

# Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report  
**28 November - 5 December 2022**  
(Weekly brief #50)

## Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This weekly report provides key highlights and operational recommendations based on social media monitoring from November 28 - December 5 in Eastern, Western and Southern Africa, as well as relevant information on current mis/disinformation.

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## Top Misinformation & Rumors

### Concern over new Omicron variant is pointless

Recent comments regarding the dangers of a potentially new Omicron variant suggested a lack of concern in any COVID-19 updates.

### Topical event: World Aids Day

Topical conversations around World Aids Day garnered empathy and interest from social media commentators through stories.

### Zero Ebola cases prove it was a ploy

Reports that a new Ebola case has not been registered in any of the impacted districts over the last five days have led to skepticism from the online community in Uganda regarding the validity of the outbreak.

## Key resources

Viral Facts Africa social media content: [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Instagram](#)

### COVID-19 VFA content

- COVID vaccines safety and approval [ENG](#) [FR](#)
- mRNA vaccine impact on immunity [ENG](#)
- COVID vaccine causing AIDS [ENG](#) [FR](#)
- Vaccine causing COVID-19 infection [ENG](#) [FR](#)

### Ebola content

- Mythbuster: Ebola isn't real [ENG](#) [FR](#)

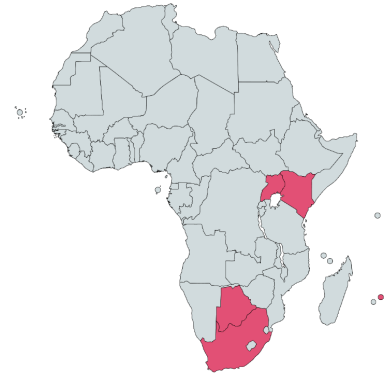
### HIV content

- HIV explainer [ENG](#) [FR](#)

## Botswana, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Mauritius

### Concern over new Omicron variant is pointless

**CONTEXT:** According to [reports](#) from various African media outlets, the WHO has urged caution to prevent a new COVID-19 variant from emerging. While [reports](#) suggest that 90% of the world's population has now acquired a level of immunity due to prior vaccination and infection, online users' reactions seem unconcerned with the possible re-emergence of a new variant.



**Global Engagement: 17 posts, 5210 likes, 1793 comments**

**Botswana (Detection of variant): 3 posts, 1257 likes, 380 comments**

- Two sub-lineages (BQ 1 and BQ 1.1) of the existing BA.5 Omicron variant have been detected in [Botswana](#). The Ministry of Health has reiterated the importance of preventative measures while highlighting that scientists are actively studying the behavior of the sub-lineages.
- Although no major impact is currently visible, online reactions suggest that medical interest in COVID-19 updates drives little interest. In fact, criticism raised by 30% of individuals in an article posted by [The Voice Newspaper](#) based in Botswana claim that the new variants only appear during the festive season to favor a lockdown by the government.
- The [WHO](#) had already shared an update a few months ago regarding the sub-lineage variant BA. 5 detected in Botswana, which has no significant epidemiological difference detected as it compares to known sub-lineages of the Omicron variant. The Ministry of Health also posted an update on Facebook which generated [lower](#) engagement and concern among online users in April 2022.

**South Africa, Kenya, Mauritius, Tunisia (Increase alertness and rise of cases):**

**6 posts, 1806 likes, 600 comments**

- The monitored comments from a Facebook article by [Eyewitness News](#), a South African news organization, have been met with negativity and criticism as 20% of online users claim that the WHO is a misleading organization that raises ongoing concerns over COVID-19 with no end in sight.
- Comments below highlight this claim:

When this WHO be disbanded for misleading humanity.. until when are going to be subjected to these faceless medical erros.. whike they know very well immunity vele is always below par due to a lot of other aspects mara... on this one we need no scientist shame...

The W.H.O must be disbanded

If we have immunity...there is NO need for vaccines then! Whoop Whoop!! 🎉🎉🎉

The way WHO is obsessed with covid you would believe they created it  
You can always count on something new from tne WHO. They never disappoint.

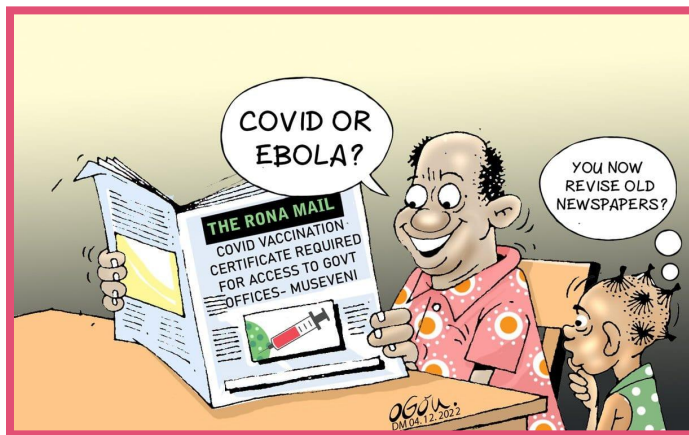
WHO can say all they want this time around not listening to their reports.

- It is also noteworthy that reports of COVID-19 new [cases](#) in Kenya have been met with fervent disbelief by all users. This trend has been present over the last several weeks with every COVID-19 update released on Facebook and Twitter by the Ministry of Health.
- As COVID-19 waves continue to rise in African countries, and new variants are still a potential threat to a significant reemergence of the disease, it is necessary to reinforce the acceptance of COVID-19 vaccination and safety measures rather than losing public trust in its efficacy.

### **Uganda (Reemergence of COVID-19 preventative measures)**

**8 posts, 2147 likes, 813 comments**

- During the Sudan ebolavirus outbreak, COVID-19 updates lost considerable traction and viewership.
- During his speech on Saturday 3 December, President Museveni stated he will bring back public safety measures in place such as the prohibition of [handshaking and hugging](#), as well as the presentation of COVID-19 vaccination [certificates](#) to access offices at all government ministries, departments, and agencies.



□ 90% of all [comments](#) on a monitored Facebook post by the Daily Monitor agree that COVID-19 is now over and the President's speech is inspired by 2020 and 2021 updates.

□ To date, the messaging around COVID-19 cases in Uganda has been overlooked by the ebola

outbreak. Online citizens have criticized the government's methods of reporting new cases and preventive measures, as they have expressed the sentiment that COVID-19 is now insignificant.

### Why is it concerning?

- The lack of concern for the COVID-19 new Omicron sub-variant and the belief its potential resurgence is being fabricated to spoil the festive season highlights that ongoing advocacy measures are not reaching levels of high efficacy.
- The reemergence of new variants triggers online users to share skepticism regarding the vaccines and the boosters' efficacy.
- The development of a new sub-variant may be met with significant obstacles to again adhere to preventative measures to mitigate the spread.

### What can we do?

- Amplify the message that [COVID-19 vaccines](#) are safe and effective.
- Highlight the vaccine's ability to mitigate severe symptoms and complications from contracting the disease without inoculation, and how it can protect individuals from new variants of COVID-19 that may become prevalent.
- Raise awareness regarding the higher risks of severe disease and mortality from COVID-19 infection for unvaccinated individuals compared to vaccinated ones.
- Share information from the [WHO](#) about the COVID-19 vaccine's Adverse Events Following Immunization (AEFI), and the reporting and monitoring process of AEFIs.

## Zambia, Kenya, Nigeria, DRC, Uganda, South Africa

### Topical event: World Aids Day

*CONTEXT: World Aids Day was celebrated on the 1st of December under the theme [Equalize](#). African media outlets from six countries shared their human-interest stories to raise awareness about HIV prevention and stigma.*

- On World Aids Day, news media outlets alerted online users about the importance of collective (the ABC approach) and individual (regular testing) preventative measures and advocated positive lifestyles adopted among HIV-positive adults and celebrities.
- Conversations around the rise of HIV cases in [Kenya](#) and [Zambia](#) and around the fight against stigma in [Kenya](#) and [South Africa](#) generated concern and empathy among users but no prevalent misinformation pieces were recorded in the monitored comments.
- World Aids Day is an opportunity to amplify new [updates](#) around early-stage HIV vaccine trials, and incite individuals to adopt preventative measures in order to reduce the risk of HIV infections.



## Uganda

### Zero Ebola cases prove it was a ploy

*CONTEXT: Reports that a new Ebola case has not been registered in any of the impacted districts over the last five days has led to skepticism from the online community in Uganda regarding the validity of the outbreak.*

- The response from social media users to the rapid decline of new cases registered in Uganda has been predominantly negative.
- The narratives highlight “proof” of failed efforts by the government for financial gain, mockery of the public health system in Uganda, and multiple warnings that a new disease (Cholera, COVID-19, HIV) will take the place of Ebola to continue lockdowns and overreach by the government.
- Of 15,000 that were reviewed, 13% (roughly 200 responses) were positive or in support of the response teams combating Ebola effectively and mitigating the continued spread of the disease.





- A significant share of the negativity was about the failed funding efforts, however, it is important to note that a small share of the narrative was directed at the response teams. Users on social messaging apps claimed response teams were falsely reporting new Ebola cases to continue to receive funding until their “scheme” was recently discovered.
- The general social media community in Uganda has highly politicized the Ebola outbreak and continued criticism, particularly for the current presidential administration, has drawn the community’s focus away from the successes of the response. Instead, the widely negative rhetoric has encouraged misinformation and blatant inaccuracies to develop and take root in the common public narratives.

### **Why is it concerning?**

- Ebola news continues to incite anger and frustration with an emphasis on government malfeasance. Potential cases in the future will likely drive considerable backlash as many are convinced the “Ebola ploy” is over.

### **What can we do?**

- Reiterate that the outbreak is not over yet and that vigilance and adherence to public health measures are just as vital during this period as it was during active case spread.

## **Persistent Rumors**

### **Rumor: Ebola doesn’t exist**

- Response: Address the severity of the disease and explain the origins, symptoms, and ways of transmission (Viral Facts Response [here](#)).

### **Rumor: Ebola benefits the Ugandan government**

- Response: Greater cooperation in public-facing messaging can help limit the overall confusion.

### **Rumor: COVID-19 no longer exists / never existed**

- Response: COVID-19 cases have declined but health authorities are warning of the potential emergence of a new Omicron subvariant (Viral Facts response [here](#))

### **Inaccurate assumptions of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects**

- Response: Fear of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects continue to be misinterpreted or overstated (Viral Facts response [here](#))

## Information Gaps

The most common questions raised by social media users this week are:

### Sudan ebolavirus (SVD)

- What cure was introduced to stop the spread of Ebola?
- Why do we need a vaccine trial if Ebola is gone?
- How can Ebola disappear without a vaccine, but polio comes back when we are vaccinated?

### HIV

- Is someone sick with HIV or AIDS?
- How long can someone live with HIV?
- Is it possible to eliminate mother-to-child transmission?

### COVID-19

- What are the symptoms of the new Omicron sub-variants detected in Botswana?
- What are the implications for Botswana during the festive season?
- Will lockdown be implemented again because of the new Omicron sub-variants?
- Are the new sub-variants a mutation from the booster shots?
- If 90% of people have developed immunity, is there still a need for more COVID-19 boosters or vaccines?

## Methodology

The social media listening process 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, and 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 (siloeed engagement).

The monitoring reports are produced using NewsWhip Analytics, TweetDeck, Crowdtangle, Google Trends, and 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:**

