FACT CHECKING THE PANDEMIC IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: CORRECTION STRATEGIES BY LATIN AMERICAN AND AFRICAN META FACT CHECKERS

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The Covid-19 pandemic and fact-checking in the   Global South

Between 2019 and 2021, the number of fact-checking organizations rose substantially in three key regions of the world (Asia: 35 to 75; Africa: 9 to 19; and Latin America: 18 to 38) (Stencel & Luher, 2021). Meta launched a third-party fact checking program for Facebook content in 2016 and since then it has grown to include more than 90 fact checking partners around the world. They have also granted access to their detection and engagement measurement tools (Full Fact, 2020).

This study investigates the Facebook dissemination practices of region-specific Meta-affiliated fact checkers who dealt with Covid-19 vaccine mis/disinformation. Meta-affiliated fact checkers benefit from privileged access to AI tools developed by Meta to identify viral and misleading content on Facebook, however these tools operate under Meta's own assumptions and policies about content moderation that are not transparent/discussed openly. On top of this, there may be tensions between Meta's policy that emphasizes a focus on detecting bottom-up dis/misinformation claims and the understanding that Covid-19 vaccine information is highly politicized.

The spread of Covid-19 dis/misinformation coincided with tumultuous periods of electoral political activity in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Government representatives at various levels engaged in "vaccine diplomacy" (Hill, 2021). Importantly, Russia and China engaged in negotiations with many countries to promote and sell their vaccines in competition with vaccines manufactured by the US, UK and Europe. Sputnik V and the Chinese vaccines were acquired in numerous countries in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa (Hill, 2021; Mallapaty, 2021). According to the Argentinian fact-checking organization, Chequeado, in the last half of 2021, false claims that had been verified tended to be "exported" from the US and Spain to Latin America (Tardaguila, 2021).

Research approach

We used Crowdtangle to collect all Facebook posts from six fact-checking organizations in Latin America and Sub-saharan Africa from 2021 that contained variations on the words "coronavirus/Covid-19" and "vaccine" and corresponding translations in Spanish (i.e. "vacuna" and "pandemia") (see Figure 1).

Region	Fact-checking organisation	Total unfiltered Faceposts in 2021 (N)	Total COVID-19/vaccine posts in 2021 - N (%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	AfricaCheck	649	164 (25.3%)
Latin America	AnimalPolitico	9,625	259 (2.7%)
Latin America	Chequeado	2,884	1,319 (46.4%)
Latin America	ColombiaCheck	1,161	299 (25.8%)
Latin America	LaSillaVacia	5,470	59 (1.1%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	PesaCheck	411	59 (14.4%)
	TOTAL	20,200	2,159 (10.6%)

Figure 1: Facebook posts associated with Covid-19 vaccinations collected from selected Meta third party fact-checkers in 2021

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We drew on the work of Ferracioli et al. (2022) and Luengo and Garcia-Marin (2020) to develop our initial coding frame and used a double coding and consensus coding approach to inductively develop our codebook. Here, we report on the findings from over half of the sample of Facebook posts from each of these fact-checkers.

Preliminary findings

Fact checks of bottom-up and top-down claims

Our preliminary analysis shows that verifications of local bottom-up claims (associated with social media platform communication between ordinary users) dominated the Facebook posts of these Covid-19 fact-checking organizations in 2021 (Figure 2 below).
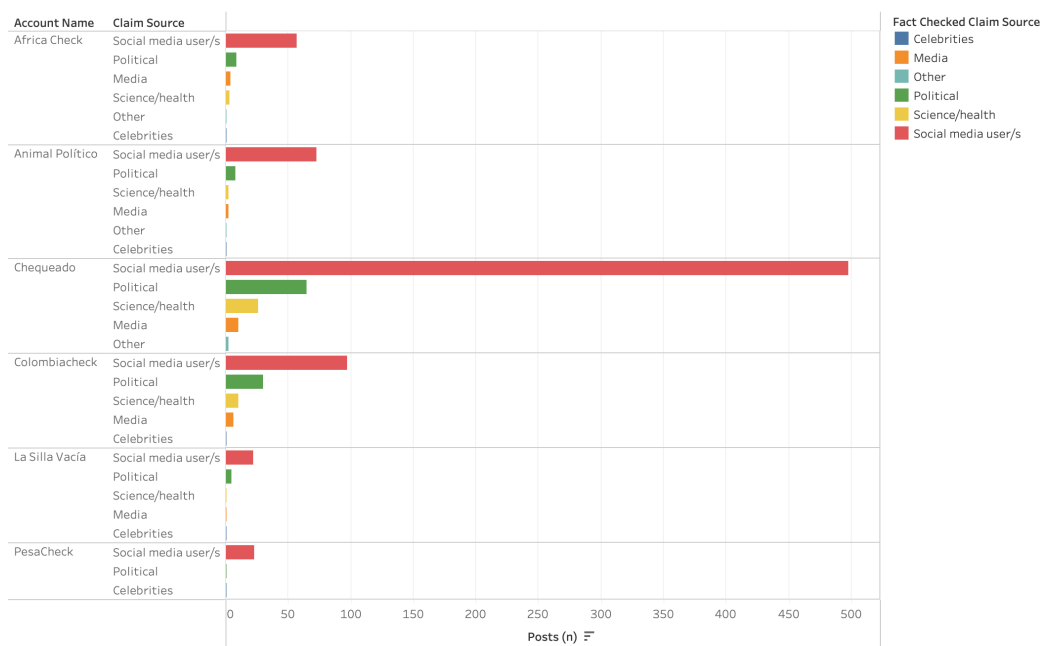
Figure 2: Source of claim mentioned in fact-checked claims on Facebook. fact-checked claims addressed by fact checkers

These fact checks focussed on bottom-up claims related to Covid-19 treatments and cures as alternatives to vaccines, Covid-19 cases and deaths, and vaccine safety and efficacy. Figure 3 presents an example of the kind of bottom-up fact-checking posts contained in our sample; the post from PesaCheck contains a video debunking a claim that ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine were proven Covid-19 treatments and that the Astrazeneca vaccine was unsafe. This post was shared widely on Facebook in Kenya.

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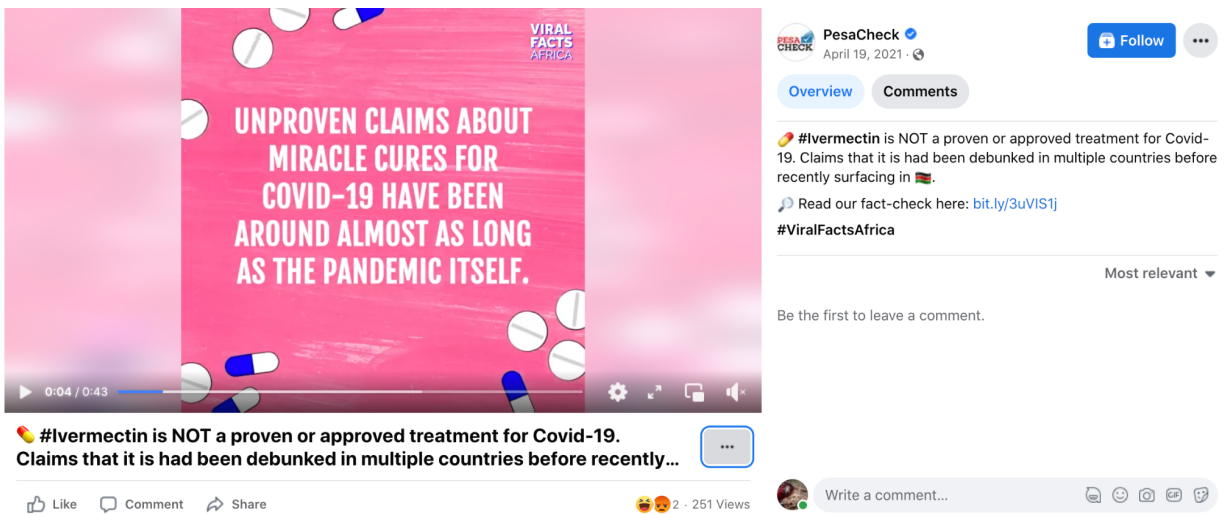
Figure 3: PesaCheck Facebook post fact checking a bottom-up claim

The fact-checking posts in our sample relating to local top-down claims were mainly local political fact checks (i.e. fact-checking focussing on the claims of local politicians and political parties and elected government officials). These top-down fact-checking posts reflected strategies that avoided focusing on political fact checking on Meta platforms. Fact checkers addressed government-influenced accounts of the virus spread as "mistakes", "partially true", or aggregated them into "multiple checks", or "explainers" instead of declaring a single false verdict.

Many posts focussed on debunking political claims posted to Twitter or claims reported in national broadcasting or printed mainstream media. For example, one of the most engaging posts from La Silla Vacia debunked a claim made by the opposition politician and then Senator Gustavo Petro on Twitter about vaccine efficacy during the Delta variant spread (see Figure 4). The translation of the post is, "Senator and presidential candidate Gustavo Petro tweeted saying that vaccines are useless against the Covid delta variant, but that is FALSE. Petro drew the wrong conclusion from an article in The New York Times that talked about reinforcing biosecurity measures against this variant, however this article does not say that vaccines do not work against it. Don't stop getting vaccinated!"

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Figure 4: La Silla Vacia fact check of a political claim from Senator Gustavo Petro (currently President of Colombia) on Twitter questioning vaccine efficacy during the spread of the Delta variant.

Engaging Facebook users through social media affordances and "checktainment"

The most common way that fact checkers distributed their content on Facebook was through posting captions with attached URLs, which functioned to drive traffic to the fact-checking websites. However, the explainer or analysis posts often made use of video, memes and infographics, and received relatively more engagement on Facebook when compared to the posts with captions and URLs only (see Figure 5).
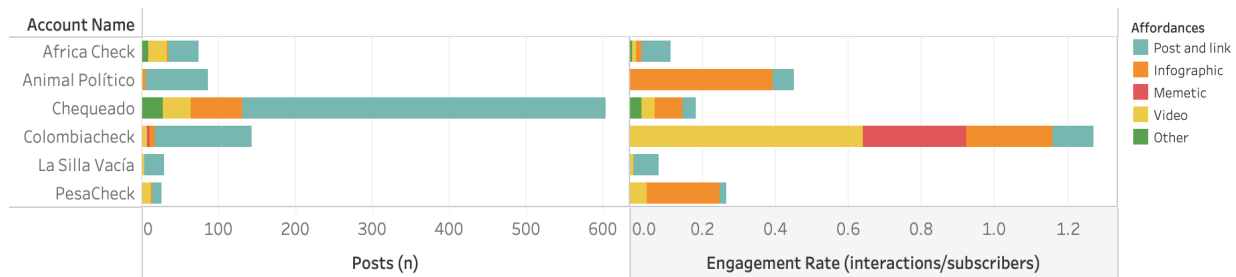

Figure 5: Fact-checkers' use of Facebook affordances to package explainer content and engagement rate

As Figure 6 shows, fact-checking explanations could be both humorous and pedagogical. We describe these kinds of emerging fact-checking practices as *checktainment* because

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fact checkers would reuse and reshare this entertaining content within weeks when dis/misinformation resurfaced and recirculated.

Figure 6: Example of checktainment content. The text in this meme, based on Disney's "Encanto" film, translates to "When they say the Sinovac vaccine is less effective and the vaccine of poor people…" The post shares a URL and an explainer with the caption, "Much of the misinformation about vaccines against Covid-19 stems from ignorance about how they work. In this article we explain what technology each of them uses and how they act in the body"

Conclusion

Political fact checking associated with Covid-19 vaccine misinformation was inescapable in these regions in 2021 given that many countries were on the verge of midterm or presidential elections. Through explainer content, fact checkers were able to address uncertainties related to trending local politicized Covid-19 science without referring directly to political sources. We also argue that the emerging *checktainment strategies* used to engaged social media users form part of a growing focus on *evergreen* content (content that remains fresh and relevant) creation used by fact checkers to engage followers.

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