

COVID-19 vaccine digital conversation in Eastern and Southern Africa

UNICEF ESARO

Weekly report
May 31 – June 6, 2021



KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Online conversations this week focused on vaccine access and safety. Users showed concerns about delay in vaccine rollout, fake vaccines, and forced vaccinations.

Misinformation around vaccine safety continues to impact the online conversation. Some of the articles commenting on false claims that COVID-19 vaccines kill people were not clarifying upfront that these claims are unsubstantiated and shared by untrusted sources.

Concerns about the effectiveness of the vaccines continue to circulate and can be damaging to demand generation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Encourage media organizations to use images that depict a positive immunization experience instead of images of individuals in pain to avoid reinforcing the narrative that people are being vaccinated against their will.




Build misinformation literacy among local media partners, particularly small blogs and social media pages. Reinforce capacity on how to report on misinformation without spreading falsehoods further.

Continue to promote accurate information on the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccination, particularly in preventing severe disease, to encourage individuals to get vaccinated when possible.

This weekly report provides key highlights of the digital conversation on COVID-19 vaccines in Eastern and Southern Africa. The report builds on different categories of online signals including search trends, social media content and digital news articles. For more information, please see the [methodological note](#). For additional information please contact UNICEF ESARO C4D: hballesterbon@unicef.org, ssommariva@unicef.org.

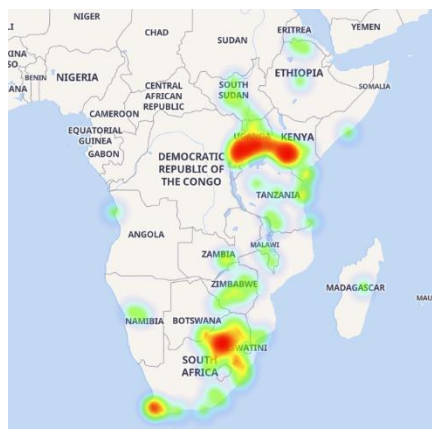
OVERVIEW

Overall, online interest around COVID-19 vaccines in the region increased over the past week compared to the previous one:

-  On social media, Facebook interactions increased by 60%. Twitter engagement was approximately the same as to the previous week.
-  Number of digital news articles decreased -70% compared to the previous week.
-  Search interest on the topic was rising in Angola, Madagascar, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe (Google and YouTube trends data).

The map below shows the geographical distribution of the number of posts or articles on digital news and social media related to the COVID-19 vaccines published in the region. The graphic provides an overview of the posts or articles by digital channel (Facebook, Twitter and digital news media) and related engagement tracked.

Heatmap of COVID-19 vaccine-related online results on digital media in the region and conversation volume and engagement tracked by platform, past week



270k engagements
3k posts



50k engagements
2k posts



50k engagements
1.5k articles or posts

TOP ONLINE CONTENT THIS WEEK

Online conversations that generated most engagements in the past week were related to vaccine access (28% of total engagements), followed by conversations mentioning specific vaccine brands (18%), and conversations about safety (16%).

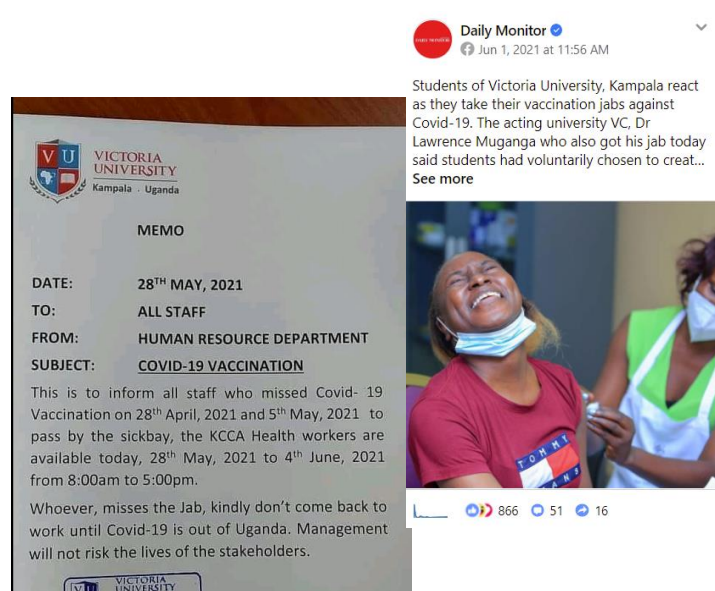
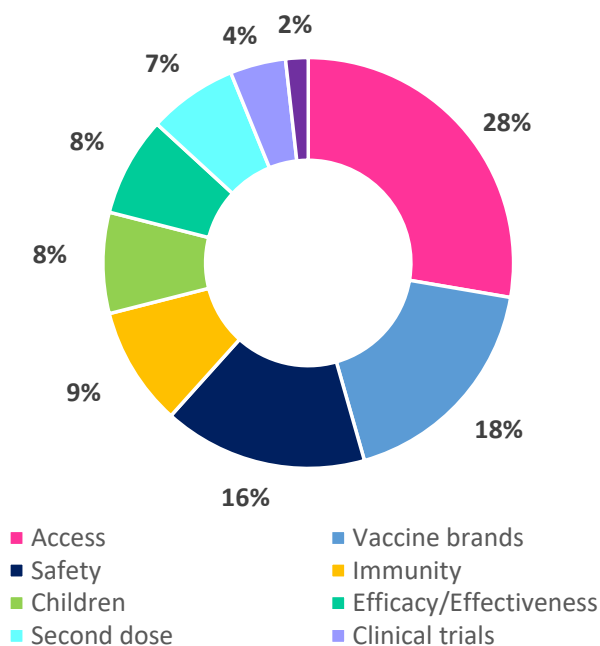
The social media posts and digital news articles presented in the following paragraphs are examples of the type of COVID-19 content that was popular online.

Vaccine rollout. Updates on the status of the vaccine rollout in the region generated high engagement online for example in [Rwanda](#), [Uganda](#), and [South Africa](#).

Vaccinated with water. Kenya Cabinet Secretary Kagwe [has warned](#) citizens against illegal vaccines and fake vaccine certificates, saying they risk being vaccinated with water and even charged for it. The CS reminded that the vaccine is free in Kenya. His statements generated [conversation online](#).

Forced vaccination. A [memo](#) attributed to Victoria University in Uganda stating that students and staff who are not vaccinated should not return to campus was circulating online, accompanied by claims that there is a forced vaccination process ongoing. One [commenter](#) posted the false claim that all vaccinated people will die in 2 years. Some users commenting below a [post](#) on this topic by the Daily Monitor (accompanied by a picture of a student who seems in pain) complained that the vaccine is being forced on young people and that the healthcare workers should be wearing gloves while administering the injection.

Share of engagement by subtopic, digital news and Twitter, past week



TOP ONLINE CONTENT THIS WEEK (continued)

AEFIs. The [investigation](#) into the death of doctor Raherimandimby in Madagascar, who died the day after he received the COVID-19 shot, did not find a connection with the vaccine. Some users below the post and other [posts](#) were asking for more information about the autopsy and to know the cause of death. The number of posts about the investigation generated substantially fewer engagements compared to the original news of his death (on May 20).

Engagement of Facebook posts about Dr Raherimandimby over time



Children and COVID-19 vaccines. Conversations mentioning children in the context of COVID-19 vaccines were related to the [importance](#) of vaccinating teachers and possible arrival of [J&J doses](#) in South Africa. The [news](#) that Israeli health officials have found a possible link between the Pfizer vaccine and cases of myocarditis in young man (although no causal relation has been yet established) was also circulating.

Pregnancy and vaccine safety. Concerns around vaccine safety for pregnant women were also tracked in [Kenya](#) and in [South Africa](#). These concerns were in part driven by [older claims](#) in the US and UK that COVID-19 vaccines have caused an increase in miscarriages. Viral Facts Africa has produced [relevant content](#) to clarify facts about vaccination and fertility.

Vaccine effectiveness. Twitter users in [Namibia](#) and [Uganda](#) raised concerns around the fact that vaccinated individuals can die or get sick with COVID-19. [Others](#) have questioned how it is possible to have many COVID-19 cases if vaccines are effective.

SENTIMENT OF ONLINE CONVERSATION

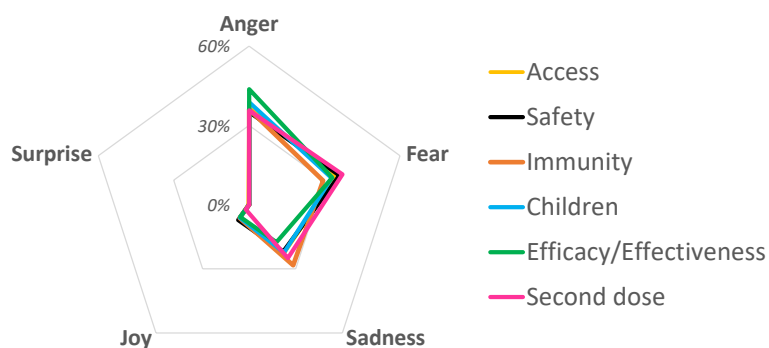
Around 20% of posts on Twitter were categorized by the sentiment algorithm of the social listening tool Talkwalker as negative, compared to 8% positive posts. A [tweet](#) about COVID-19 vaccination being halted in Kololo Uganda due to the state of the nation address was driving negative tone. Other posts associated with negative sentiments included the [statement](#) by Kenyan CS about fake vaccines, a [post](#) by a Ugandan user about how vaccinated people can still die of COVID-19, and a [post](#) from South Africa claiming that it is suspicious that the UK health system is overwhelmed while the vaccines are reported to be highlight effective.

[Frustration](#) with the rollout in South Africa generated angry reaction, while a [post](#) about delay in vaccinating teachers as a priority group in Botswana generated “sadness” emotions.

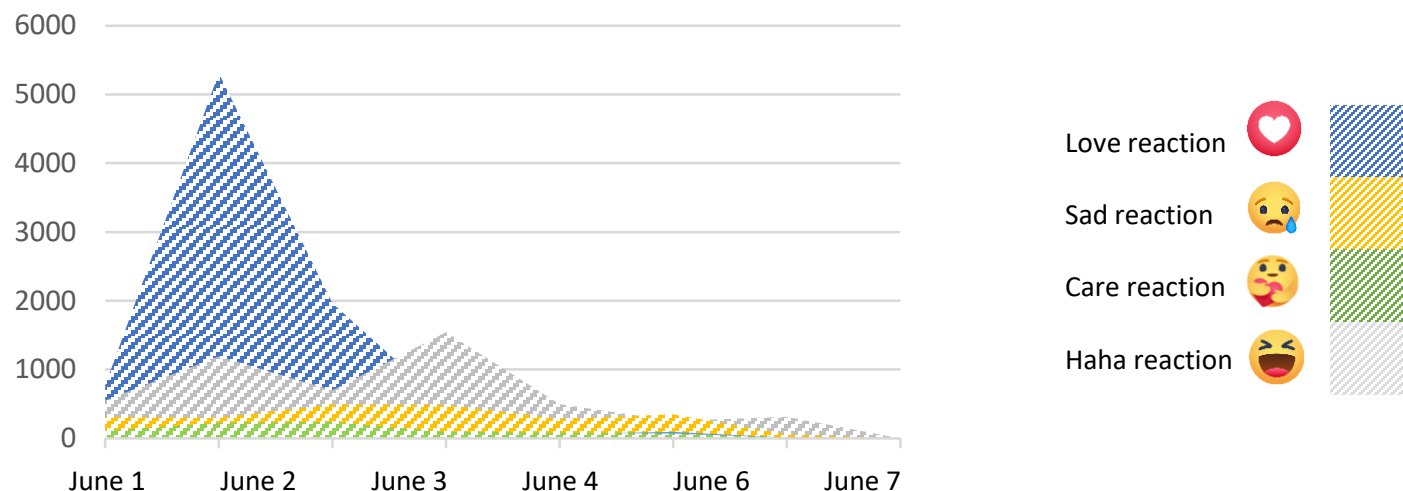
On Facebook the following posts generated peaks of user reactions (engagement through emojis) over the past week:

- ❑ [Q&A from the SA National Institute for Communicable Diseases](#): 2.6k 🍷 (June 2)
- ❑ [Updated COVID-19 statistics for Zambia](#): 260 😞 (June 5)
- ❑ [Only 30k people have received their second dose in Uganda](#): 280 😂 (June 6)
- ❑ [3rd delivery of doses arrives in Botswana](#): 450 🍷 (June 3)

Emotions by subtopic, Twitter, past week



User reactions to COVID-19 vaccine content, Facebook, past week



ADDITIONAL ISSUES TO MONITOR

The following narratives have also been tracked over the past week.

Vaccinated individuals will die. A [video](#) of Dr. Sherry Tenpenny saying that people who received the vaccine will soon die was shared in [South Africa](#) (fact-check [here](#)). The article "[CDC Admits: More Dead From COVID-19 Vaccine Than ALL Vaccines From Last 20 Years Combined](#)" was also shared in South Africa on Twitter. A [video](#) making similar claims was also shared in South Africa. Claims that the vaccine kills were also appearing in some [replies](#) to this post.

The same blog post containing several falsehoods around vaccine safety and the words of virologist Luc Montagnier was published in [Uganda](#) and [Rwanda](#) (little to none social media uptake). The article also reports misinformation from former Pfizer scientist Mike Yeadon (fact-checked [here](#)). Claims attributed to Montagnier were also shared in [Zimbabwe](#) (no social media engagement): while this article clearly states at the end that these statements have been dismissed by experts, it gives high prominence to the misinformation.

Other conspiracies. The release of thousands of Dr. Fauci's emails generated online conversations and conspiracies by anti-vaccine groups [globally](#), including reactions in [South Africa](#).

Vaccine equity. Some [users](#) are comparing the state of vaccine rollout in the region to other countries where the vaccines are already available to young people. There is also [concern](#) that not enough is being done to ensure access for lower-income individuals.

Recovery and COVID-19 vaccines. A [question](#) on Twitter about whether individuals who have been sick and recovered from COVID-19 still need to get the vaccine generated discussion in South Africa.

Expiration. Content around vaccine expiration continues to circulate, particularly in relation to donation from [South Sudan](#) to Kenya.