](#). Narratives that COVID-19 is no longer a threat were tracked in Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho and Namibia. [Questions](#) regarding the flu were circulating in Kenya, where experts were encouraging people to keep wearing a mask because the suspected flu outbreak currently ongoing may also be COVID-19. A [user](#) in Namibia argued that it is normal to get the flu in winter months and it’s not the Coronavirus going around. The South African group Pandemics Data and Analytics claimed that WHO is promulgating the “myth” that there is a growing risk of pandemics. A [link](#) to the page of their website on this issue was shared on Telegram.

 Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe

Remedies for COVID-19. [Claim](#) that Ivermectin prevents COVID-19 deaths received over 1.5k engagements. Posts sponsoring herbal remedies believed to work against several diseases, including COVID-19, have been tracked in Lesotho throughout the month. [News](#) that Ivermectin can no longer be prescribed to COVID-19 patients in South Africa generated negative reactions.

 Lesotho, South Africa

Questions regarding testing. As positivity rates in the region [were rising](#), interest in how to get tested for COVID-19 was high in Rwanda and Tanzania. The question “Can you test positive after vaccination?” was a rising search on Google in South Africa.

 Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania

Impacts of COVID-19: online conversations in ESAR

Overview

📱 Conversations mentioning COVID-19 in relation to key services and issues such as sexual and reproductive health, education, nutrition, violence against children, mental health and other health services generated over **730 thousand engagements** on social media and digital platforms in the region.

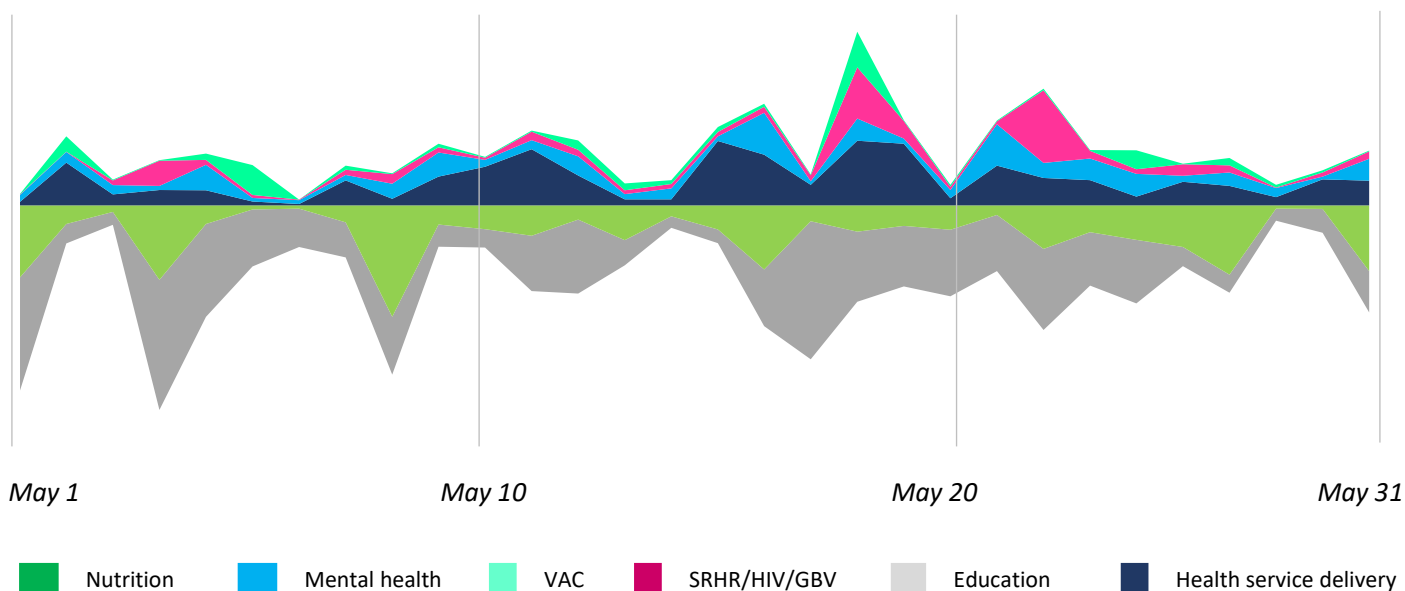
✉️ This represented an **increase of 2%** compared to April.

🟢🔴 Sentiment was mainly **negative** (14% vs 11% positive sentiment) and negative user reactions were observed on Facebook on May 5 about mask wearing requirements in schools in South Africa, and on May 22 in response to an article about the negative impact of school disruptions on learning.

♀️♂️ On Twitter, gender disaggregated data showed a **higher participation of male users** over female users (61% male vs 39% female, in overall sample of 2k users).

▶️ Posts and articles that generated most engagement discussed the impact of the pandemic (among other factors) on fertilizer prices, cost of living, access to SRHR services, and educational settings.


Stream graph of engagement of conversations about key issues that mention COVID-19




Impacts of COVID-19: online conversations in ESAR

Questions, concerns and rumours


Food crisis. Increase in the price of fertilizer due to the pandemic and exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significant impacts on the food crisis in the continent. [Concerns](#) around cost of living, rising food prices and fuel [generated](#) engagement on social media.

 Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa

Child labor. Children's rights activists are [calling](#) for measures to address the increase in child labor following the pandemic and after years of decline.

 Sub-Saharan Africa

Access to SRHR services. The impact of COVID-19 on SRHR services continues to be a concern, with a study [promoted](#) by the African Population Research Center and other partners showing that access to contraceptives was the greatest challenge in terms of sexual and reproductive health services during the pandemic.

 Ethiopia, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda

Children's learning and attendance. An [article](#) discussed the effects of the pandemic on South African students, resulting in lower test scores and gaps in learning. Similar concerns were [shared](#) by Basic Education Minister Motshekga, who said that there has been a loss equivalent to one year of learning and reading skills. Concerns about the consequences of over 3000 teachers dying due to COVID-19 in the country (representing about 1% of the workforce) were also shared by the Minister. The Minister has also [said](#) that evidence now shows that there has been no significant increase in school dropout rates. Concerns regarding decrease in school attendance were shared in Uganda.

 South Africa, Uganda

Other issues, diseases and emergencies: online conversations in ESAR


Overview



 Conversations about **vaccine preventable diseases** other than COVID-19 generated around **330 thousand engagements** on social media and digital platforms in the region.



Conversations about **sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and contraception** generated **5 million engagements** on social media and digital platforms.


Conversations about **floods in South Africa KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) region** generated over **3.9 million engagements**.

Conversations about the **monkeypox virus** generated about **620 thousand engagements** on social media and digital platforms.

 Engagement around **vaccine preventable diseases** saw an overall **increase by 18%** compared to April. Engagement around **STIs** saw a **50% increase**. Engagement around the **floods in KZN decreased by about 30%** compared to April.

  Sentiment around **vaccine preventable diseases** other than COVID-19 was mainly **negative** (17% vs 9% positive sentiment). Sentiment around **STIs** trended **negative** (45% vs 9% positive sentiment). Sentiment about **KZN floods** was also **negative** (32% vs 10% positive sentiment).

  On Twitter, gender disaggregated data showed a **higher participation of male users** over female users in both vaccine-related conversations (59% male vs 41% female, in overall sample of 2.7k users), in STI-related conversations (58% male vs 42% female, in overall sample of 17k users), and in conversations about KZN floods in South Africa (61% male vs 39% female, in overall sample 110k users).

 Conversations about vaccine preventable diseases other than COVID-19 accounted for about 20% of vaccine-related conversations. For breakdown of vaccine related conversations by vaccine type in each country visit the [Social listening dashboard on immunization in ESAR](#).

About 50% of conversations related to SRHR focused on gender-based violence. About 20% mentioned contraception.


Conversations about floods in KZN focused on relief measures, number of victims and infrastructure damages.

Conversations about the monkeypox virus multi-country outbreak were rising quickly in several countries in the region, focusing on symptoms, transmission, origin of the virus and response measures.


Other issues, diseases and emergencies: online conversations in ESAR

Questions, concerns and rumours


Monkeypox. Monkeypox was a breakout search on Google in Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. In South Africa searches for “smallpox vaccine” were also rising. Questions about treatment were tracked on Google in Ethiopia. Interest in symptoms of the virus was rising on Google in Zambia. [Concerns](#) regarding stigmatization of African countries for the outbreak happening in Europe and other areas were shared online. Several users expressed worry that new lockdowns and travel restrictions will be implemented, and that the virus will be used as an excuse to keep COVID-19 pandemic measures in place. Some [users](#) already expressed that they will not get any vaccine recommended in the future. Several conversations, particularly regarding spread and prevention measures, compared the virus to SARS-CoV-2. False claims that the monkeypox outbreak is caused by COVID-19 vaccines were circulating in South Africa. [Claims](#) that the virus is spreading by contact with members of the LGBTQ+ community were circulating on WhatsApp in Kenya. Articles saying that the virus spreads primarily via sexual contact were shared in [Uganda](#) and [Kenya](#). Several posts on social media clarified the disease is transmitted through close contact.

 Angola, Botswana, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe

Polio. Health authorities in Mozambique have [declared](#) a polio outbreak after confirming that a child had been paralyzed by the disease. Searches for information on polio vaccines were rising quickly on Google in Mozambique and Tanzania. User questions tracked included: “Is the polio vaccine mandatory?”, “Is there a reason to panic?” and “How do we know it’s actually the polio vaccine being administered and not the COVID-19 vaccine?”. [Claim](#) that HIV has been spread via polio vaccines was tracked in Kenya.


 Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania

Measles. [News](#) of 14 children dying due to a measles outbreak in Zimbabwe generated concerns regarding the impact of the pandemic on routine immunization. The Department of Health in South Africa [called](#) for parents to get their children vaccinated to prevent a measles outbreak. Searches for “measles symptoms in toddlers” were rising on Google in South Africa.

 South Africa, Zimbabwe

Other issues, diseases and emergencies: online conversations in ESAR


Flooding in KZN. Search interest for “causes of floods” was rising on Google compared to April (+250%). [Concerns](#) regarding school disruptions were shared by local parents. The MEC for Education said there is also a [concern](#) that learners who lost their parents due to the floods might be at risk of child labour.

 South Africa

HIV. A [user](#) on Twitter asked who is to blame for a surge in HIV infections in Kenya; some users commented about the lack of testing and other resources. Concerns about Kenyan students using PrEP because their partners don't want to use protection were discussed in a digital news [article](#). A Uganda [user](#) asked whether people would date someone with HIV; responses showed mixed opinions, with several users answering negatively. Questions regarding “HIV vaccine” were rising on Google in Kenya. Interest in “signs and symptoms” of HIV was rising on Google in Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa. “Signs of a person taking ARVs” was a rising search on the search engine in Zambia.

 Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Contraception. A [post](#) encouraging men to avoid vasectomies generated over 5k engagements. Search interest in the price of birth control medication was rising on Google in South Africa. A [user](#) whose post generated over 1.2k engagements on Twitter said it is embarrassing to purchase emergency contraception.

 Kenya, South Africa