

## Issues of ethics in research: Analysis of conspiracy theories surrounding Covid-19 pandemic on social media

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### Abstract

This study sought to analyse social media's conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Several conflicting theories about the origin of the coronavirus have been advanced in most public discourses, especially on social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook. Since no studies have been done concerning the study area, there is a need to analyse conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic on social media. The study relied on descriptive research design and premised on conspiracy theories in situations of uncertainties, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling is used to select social media content with messages, particularly from Facebook posts on the coronavirus and the responses or comments from social media users. This data was extracted between the periods of March and August 2020. Textual analysis is the main form of data analysis in the study. The study findings are useful to the ministry of health and the media houses to inform what and how they disseminate information, especially on the coronavirus. This study concludes that COVID-19 pandemic has created the perfect circumstances for conspiracy theories, and research suggests that they negatively affect people's compliance with preventive behaviours.

**Key terms:** Conspiracy theories, COVID-19 pandemic, social media.

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is an on-going global pandemic of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus. The virus was first reported in Wuhan-China, in December 2019, although the exact origin of the virus is still unknown. Consequently, it was declared a world pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020. On 31 December 2019, WHO was informed of cases of #Pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan city, #China. “A total of 44 cases have been reported: 11 patients are severely ill, while the remaining 33 are in stable condition,” said WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in a tweet on 5 January 2020. There was the confirmation of more than 165 million cases as of May 2021, with more than 3.4 million deaths reported worldwide, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in history.

In Kenya, the virus was first confirmed and reported on March 2020. Since then, many cases have been reported, with the Kenyan Government giving daily statistics on infections recoveries and deaths attributed to the virus. However, just as the conspiracy on HIV/AIDS existed, Covid 19 conspiracy theories have flourished, which negates the disease impact despite the effort by the Government of Kenya to address the issue as a pandemic; this has resulted in fear and confusion among Kenyans. For instance, corona was created as a weapon to intentionally kill Africans in Kenya among them, importing goods from countries affected by the pandemic is a means of transmitting the disease, Covid 19 is worse compared to flu that people recover after battling with it and finally, coronavirus is a wave passing from one place to another forcing people to lock themselves in the houses with enough food.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Vosoughi et al. (2018), thoughts on conspiracy were highly associated with traditional media like newspapers, radio and television, as well as digital media, including the internet and social media. Research has revealed that traditional news media mistrust results in exposing the news selectively filtering other information; hence the different sources of political information are not clearly disclosed to Kenyans (Coninck et al., 2021). Since the

Kenyan Government declared the first case of Covid-19 in March 2019, social media has been at the forefront of spreading invalid content with official communication in hand (Chamegere, 2021). Public health depends on public participation; we cannot overcome the pandemic without changing our lifestyles. Health authorities and political trust in vital; when false information leaks, people will be reluctant to adhere to the rules and regulations on COVID-19. In taming the conspiracy theory, public health implemented proportionate and accountable responses; health and communication experts addressed the effective risk communication in garnering the public’s consent and building trust in the response (Hillier et al., 2020).

With respect to the surge in the number of infections, the government of Kenya was at the forefront of efforts to contain the rapid spread of this coronavirus. Several containment measures have since been placed, among them contact tracing and isolation, closure of educational institutions, markets and places of worship, banning of political gatherings and sporting activities, travel restrictions, nationwide curfews, social distancing, wearing of facemasks and washing of hands among other containment measures. According to the Cambridge dictionary, conspiracy is a secret agreement between two or more people or groups to do something bad or illegal to harm someone else. From this definition, therefore, the term conspiracy denotes something negative. When the first case of coronavirus was first reported in China, conspiracy theories began to emerge (Van Bavel et al., 2020).

In the USA, for example, in the run-up to the presidential elections in the year 2020, former president Donald Trump dismissed the virus as a hoax and termed it an attempt by his competitors to deflate his re-election campaign. Consequently, Donald Trump took to his social media pages, especially his Twitter account, to castigate his perceived opponents for trying to ruin his election campaign by peddling lies and innuendos about the coronavirus. For instance, Trump bragged that he had done “an incredible job” with the China virus than Biden did with the swine flu in 2009 as a Vice President. On 18 September 2020, Trump tweeted: “Biden FAILED BADLY with the Swine Flu. It was the Gang That Couldn’t shoot straight. He

didn't have a clue. But, on the other hand, we have done an incredible job with the much tougher China Virus!"

According to Trump, Joe Biden was only playing politics with the Coronavirus issue for cheap political publicity, yet the Trump administration was handling the matter very well. He reminded him of how badly he handled the Swine Flu pandemic that hit the United States in 2009. Similarly, Trump continued onslaught on Joe Biden is evident when he tweeted from his tweeter handle @realDonaldTrump on 3 September 2020: "Sleepy Joe Biden was acknowledged by his own people to have done a terrible job on a much easier situation, H1N1 Swine Flu. The Biden Administration failed badly on this & now he sits back in his basement and criticises every move we make on the China Virus. DOING A GREAT JOB!"

This tweet was in response to the criticisms that Joe Biden had against Trump with regard to the latter's handling of the pandemic in the United States. Evidently, one is able to see political undertones from the tweets as the country geared towards the general elections. Moreover, during the elections campaigns, Trump accused some media of being "fake news media", only focusing on the coronavirus pandemic and peddling lies around instead of covering or reporting alleged election rigging plans by Joe Biden team. On 15 June 2020, he tweeted, "The Far Left Fake News Media, which had no Covid problem with the Rioters & Looters destroying Democrat-run cities, is trying to Covid shame us on our big Rallies. Won't work!"

Donald Trump refused to rely on the hostility toward bureaucratic expertise to fight COVID-19 long before the pandemic began. Even if the signs were unclear at that time regarding the potential for the outbreak to become a pandemic, President Trump doubted the threat of COVID-19 pandemic in his January 22 comment to CNBC's. Trump responded to Kernen courageously and optimistically, saying that they had the outbreak under control and that it was only one person coming in from China; thus, it could just be fine, which was very different from what came out of WHO at that time. Likewise, on 6 July 2020, Trump lamented that the Lamestream fake news media would refuse to report that the china virus deaths

were significantly down owing to how his administration dealt with the pandemic. He tweeted, "Why does the lamestream Fake News Media REFUSE to say that China Virus deaths are down 39 per cent and that we now have the lowest Fatality (Mortality) Rate in the world? They just can't stand that we are doing well for our country." The irony with this statement is that two months later, in September, the country had recorded 200,000 deaths from coronavirus.

Trump went on downplaying the threats of the virus irrespective of the massive spread of the virus in China the whole of February and the bells rang by WHO. On 2<sup>nd</sup> February, President Trump, interviewed by Sean Hannity, stated that they shut it down coming in from China (Keith & Gharib, 2020a). On February 13, in an interview on Fox News with Geraldo Rivera, Trump said that in their country, they only had 12 cases, and most of those people were recovering while some fully recovered (Keith & Gharib, 2020b). On Twitter, he also de-emphasised the threat that the virus posed. On February 24, Trump (2020a) tweeted, "The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA." Trump, in standard outlets, downplayed the virus's threat even as the news from WHO worsened. On February 26, in a news conference, President Trump stated that if you have 15 people, the 15 will be down to close to zero within a couple of days, and that was a pretty good job they have done (Keith & Gharib, 2020). However, after 2 days, the WHO raised the global risk from coronavirus from high to very high. Trump would further contradict himself in his Twitter posting on 28 May 2020, "All over the world, the coronavirus, a very bad gift from China, marches on. Not good!" This was a clear indication that the pandemic was far from over, as he had alleged.

Trump was against Health warnings saying that they were a conspiracy against him. On February 26, as President Trump was returning from India, he watched on the Air Force One screens that the first stock market had fallen due to the pandemic fears. He complained on his Twitter by tweeting that, "Low Ratings Fake News . . . are doing everything possible to make the Caronavirus [sic] look as bad as possible, including panicking markets, if possible." Trump was angered by Nancy Messonnier, an expert on infectious disease at the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC), as he termed her responsible for causing the market slide after announcing that in the US, there was an assurance of ultimate community spread.

Donald Trump was also against wearing masks. Trump tweeted a video in which a doctor from Houston, Texas, Stella Immanuel, alongside a group named America's Frontline Doctors, which had about 10 people standing in white coats on Washington, DC's Supreme Court steps saying that hydroxychloroquine was a cure for covid-19 and that masks were unnecessary. The video had 'gone viral' whereby it was viewed widely by the president's 84 million followers and was removed by Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Twitter claimed that the video was removed since it was in violation of their covid-19 misinformation policy. In Trump's press briefing on July 28, he was questioned on whether he was sorry for retweeting the video, and he said, "I was very impressed with her and other doctors that stood with her. I think she made sense, but I know nothing about her. She was, you know, making a statement with many respected doctors. She was not alone. She was making a statement about hydroxychloroquine with other doctors that swear by it . . . I was very impressed by her. Know nothing about her. I had never seen her before. But certainly, you can put her up and let her have a voice. So what they did was they took down their voice. Now, they seem to never take down the other side. They only take down conservative voices. It's a shame. And with hydroxy, all I want to do is save lives. I don't care if it's hydroxy or something else."

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Conspiracy Theories Propagated by Donald Trump

Jing and Mike (2021) defined conspiracy theories as explanations that were proposed for practices or events that refer to the secret machinations of institutions or individuals who are powerful. They also considered conspiracy theories anomalies, but with time, they have become normalised in media and public discourse. They were bio-engineered and utilised by both the Trump administration and Chinese politicians as a discursive weapon to attack one another.

Right-wing conspiracy theory. This was a theory plotted by democrats who were against the re-

election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States. Rep. Ronny Jackson, R-Texas, an active supporter of Donald Trump, tweeted that the democrats would do anything to cheat in an election. This theory held virtually that anything done by Joe Biden or his health officials was to help in his elections. Donald Trump had claimed that the mail-in ballots would create a rigged election and tweeted on 24 May 2020, "The United States cannot have all Mail Ballots. It will be the greatest Rigged Election in history. People grab them from mailboxes, print thousands of forgeries and 'force' people to sign. Also, forge names. Some absentees OK, when necessary. Trying to use Covid for this scam."

#FilmYourHospital theory. This hash tag made people go to empty local hospitals to take videos and pictures to help "prove" the COVID-19 pandemic as an elaborate hoax. Mostly prominent politicians and political activists' Twitter handles propagated this theory. However, after a few several accounts on Twitter boosted this theory, it was pro-Trump accounts.

Thirty per cent of the public in the United States believe that the virus was purposely created and that the harm of the disease was exaggerated to harm Donald Trump's conspiracy theory. Trump had endorsed the failure to wear masks and denied the seriousness of the disease, and as a result, this caused massive loss of people in the country. In fact, former President Trump was sure that all would work well. On 24 January 2020, he tweeted: "China has been working very hard to contain the coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their effort and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American people, I want to thank President Xi! This would never be the case."

### Ideologies and Scientific Facts Castigated by Donald Trump

President Trump contravened the fact that there was a need for social distancing and the presence of few people in gathering. This was seen in his rally in Henderson, Nevada, on 13 September, where many people did not observe the social distancing and the health rule that limited public gatherings to 50 people. Donald Trump, his staff and his supporters violated the rule of wearing masks. He did not observe the fact

that masks could prevent one from contracting the virus, as to him, the virus was just like the flu, very mild, and it could miraculously go away when the temperatures rise. Many of his supporters showed up during the global pandemic packed in thousands, dressed in red, white, and blue and carrying posters without masks. This action created an environment for the spread of the virus.

Donald Trump downplayed a warning from Dr Anthony Fauci, the administration's medical expert, that the country did not have sufficient capacity to test the virus. He said that he did not agree with him since, as to him, they were actually doing a good job in testing the virus. The president also suggested that the virus might be gone by a fall. Donald Trump suggested that people could be injected with disinfectants to help defeat the coronavirus. In addition, he castigated the scientists' view that the various drugs he promoted to fight the virus were not proven to be effective. Trump's administration did not have a pandemic response team as his National Security Advisor Jon Bolton, whom he had appointed in April 2018, disbanded it. The disbanding happened irrespective of objections from Luciana Borio, the director of the biodefense preparedness and medical team of the National Security Council (NSC), who claimed that a flu pandemic was the number one threat facing the nation's health security.

## Response of WHO and Experts on Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories

WHO and experts were against the roaming false information spread by people, mostly by prominent leaders and political activists on social media. WHO created awareness on their tweeter page on May 20 by tweeting, "False information on #COVID19 is spreading & putting people in danger. Make sure you double-check everything you hear against trusted sources. For accurate information on #coronavirus, find official advice from your country's public health authority & WHO." Experts warned people against believing the covid-19 conspiracy theories, which they termed deadly since they could kill people. The World Health Organization, under the Twitter handle @Dr Tedros on April 29, 2020, stated, "The virus can wreak havoc. It's more than any terrorist attack. It can bring political, economic and social upheavals. But the choice is ours and the choice should be unity at the ntl

level. The choice should be global solidarity, standing in unity."

Unlike Kenya, Tanzania responded differently to Covid 19. The former president of Tanzania, the late John Pombe Magufuli, publicly dismissed the virus and termed it a Foreign Effort to Undermine the Country. He also declared the country Covid free in June 2020; since then, the country has stopped registering cases and deaths from Covid 19. He supported the traditional remedies that were not tested. Also, he actively undermined the confidence in diagnostic tests and ultimately declared victory over the Covid 19 virus. Later on, when the Covid 19 vaccines were discovered, he publicly stated that they could not be trusted and Tanzanians did not need them. This information was enough to mislead the entire country's belief on Covid 19. Similarly, Gwajima, one of Tanzania's millionaire pastor-cum-politician who ministers in the Church of Revival and Life, has adamantly refused to be vaccinated and is influencing followers not to take the jab believing that God is the ultimate deliverer and healer (Grantee, 2021).

loussou (2020) posits that as COVID-19 severely spread across Africa, leaders had to lock their countries down. However, the situation was different in Madagascar; the health practitioners worked tirelessly with the aim of developing the Covid 19 vaccine. In April 2020, President Andry Rajoelina launched a herbal remedy claiming that it could prevent and cure the virus. The herbal remedy named Covid Organics is produced from artemisia. It has proven efficacy against malaria and various indigenous herbs, which is in accordance with the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research, which developed the beverage. The beverage has been marketed as prevention and remedy for the past four months and offered to children at school.

In Uganda, there was diverse misinformation regarding Covid 19 circulating on social media. Some people believed it belonged to the rich folks in the cities; holding one's breath was a technique to test for the pandemic, whereas others believed that a boiled concoction of local herbs comprised of *ntangawuzi*, *mululuza*, *niimu*, *mubiri* and *ettovu* cures the virus. They also believed that Madagascar herbal cure could heal the virus and suggested its importation. Similarly, they had in mind that gargling liquor or salt or drinking

hydrogen peroxide cures the virus (Nannyonga et al., 2020).

Adhering to the policies set by the government and the advice of public health is vital in controlling the spread of COVID-19 (Islam et al., 2020). However, compliance of the policies largely depends on the public perception; of whether the virus is deadly. Therefore, COVID-19 conspiracy theories could highly influence the citizens' compliance with government and health practitioners' policies and recommendations, according to the study by Marinthe et al. (2020) on the links between general conspiracy beliefs and different health behaviours. They established that conspiracy beliefs were linked with significant preventive health behaviour since the participants were afraid of death after they came into contact with the virus, for example, observing social distancing rules as well as personal contact as addressed by the government. Similarly, some conspiracy theories made the public more cautious, forcing them to stock more food in their houses, thinking that the pandemic is here to stay (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

Conspiracy theory is perceived to portray adverse effects. Often, conspiracy theories are seen as laughable, and those who believe them are considered sceptical and paranoid but usually harmless. Whereas various conspiracy theories seem harmless, current psychological research implies that some conspiracy theories have social consequences and deserve more serious attention. COVID-19 conspiracy theories have incredibly resulted in negative societal effects, for instance, low institutional trust. Accordingly, believing in conspiracy theories around COVID-19 is perceived to undermine institutional trust, governmental regulations support and its adoption, and social engagement, like helping members of risk groups (Pummerer et al., 2021). It has been seen to lower social distancing compliance and other measures of health protection, including vaccination and putting on masks (Peitz et al., 2021). Accepting conspiracy narratives can lead to the dismissal of credible scientific information by people as it minimises the perceived importance of engaging in collectively beneficial behaviours (Lewandowsky et al., 2013). In Kenya, conspiracy theories have been used to fight the

regulations set by the government in relation to Covid 19 pandemic (Chamegere, 2021).

Since December 2019, the Covid 19 pandemic has claimed several lives. Covid-19 is said to have originated from a meat market in Wuhan, China, as discussed by Harman. The disease was developed in a lab in Wuhan, China, as scientists were researching a way to minimise population in the country. 5G mobile networks cause Covid-19 through radiation. According to Nannyonga et al. (2020), the pandemic has increasingly resulted in several global socioeconomic disruptions, for instance, the largest global recession. With the continued spread of the pandemic, diverse misinformation in line with the virus has highly risen. For instance, in Nigeria, men advice told to shave their beards to stay safe. Uganda has seen her share of misinformation concerning COVID-19, which some people believe to belong to the rich folks in cities.

There exist some conflicting theories about the origin of the coronavirus pandemic. For this reason, in January 2021, WHO appointed a team of medical experts to investigate the origin of COVID-19 in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The findings from the task force indicate four conspiracy theories surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. First, it shows a possibility of one person contracting the virus through direct contact with the host species, the bat, thereby infecting the heavily populated Wuhan province. According to WHO experts, involves the second scenario involves the virus transmission to humans through unknown intermediary species such as pangolins, minks or even cats. The third possibility is that COVID-19 could have originated under the first and second scenarios and was then transmitted via cold chain products. Finally, the fourth scenario involves a conspiracy theory that COVID-19 virus was manufactured in a laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology; a thought disputed by medical experts even though they do not rule out such a possibility even as the WHO experts call for further studies to ascertain the likely source of the coronavirus. "As far as WHO is concerned, all hypotheses remain on the table. This report is a very important beginning, but it is not the end. We have not yet found the source of the virus, and we must continue to follow the science and leave no stone unturned as we do," Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

The origin of Covid-19 was a meat market in Wuhan, China; the meat market origin theory is predicted by the bias of COVID-19 anxiety, ethnocentrism, uncertainty, and less so by more income, while scientists' distrust is negatively associated with this origin story. Covid-19 first appeared in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019 and escalated worldwide with millions of deaths globally. Epidemiologists have stated that the virus began from bats and then jumped to humans naturally, people who handled infected animals at a market in Wuhan, China. Concerning this theory, people should be careful about what is said, mostly if it has not been proven.

It originated in a lab in Wuhan, China; For instance, belief in the Chinese lab conspiracy theory is majorly associated with social dominance orientation (SDO), general conspiracy ideation, and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), as well as few reliable sources of news, anxiety, and distrust in scientists about the pandemic. (Yan, 2020) published a report pre-print, which stated that SARS-CoV-2 was created in a Chinese Lab as part of bioweapon research. In this theory, it was believed that the disease was made in a lab in Wuhan, China, as the scientists attempted new research to either reduce the population in the country. From this theory, my view is that people should stop judging scientists and take the necessary precautions to prevent themselves from contracting diseases.

'5G mobile networks cause Covid-19.' This belief in the 5G network conspiracy theory is majorly associated with distrust in scientists, and social dominance orientation (SDO), while less strongly with conspiracy ideation and information from social networks/media; right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is strongly negatively associated with belief in the 5G conspiracy theory, with older and wealthier individuals somewhat less likely to support it. It is believed that the introduction of the 5G network brought the virus through radiation, for which COVID-19 is entirely a cover-up (Henley & McIntyre, 2020). In this theory, critics of the pandemic believed that the disease came up from the new 5G network, which started affecting human health.

On the African island of Madagascar, President Andry Rajoelina launched a herbal remedy purporting that it could prevent and cure the virus. The herbal remedy Covid Organics is produced from artemisia, produced by the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research. Regardless of the warning from WHO against the untested remedies, President Andry Rajoelina has since marketed the product. The country has as well been struggling to cope with the Covid-19 surge cases despite the remedy. Similarly, a study by Nannyonga et al. (2020) postulates that boiling concoction comprising local herbs comprising of ntangawuzi, mululuza, ettovu, mubiri and niimu kills the virus. In regard to this theory, the only remedy to the pandemic should be tested and proven by health practitioners and WHO to be taken by human beings. These are conspiracy theories, and no one is unsure unless proven.

The former president of Tanzania, the late John Pombe Magufuli, advised Tanzanians to pray to God and use herbal herbs as a cure for the virus. Unlike other countries, Tanzania had no lockdown, markets were open, and public transport operated normally; Tanzania's borders remained open. Government leaders the president included appealed to members of diverse religious denominations to pray as a method of fighting the pandemic. Different verses are recited from the Quran and the Bible to justify prayer to protect or heal (Magoti, 2020). Gwajima, one of Tanzania's millionaire pastor-cum-politician who ministers in the Church of Revival and Life, adamantly refused to be vaccinated and influenced followers to accept the jab believing that God is the ultimate deliverer and healer (Grantee, 2021). This theory depicts that, as much as we pray and trust in God, we should not put God to the test. Nevertheless, the pandemic exists, and people are still dying; the best precaution is to observe health experts' regulations and end the pandemic's misinformation.

Lewandowsky et al. (2013) observe that it would be difficult to address the outcomes of conspiracy theories owing to the vague nature of the explanations given. From the research findings above, it is evident that a majority of the populace is sceptical about the theories being advanced by different governments regarding the causes and the possible containment measures for the coronavirus. A

response to one of the posts from the Kenya Ministry of Health urging Kenyans to observe the COVID-19 protocols reads, “Why is the government telling us to wear face masks yet themselves they don’t?” Similarly, another Facebook post read, “These politicians are taking us for a ride; they talk of keeping social distance, yet they attend political rallies and meet the people tours with utmost disregard to social distancing”. Uscinski et al. (2016) further corroborate the belief that conspiracy theories are often driven by strongly held social and political identities that are difficult to break, a case in point being the protests witnessed in the USA against the wearing of facemasks that was spearheaded by the former president Donald Trump who had a massive following on Twitter with several tweets each day and his supporters worldwide. His Twitter account would later be suspended permanently by Twitter. Therefore, the power of social media can never be underestimated in this day and age, especially on matters to do with

information dissemination in a timely fashion with an avenue for comments, likes and the ability to share the information.

## CONCLUSION

**Conclusion:** Conspiracy is a serious ethical issue in this day and age. With many avenues for information dissemination, especially on social media, information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood and misunderstood in equal measure. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic has provided us with a situation of uncertainty since the future of this world pandemic is unknown. Douglas (2020) opines that conspiracy theories flourish in times of crisis when people feel threatened, uncertain, and insecure. Accordingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the perfect circumstances for conspiracy theories, and research suggests that they negatively affect people’s compliance with preventive behaviours.

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