
Outlining the Media Framing of the Covid-19 Omicron Variant, and Its Consequences on Africa

Rhoda Patrick¹, Samuel Okunade², Hosea Patrick^{3,4}

¹Media and Communication Studies, Redeemer University, Ancaster, Canada

²Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

³Africa and Black Diaspora Studies, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada

⁴School of Built Environment and Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Abstract: The quality of the information that people are exposed to influences their outlook, perceptions, and interactions. This study examines how the framing of information about the Covid-19 Omicron variant led to its characterization as an ‘African’ variant. The World Health Organization (WHO) introduced the term ‘disinfodemic’ to describe the widespread misinformation and biased reporting during the pandemic, which significantly impacted society. This concept emerged from what the WHO termed a “massive infodemic,” a key driver of the pandemic’s spread. This study evaluates the global fear and reactionary measures taken by governments towards African countries. Using a desktop systematic review of online news coverage and Covid-19 regulations over two periods (November 2021 – January 2022 and October 2022 – December 2022), this study addresses how the media contributed to the portrayal of the Omicron variant as an ‘African’ variant, and the implications of this portrayal for the African continent. Supported by the media framing theory, this paper advocates for enhanced media literacy to combat misinformation. Given the critical role of the Internet and related technologies in managing information, this study underscores the importance of developing media literacy competencies to mitigate and counteract news misinformation.

Keywords: Africa; Covid-19; disinfodemic; media framing; Omicron

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: abiolurhoda@gmail.com

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Introduction

In today’s digital age, media literacy is increasingly crucial as people rely more on digital media for information and communication. The world has witnessed a surge in new media convergence, driven by globalization, as information and technology converge. However, globalization has also been linked to low media literacy due to the overwhelming flow of both verified and unverified information (Shevchenko et al., 2021). Studies suggest that a deeper understanding of media literacy could have mitigated the impact of misleading news and poorly represented information during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021; Shevchenko et al.,

2021; Tretter and Franz-Balsen 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic, which negatively affected various aspects of life due to misleading information, particularly through news coverage, underscores the importance of media literacy for a more balanced and unbiased approach. The Covid-19 pandemic, caused by SARS-CoV-2, first emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Patrick & Ramohai, 2023; WHO, 2023). Since then, the virus has spread globally, causing millions of infections and deaths (Patrick & Ramohai, 2023). A significant challenge during the pandemic was the emergence of new viral variants, which had mutations affecting the virus's transmission, severity, and response to vaccines and treatments. Late in 2021, the Omicron variant of Covid-19 emerged, identified among travellers in Botswana and South Africa who had flown in from Europe, causing widespread concern and panic (Tian et al., 2022).

The virus's genome made it prone to mutations (Koyama et al., 2020). The media played a crucial role in reporting these variants, disseminating information, and shaping public perceptions and responses, particularly regarding the Omicron variant—the focus of this paper (Tretter and Franz-Balsen 2020). This paper examines the consequences of Covid-19 misinformation and the misrepresentation of Africa and Africans, particularly concerning the Omicron variant, which has been perceived as an “African” variant. Furthermore, it aims to answer the following questions: (a) What role did the media play in portraying the Covid-19 Omicron variant as an ‘African’ variant? (b) What were the implications of this portrayal for the African continent? The position in this discourse does not dispute the data regarding the identification of the Omicron variant in Southern Africa by the scientists who reported it at the time, nor does it claim to know how it spread across the continent. Instead, it challenges the biased and prejudiced media portrayals that led to discriminatory attitudes towards African people.

Disinfodemic representation and media literacy in the COVID-19 era

Media literacy refers to the ability to critically analyze and interpret the meaning of media messages, as well as understand the impact of media on society and individuals (Potter, 2018; Silverblatt et al., 2014). This is particularly necessary, given the constant interchanging of roles among consumers, producers, ‘prosumers’ (a combination of producers and consumers), and creators of media content (Abiolu & Teer-Tomaselli, 2018). Similarly, media literacy has a significant influence on how people exercise their agency over their environments. It plays a crucial role in shaping individual and community health behaviours, as people critically evaluate the information they encounter, thereby reducing the likelihood of falling for false claims. This is particularly helpful in curtailing disinformation about pandemics (disinfodemic). Austin et al. (2021) affirmed that media literacy skills encouraged the acceptance and uptake of recommended health behaviours regarding Covid-19, such as the use of protective face coverings and social distancing, while partisan coverage and misinformation about the pandemic were linked to carefree behaviours towards health regulations. Their study further highlighted the need for media literacy-based interventions to address and correct myths and misinformation in the event of future occurrences. Therefore, media literacy proves pivotal in helping individuals navigate the vast amount of information now available online and in identifying and evaluating credible and reliable sources of information. For these reasons, they are essential skills for navigating the complex and rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Not only are media literacy critical skills for promoting democratic values, economic development, and empowerment, but they also reduce people's susceptibility to misinformation, its dissemination, and the associated harms (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021). These risk factors and consequences of human susceptibility to misleading news were exacerbated by the pandemic (Boettke and Powell 2021; Mallapaty, 2021; Tretter & Franz-Balsen, 2020). The Covid-19 disinformation pandemic encompasses a range of falsehoods, from conspiracy theories about the virus's origins to misleading information about treatments and prevention methods. It gained exciting titles such as “The variant of fear” and “The variant of hope” (Djordjevic et al., 2023). Similarly, Shevchenko et al.'s (2021) pointed to the use of sensational news headlines by journalists to drive news traffic. Their observation focused on the prevalence of this ‘journalistic skill’ during the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, as it led to the dissemination of misleading news. They attributed the political orientation of journalistic sources as a key factor in the portrayal of Covid-19 news. In this way, political and economic powers are displayed in the manipulation and distortion of actual reality, favouring those wielding the power and harming those at the receiving end. The dynamics of the political economy of the media, brought to the fore by Covid-19, are highlighted.

Bieber (2022) observed that the pandemic risked reinforcing pre-existing nationalist dynamics that could have contributed to the political and economic undertones in global responses to the pandemic. The closing of borders,

which led to deglobalization, and the politics of fear (which we, in this discourse, argue was fueled by the media), had some consequences as a result of these reactionary measures. The politics of fear were a key feature of the pandemic. Various conspiracy theories greased by the wheels of fear and fearmongering became weaponized for political, economic, and religious purposes. Scapegoating was one of the consequences. Further arguments crystallized the viewpoints that the pandemic began against a backdrop of intensely mainstreamed exclusionary nationalism in key countries globally. Racism, unequal wealth distribution, oppression, police brutality, modern-day slavery, anti-immigrant policies, climate change, and other vices were contentions in global spaces. And though the pandemic had momentarily overshadowed them, those concerns could not be permanently eclipsed. The pandemic only added to the world's troubles. Bieber maintained that the closing of borders around the world and the evacuation of citizens by foreign ministries only reiterated the importance of citizenship, leading to the conclusion that the value of citizenship had shifted and increased. Bieber stated that "as the pandemic has spread globally, the risk is that citizens from the Global South will be particularly affected by continuous border restrictions. The result could be a reinforcement of global inequalities of citizenship, especially as citizenship and migratory policies are likely to remain more rigid (p.20)."

The privileges of those with citizenship from developed countries placed them at an advantage in terms of more unrestricted movement and quicker returns compared to those from developing and 'high-risk' countries, who faced travel restrictions/bans, more extended quarantine periods, more mandatory testing, and general monitoring. Arguments on this idea are elaborated on more in the analytical section of this paper. The inequalities and misrepresentations around the pandemic, especially the Omicron variant, resulted in a toxic "massive infodemic", also referred to as "disinfodemic" by the World Health Organization (WHO) in Posetti and Bontcheva's (2020) policy paper on *deciphering Covid-19 disinformation*. This expression describes the parody of mediated content surrounding the pandemic, the influence of this falsehood and reporting predisposition on society, and its consequences. Making a distinction between disinformation and misinformation, Posetti and Bontcheva (2020:2) argued that disinformation would be "the production of content promising fake treatments for reasons of private profit, while misinformation would happen when the same content is believed to be true and is then shared to be helpful." The focus of this current paper is on misinformation, as the news about Omicron, although believable and widely circulated, provided evidence that suggested the variant had been identified in other places. However, these regions were not at the receiving end of the unfriendly policies and regulations that Africans were subjected to.

The uncertainties surrounding the emergence of the Omicron variant and the fearmongering that had already characterised the Covid-19 pandemic led to a further breakdown of tolerance and togetherness, as well as global disunity (CBS News, 2021). Du et al. (2022) confirmed that the question of Omicron's origins is complicated and thus remains mysterious and elusive and could easily have evolved from any region. Considering three theoretical perspectives, their study showed that the variant could have circulated and evolved in a hidden population without detection, evolved from a cat-and-mouse game between the virus and host in some immunosuppressed patients, for example, people living with HIV, and originated from adaptation in animal reservoirs and been transmitted back to humans. There were speculations about the detection of the Omicron variant in Europe before it was reported in South Africa. It was also detected in Botswana, Belgium, Hong Kong, and Israel. Just three days after it was reported in South Africa, it was also reported in Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (Petersen et al., 2022). Based on these multiple observations across different geographical spaces, it raises the question of whether there is an actual and scientifically proven report that identifies the origin of the Omicron variant and explains why South Africa, or the African continent generally, was scapegoated.

In combating misinformation in Africa, the use of 'technology to counter technology' is vital. By implication, this necessitates media literacy and the dissemination of accurate information through official and authentic sources (Nsoesie, 2021). The role of fact-checking mechanisms is quickly vital in the equation, informing and guiding rather than misinforming and misleading (Heffernan, 2024). Owing to the weaponization of misinformation, it has been a viable instrument for political, xenophobic, racial, and associated hatreds. It is on this note that the arguments maintain that the pandemic, through media portrayals, reinforced these tendencies in the wake of border closure, travel restrictions on specific groups and inherent 'deglobalization.' To this end, this paper offers an analytical standpoint of news presentation, observable syntactic construction of news headlines, the political economy of factual reportage due to the highly politicized nature of the pandemic, and the culmination of these factors in the actual representation and perception of Africa and Africans as relating to the Omicron variant.

Media framing theory

Goffman's (1974) framing theory serves as the theoretical basis for understanding how the Omicron variant was portrayed, along with its consequences. According to Goffman, the theory is concerned with how the presentation of an event or series of events to an audience influences and impacts the audience's reactions to such messages. It thus seeks to explain media effects based on how content is portrayed. It refers to how the media influences people's perceptions of a particular issue or event. Media framing involves selecting certain aspects of a problem or event and excluding others to influence public opinion. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, media framing played a significant role in shaping the public's perception of the disease and its variants, including the Omicron variant. Media framing theory offers a valuable lens through which to analyse media coverage of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 (Yousaf et al., 2022). The media's framing of the issue significantly impacted the public perception of the variant, contributing to a sense of panic and uncertainty among the public (Zhu, 2023). Journalists and media organizations must be aware of the potential impact of their framing choices, particularly in public health, given the significant influence they exert (Hoon, 2022). After the Omicron variant was discovered, it was widely reported in the media, and how the media framed it extensively influenced shared experiences of the variant.

Largely, the media framing of the Omicron variant considerably swayed public views of the disease and its likely outcomes. For instance, the media framed the Omicron variant by overtly focusing on its origin in South Africa (Dyer, 2021; Du et al., 2022; Petersen et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2022). However, it proved especially problematic because it fuelled the stigmatization of South Africa and other countries in the region. The Omicron variant has been referred to as the "South African variant" or the "African variant," as evidenced by data analysis, despite being detected in several other countries. This framing reinforced negative labels about Africa and its people, which contributed to the spread of misinformation and xenophobia as well as a sense of panic and uncertainty among the public (Vaughan, 2021). It is crucial to acknowledge the role of media framing in shaping public opinions, particularly during a public health crisis. Communication scholars have argued that media framing can significantly impact people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Therefore, it is also crucial to pay attention to how the media covers issues related to public health. In the case of the Omicron variant, the media's framing had real-world consequences as it led to the spread of misinformation, prejudicial regulations, and panic.

Methodology

The methodological approach employed in this paper is a systematic desktop review. As such, it was framed discursively. McKeown and Mir (2021) defined a systematic desktop review as searching multiple bibliographic databases to identify eligible studies for analysis of secondary evidence on a particular area of study. Ayouni et al. (2021) found this method to be valuable for understanding, appraising, and analyzing the effectiveness of public health measures in preventing, controlling, and mitigating the spread of the pandemic. By targeting the coverage and reportage of the emergence and spread of the Omicron variant, specific techniques employed by news outlets, especially in the Global North, that sparked prejudiced regulations against Africans, mobility/border control measures, as well as fearmongering in the global space, are highlighted. This methodology was employed to provide an understanding of the role of the media in peddling Covid-19 Omicron as an 'African' variant and the implications for the African continent.

Secondary data were sourced from selected news coverage and Covid-19 regulations spanning three consecutive months in 2021/2022 (November 2021 – January 2022, and October 2022 – December 2022) using a multilayered purposive random sampling approach. This was done to capture perspectives around when the Omicron case was reported, considering that November 2021 was the period when the news broke. The focus was on the end of the year 2022 because the peak periods of the variant had passed, and it was the first anniversary of the report on the variant. Therefore, the focus of this paper was on news reportage and presentation after the Omicron cases had reasonably subsided in different countries. It is purported that the timeframe would provide ample opportunity to identify how it had been reported, the global responses to this, and the consequences of the reactions. A specific and intentional approach was taken with the Google search since the inclusive criteria were news items or terms that contained 'Omicron variant,' 'its emergence/supposed origin,' 'regulations that accompanied the report,' 'Covid-19 regulations,' 'mobility,' and 'the exclusion of certain countries/citizens from the travel ban.' This approach is known as the Boolean search method (Aliyu, 2017).

Davahli et al. (2020) employed a systematic review, offering valuable insights into the hospitality industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, they noted that the following limitations are palpable. Identifying and

analyzing papers published within a specific time frame may lead to the inability to discover relevant documents within that period. Another challenge is that a limited number of keywords may not capture all appropriate sources, potentially leading to gaps in the search. Lastly, the available database may limit the discovery of relevant articles. Although these cases are worth considering, technological advancements in filtering systems and databases limit, to the bare minimum, the exclusion of certain news sources. There is a high level of confidence in this study's data source due to its uniqueness and the novelty of the pandemic, which made it almost impossible for relevant data to be omitted in line with keywords such as 'Omicron variant' and 'Covid-19 regulations.' Similarly, the Google database is a proficient and prolific tool that is easy and free to use, offering a variety of content and providing relative ease of access to information (Haddaway et al., 2015).

From published journal articles, between 2021 and 2022, 341,869 articles on Covid-19. This dropped to 3,445 articles when the "Omicron variant" was added as a keyword. It further dropped to 35 articles with the addition of "Covid 19 regulations" and Africa. To supplement this data shortage, the Google search engine proved useful in finding and filtering viable sources. The ubiquity of the Internet and associated technologies, as well as the globalization of the world, all enhance easier access to information regarding the portrayal of the Omicron variant by news sources. The data search also identified global regulations that accompanied the global outbreak of the variant through online sources. The data and subsequent analysis elaborate on international evidence relevant to the paper's guiding questions, enabling a critical examination of these reports to inform further research, policy, and practices in this area of concentration.

Twenty-two news sources were purposively selected for analysis concerning the paper's objectives and questions. As inclusion and exclusion criteria, the papers were to be published between November 2021 and January 2022, and between October 2022 and December 2022. They were to contain content related to Omicron, travel bans, Africa, regulations, and the origin of Omicron. These articles were screened for relevance, while the rest were discarded due to data saturation, as they reported similar news stories through different news outlets.

Figure 1 above provides a summary of the news sources that contained content related to the paper's keywords. During a time of confusion and fear surrounding Covid-19, people were desperate to understand the current developments and the severity of the pandemic both locally and globally (Abiolu et al., 2023; Patrick & Ramohai, 2023). And with the outbreak of the Omicron variant, headlines like, *Where did Omicron come from?*, much like clickbait, would attract a reader's attention to attend to the desire for answers. What these reports had in common was their claim to an article published in *Science*, "Gradual emergence followed by exponential spread of the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant in Africa," that allegedly shed light on the origins of the Omicron variant. Based on this, it was concluded that the virus likely originated from Omicron-specific mutations in previously infected Covid-19 patients in other African countries, rather than from South Africa.¹ The scientific report led to other misdirected claims that hailed the "scientific breakthrough." There was a claim² that the Omicron variant's predecessors had long existed on the African continent before it was first identified in South Africa and that Omicron emerged progressively over several months in different countries across Africa. It was concluded that, although Omicron did not originate solely in South Africa but in other African countries, it first dominated infection rates there before spreading across the continent. These claims were unfounded, and the paper published in *Science* was retracted because, based on new findings, some of the statements made in the study could no longer be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.³

The South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, condemned the United Kingdom and the United States of America, among other countries, for instantly placing high-level travel restrictions on passengers from South Africa.⁴ There was an immediate suspension of air travel by the European Union and other countries to and from southern Africa and other parts of Africa.⁵ This was one of the responses that some countries took against a few African countries, although the variant was also present on different continents. For instance, Belgium and Germany had confirmed that sample tests revealed the variant was present in those countries before the world was alerted by South African health officials on 24 November, 2021. There were already cases in Europe a week before South African scientists raised the alarm.⁶ Moreover, "other countries where the variant has been detected,

¹ livemint.com 4 December 2022

² Genetic engineering and biotechnology news 5 December 2022

³ News Medical Life Sciences 20 December 2022

⁴ Quartz. 30 November 2021

⁵ BBC 26 November 2021

⁶ National Public Radio (NPR) 30 November 2021

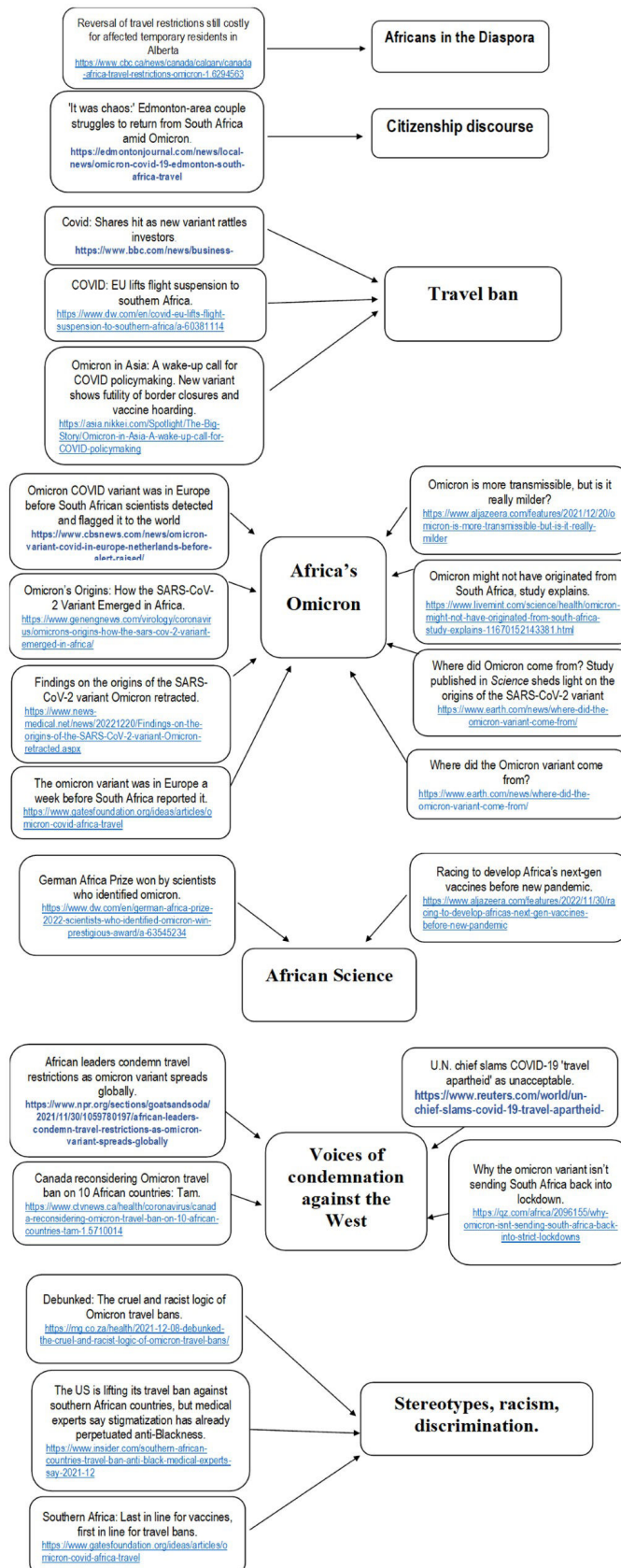


Figure 1. Data presentation of selected headlines between Nov 2021 – Jan 2022/Oct – Dec 2022.

such as the U.K., Canada and Germany, did not appear to be facing targeted travel bans.” The ban would do more harm than good and discriminate against African countries. The ultimate challenge with such restrictions was the deep-seated bigoted tendency, in that *the blanket travel bans* were because of people’s nationalities, and it was not a true reflection of a global stance against the pandemic if some were excluded from travel bans.

The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, opposed all forms of social injustice levied against South Africa and other Africans due to the Omicron outbreak on the continent.⁷ With strong words such as “travel apartheid” and “unfair, punitive and ineffective” regulations, his words echoed the disgruntled feelings of African leaders such as the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa. “The prohibition of travel is not informed by science, nor will it be effective in preventing the spread of this variant ... The only thing the prohibition on travel will do is to damage the economies of the affected countries further and undermine their ability to respond to and also to recover from the pandemic.”⁸ “With the omicron variant now detected in several regions of the world, putting in place travel bans that target Africa attacks global solidarity ... COVID-19 constantly exploits our divisions. We will only get the better of the virus if we work together for solutions,” said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa. Cheikh Oumar Seydi, who is the Director, Africa, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, captured the ordeal of African countries, the leaders, and the populace.⁸ He bemoaned the lingering problem of inequality, racism and discrimination faced by Africans. He added that the economic downturn and hardship were strongly felt within the South African economy. The African Union Commission Chair, Moussa Faki Mahamat, further criticized the unjust treatment of Africans: “These travel bans are not justified.” The complaints were along the lines of South Africa being “punished” for alerting the world to the presence of this variant. The deputy chief public health officer of Canada, Dr Howard Njoo, submitted that the rationale for omitting countries, such as the United Kingdom, that had high reports of the virus, like the restricted African countries, from the list of banned travel into Canada could not be justified.⁹ Affirmatively, “... the Omicron variant did not originate in South Africa, [but] because it had the technology and sense of responsibility to report the new variant, it has unfairly had the most severe travel restrictions imposed upon it by other countries.”¹⁰ Adding on to how the world reacted to the South African-based Omicron revelation, it was shown to be a ‘cruel and racist’ mindset behind such reactions.¹¹ These included how only Africans had to bear the burden of travel restrictions, while other continents did not face such hardships, and how the reactions indicated that the science emanating from South Africa could not be trusted. What necessitated this conclusion was the requirement for people who had travelled through the southern African region to submit pre-departure negative Covid-19 molecular test results obtained in places other than those in South Africa. The remarks on citizenship and elitism from the reports are captured thus;

Across the Atlantic, France revealed its own set of rules: only French and EU residents, diplomats and flight crews are allowed to disembark on French soil if a plane passed through a Southern African country; regardless of whether those people were exposed to potentially infected people in those countries or not; if they have the correct passport, they can disembark.¹⁷

Not only were these responses preposterous, but they were also laden with stigmatization and biases, which are hallmarks of anti-Blackness.¹² Furthermore, there were loopholes in the global responses to ban travel to southern Africa and the restrictions on Africans from travelling in the comments of some scientists; “If you do the travel ban early enough and you do it completely ... you could keep the variant out of your country,” said Dr Bettie Steinberg at Northwell Health’s Feinstein Institutes for Medical Research.¹³ “But as soon as one or two people have come in before you knew there was that variant and imposed the travel ban, then you’re locking the door after the horse escaped.” Steinberg added that travel bans only slowed transmission for a little while, but by allowing citizens of some countries and banning others, “you haven’t really done anything.”¹⁹ The consequence was far-reaching even for Africans abroad. A Nigerian who lost her mother to the virus and could not travel to Nigeria for the funeral rites felt helpless and hurt.¹⁴ Another Nigerian paid exorbitant fees to travel to Nigeria,

⁷ Reuters. December 2021

⁸ The Optimist; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 10 December 2021

⁹ CTV News 16 December 2021

¹⁰ Aljazeera Feature News 20 December 2021

¹¹ Mail and Guardian 08 December 2021

¹² Insider 27 December 2021

¹³ Nikkei Asia 15 December 2021

¹⁴ CBS News 24 December 2021

but was concerned about the possibility of not being able to return to her domicile abroad.²⁰ However, this was not the case for those with certain citizenship and travel documents as members of the EU and Western countries were permitted to travel, but only had to observe a few health precautions.¹⁵ In this case, not only were the targeted Africans affected, but it also recalls the discourse on citizenship and elitism, in that only those who could afford rebooking at excessive costs and 'choice citizenship' could travel. In contrast, others were left high and dry.

The strides of African scientists in their use of technology to combat diseases and confront global health inequalities did not go unnoticed.¹ This stemmed from the unfair and unjust treatment of Africans after the discovery of the Omicron variant, and why Africa needed to be more self-reliant and sufficient. In the same vein, the scientists who alerted the world to the emergence of the variant were lauded for their efforts in recognition of the importance of their research, for which they got the German Africa Prize.¹⁶ However, the report showed this did not exclude them from death threats and the blame game for being responsible for the travel ban on southern Africa. The negative global responses and consequences on Africa and Africans to the discovery of the Omicron variant by scientists are detailed in the analysis of these data in the ensuing section.

Discussion of emergent themes

This section outlines the dominant themes derived from the analysed data. By offering a more nuanced approach to the issues raised, a deeper scrutiny is necessitated within the purview of academic debates of the media frames attached to the Omicron virus. The examination of media roles and framing in the context of the emergence of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 sheds light on the intricate interplay between media narratives, public perceptions, and societal consequences. Goffman's framing theory provides a valuable lens through which to dissect the media's portrayal of the variant and its implications (Goffman, 1974). It could be said that the meaning attributed to the Omicron variant by global scientific networks, coupled with media reportage, may be an attempt to scapegoat South Africa and the African continent for this course. This analysis examines the impact of media narratives on public understanding, behaviour, and the broader socio-political landscape during the critical period of the pandemic.

The power of framing: Reinforcing stereotypes and igniting panic

One of the key findings of this study is the media's framing of the Omicron variant of Covid-19, which was labelled the "South African variant" or the "African variant." This framing choice, while geographically accurate, oversimplified the situation and led to unintended consequences. The media's singular focus on the origin of the variant reinforced existing stereotypes about Africa, contributing to the stigmatization of the continent (Vaughan, 2021). Similarly, the potency of media framing in shaping public perceptions is underscored by the panic and uncertainty that resulted from this portrayal. The analysis aligns with the concerns voiced by scholars such as Cunliffe-Jones et al. (2021), who stressed the importance of media literacy in countering biased and misleading information. The media's framing in this context exacerbated fear and contributed to the spread of misinformation, thereby underscoring the need for responsible journalism. The framing of the Omicron variant as the "South African variant" had several significant impacts. Firstly, it led to a surge in xenophobic attitudes and behaviors towards individuals of African descent, both within and outside the continent and more in the Global North countries (Rabin, 2023; Gordon, 2024). This stigmatization was not only unfair but also counterproductive, as it diverted attention from the pandemic's global nature and the need for a unified response to the crisis. The focus on Africa as the source of the variant overshadowed the fact that the virus was spreading rapidly in many parts of the world, including Europe and North America. Moreover, the media's portrayal of the Omicron variant fueled public fear and uncertainty (Islam & Hossain, 2022; Singhal 2022). Sensationalist headlines and alarmist reporting created a sense of panic, leading to behaviours such as stockpiling supplies and a reluctance to engage in public activities (Marzano et al., 2023). This fearmongering had a detrimental effect on public health efforts, as it undermined trust in health authorities and contributed to vaccine hesitancy. People were more likely to believe and spread misinformation about the virus and its variants, further complicating efforts to control the pandemic.

¹⁵ Edmonton Journal News 19 December 2021

¹⁶ Deutsche Welle 25 October 2022

Media's role in global Inequalities: Amplifying the politics of fear

The pandemic's impact on global dynamics, involving issues of deglobalization and the advancement of nationalist sentiments, was heightened by the media's framing choices (Bieber, 2022). The closing of borders and consequent travel bans were accompanied by a narrative that sustained the politics of fear and divided the world along national lines. The media's spotlight on these sentiments confirms the concerns concerning the implications of mobility privileges and global inequalities. The media's framing contributed to the implementation of prejudiced regulations and mobility restrictions. Countries around the world, including the United States and several European nations, imposed travel bans on African countries shortly after the Omicron variant was identified (Naude, 2023; Vermooten, 2023). These measures were criticized by public health experts and organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) for being ineffective and discriminatory (Forman & Habibi, 2022; Jackson et al., 2022). The travel bans not only failed to prevent the spread of the variant but also caused significant economic and social harm to the affected countries.

Additionally, media framing has the potential to exacerbate these divisions, underscoring the need for media organizations to consider the ethical implications of their news reports and techniques. The paper analysis further highlights the position that the media occupy as powerful agents who can significantly impact societal values, either supporting inequalities or contributing to a more equitable discourse.

Unveiling uncertainties: Media's impact on global unity

The analysis also digs into the intricacies surrounding the origins of the Omicron variant. Du et al.'s (2022) study highlighted the complex nature of the variant's progression, which contrasts with the media's tendency toward sensationalism and assumptions. The media's interpretation of uncertainties and its role in fuelling fear can be seen as a substantial contributor to the attrition of global unity and cooperation. The interplay between media, uncertainty, and disunity echoes the matters raised by Austin et al. (2021) regarding the consequences of biased coverage and misinformation of the Omicron variant. The media's framing of uncertainties underscores the importance of accurate representation, responsible reporting, and transparent communication, particularly during times of crisis.

Implications and a call to action

The implications of this analysis are multilayered and range beyond the pandemic itself. Media framing, as established, has far-reaching consequences on public perceptions, actions, and policy decisions. In the face of such influences, media literacy emerges as a crucial tool to counter the spread of misinformation, biased narratives, and negative stereotypes. Adopting Goffman's framing theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the media's role in shaping public discourse. These interpretations pave the way for media professionals to undertake greater accountability in their reporting practices. The analysis reminds media organizations of the significant roles they play in informing the public health crises narrative, and that their actions can either intensify divisions or foster unity.

Media framing's ripple effect: Beyond immediate consequences

The media's framing of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 disease expands its impacts past the immediate public discourse and policy resolutions. The analysis reveals a ripple effect that permeates numerous levels within society, from individual behavior to international relations. The framing of the variant as an "African variant" not only perpetuated negative stereotypes but also supported a portrayal of Africa's vulnerability and lack of scientific progress. This framing peddles the sustained cycle where perception influences behaviours, which in turn affect policy outcomes. Scholars such as Shevchenko et al. (2021) have emphasized the media's power to shape public agendas and attitudes, which in turn impact policy formulation. The media's portrayal of the Omicron variant is a poignant illustration of this cycle in play, where framing heightens public fear and affects policymakers' responses.

Media literacy as a panacea

In light of the media's significant impact on public discourse and perceptions, the study reinforces the urgency of promoting media literacy. Media literacy, as discussed by Abiolu and Teer-Tomaselli (2018), enables individuals to assess and interpret media messages critically. As media consumers, individuals can navigate the deluge of information, identify biases, and discern credible sources. The analysis aligns with recent scholarship by Posetti

and Bontcheva (2020), emphasizing the importance of media literacy in deciphering and countering disinformation. The infodemic, characterized by the spread of misleading content, necessitates a populace equipped with the tools to discern fact from fiction. By integrating media literacy education into formal curricula and public awareness campaigns, societies can equip their citizens to counter the dangers of the disinformation epidemic.

A global responsibility: Ethical reporting in crisis

Media organizations bear a substantial responsibility for disseminating accurate and responsible information during times of crisis. The study emphasizes the far-reaching consequences of framing choices and how ethical reporting can mitigate the harms associated with biased narratives. The media's global reach implies a corresponding global responsibility, as media coverage transcends borders and influences perceptions beyond national boundaries. The ethical reporting obligation is encapsulated in the United Nations (2023) call for responsible and trustworthy media. The media's capacity to contribute to positive social change and global understanding is enormous. This paper reiterates the need for media professionals to adhere to the principles of transparency, fairness, and accuracy as laid out in professional codes of media ethics.

Toward unity: Media as a bridge, not a divide

In the context of the Omicron variant of Covid-19, media framing has further contributed to misinformation, division, and stereotyping. However, the media can also bridge divides and foster understanding when used effectively. By adopting a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to reporting, media organizations can contribute to the global discourse that respects scientific uncertainties, values diversity, and seeks collaborative solutions. For these reasons, the viewpoints of this paper align with the call for "constructive journalism," a method of reporting that stresses solutions and provokes productive dialogue Tække and Clausen (2017) . As the pandemic continues to impact societies globally in diverse ways, media organizations can choose to be agents of positive change, facilitating conversations that transcend borders and promote international cooperation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper sheds light on the intricate relationship between media framing, public perceptions, and societal consequences during the emergence of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 disease. With a nuanced comprehension of the power of the media and accompanying responsibility, societies can navigate the intricacies of the post-pandemic media landscape. As a result, more emphasis must be placed on media literacy. Along these lines is the necessity to advocate for ethical reporting and encourage a more inclusive narrative. The media must embody their role as agents of transformation, inspiring unity and positive change. Similarly, the discourse emphasizes the need for further research and more in-depth dialogue that examines the evolving role of the media in crisis management. As technology continues to reshape communication dynamics, the media's capacity for influence grows. It is crucial that scholars, media professionals, policymakers, and the public collaborate to shape a media landscape that fosters responsible reporting, informed decision-making, and global understanding. Media framing continues to carry profound implications for public discourse and societal dynamics. In recognition of the power of the media and embracing their capacity for positive impact, the way can be paved for a more informed, equitable, and united global community.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study integrates media studies, public health, and African studies to analyze how the global media framed the Covid-19 Omicron variant and its consequences for Africa. It explores the intersection of communication theory, international relations, and digital literacy, highlighting how biased narratives fueled misinformation and stigmatisation. By examining media coverage and policy responses, the research underscores the need for critical media literacy and equitable global health discourse to counteract the effects of 'disinfodemic' on marginalized regions.

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