

The Politicization of COVID-19 Omicron: Southern Africa Tourism Sector

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Abstract

The Covid-19 virus has impacted the tourism sector heavily. The pandemic provided a fertile ground for politicians, development experts and individuals to 'open' up and share their emotions. In this article, discourse analysis is used to decipher the politicization of the COVID-19 Omicron variant and its impacts on the tourism Southern African tourism sector. Data is collected from the social media platforms, chiefly, Twitter. The approaches taken by countries that harshly banned travel to the Southern Africa have been described as Afrophobia, anti-scientific and fear and anti-development of the Southern African tourism sector. There is a general agreement among the voices of the participants that the strands of injustice and mistrust still exist among nations and politicians, a situation which is detrimental to tourism development.

Keywords: Covid-19 Omicron variant; politicization; injustice; Afrophobia; Southern Africa

Introduction

The sustainability of the African tourism sector has been in the spotlight due to the heavy dependency on International receipts (Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). A situation that made African destinations more hurt following the unaccepted disappearance of the international market from the tourism equation. Most African destinations have invested more in the international market compared to the domestic market (Musavengane & Zhou, 2021). The domestic market has been structurally neglected by most tourism organisations through high pricing structures limiting the choice of tourism products for the domestic market (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2022). COVID-19 which was first reported in 2020 in Africa exposed the unsustainability of domestic tourism in the region (Rogerson & Baum, 2020; Musavengane et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic was described by Gössling et al. (2020) as a challenge to the world and Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) viewed it as a watershed moment. Surely the continual evolvement of the COVID-19 virus is putting to test the relations between business partners, communities and governments. The access of the Western-discovered vaccines in developing countries has been marked with unjust and inequality practices. Furthermore, the discovery of the COVID-19 Omicron variant in South Africa has exposed the injustices in the world and the impact of politics on tourism. The South(ern) African case provides us with a unique opportunity to start a discussion on the nexus between politics and tourism at the international level.

In this study, we seek to decipher the politicization of the COVID-19 Omicron variant and its impacts on the tourism Southern African tourism sector. The Travel and Tourism sector suffered a loss of almost US\$4.5 trillion to reach US\$4.7 trillion in 2020, with the contribution to GDP dropping by a staggering 49.1% compared to 2019; relative to a 3.7% GDP decline of

the global economy in 2020. The African region lost US\$83Billion which is 49.2% less of the 2019 earnings. In terms of employment, 7.2 million jobs were lost during the same period (WTTC, 2020). Most Southern African countries rely on tourism receipts for foreign currency earnings and most people make a living through tourism earnings.

Study method

Research design

Discourse analysis is used in this study to understand beyond the language of politicians, tourism practitioners and policymakers. Discourse and discourse analysis are interpreted variously by researchers, a situation described by Cheek (2004) as confusing. To attain the aim of this study, a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) is adopted, where discourse refers to ways of thinking about aspects of reality. Discourse analysis goes beyond understanding the content of texts for the ways they have been structured in terms of semantics, syntax, and so forth. It is rather "concerned with how texts themselves have been constructed in terms of their social and historical 'situatedness'" (Cheek, 2004:1144).

Discourse analysis provides the researcher with an opportunity to understand the subjective thinking of individuals and groups through their language usage (Show & Bailey, 2009). This affords the researcher to attain the goal of the study; to understand the politicization of the COVID-19 Omicron variant and its impacts in the tourism Southern African tourism sector. Delving in the subjective world of participants, discourse analysis affords the researcher an avenue to interrogate how people justify their actions, which violate societal norms or which represent a minority worldview while deliberately disregarding international treaties and agreements as is apparent with how the COVID-19 Omicron variant has been handled by certain cliques.

The ontology, data collection and analysis

In this study, the researcher subscribes to the moral relativist ontology philosophical position. The philosophy holds that our traditions and cultural histories define the truth or falsity of moral beliefs (Mkono, 2019). In other words, moral relativism is the position that moral submissions tend to ignore objective or universal truths; rather make claims relative to social, cultural, historical and personal circumstances (Demuijnck, 2015). Similarly, Forsyth (2021) notes that "those who are more idealistic are attentive to the welfare of others, whereas those who are more relativistic are sceptical about universal moral standards". Thus, for a moral relativist, a particular set of values is used to formulate claims, meaning that different moral claims could be right when asserted by different individuals (Sarkissian et al., 2011). This is particularly important in this study, where the management of COVID-19 is informed by both scientific and moral values.

In moral relativism, no absolute standards are binding all people always and provide room to differ due to varying cultures and contexts (Mkono, 2019). This lens is especially relevant to the current study because the aim is not to make claims which side in the COVID-19 management is *morally* right or wrong – this would not be very useful – but rather to understand and contextualize perspectives of citizens and policymakers on measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 Omicron. In the context of this study, understanding the perceptions of citizens and policymakers helps to critique their positions for a progressive debate on how to manage future COVID-19 variants while promoting inclusive tourism in Southern Africa. The debate helps in coming up with pragmatic solutions that address the complexities surrounding tourism development during a crisis. All three forms of moral relativism in literature (Demuijnck, 2015) applies in this study; *descriptive moral relativism* entails that different cultures have different moral standards, while meta-ethical relativism holds that in

these disagreements, no one is entirely right or wrong. Then *normative moral relativism* emphasises accommodating and tolerating the behavior of others, whether right or wrong.

Data collection

Data were collected through a keyword search on Twitter, this platform was specifically chosen as most individuals in politics and newsrooms utilize it. Further, individuals are quick to share their feelings and perceptions on this social media platform, thereby making it possible to attain the goal of this study. The terms ‘Omicron’, ‘Omicron in South Africa’, ‘Omicron and Southern Africa’ were inputted in the search bar. Purposively, data from Presidents, renowned law experts and development practitioners were included in the sample. Some data were collected from websites of International boards as they represent a majority, but sentiments of individual leaders of such are recorded. All sources were accessed in December 2021. The following sources were included in the sample:

1. Geoffrey York (Africa correspondent for The Globe and Mail (Canada). <https://twitter.com/geoffreyyork/status/1467591000910667784>
2. Cyril Ramaphosa (President of the African National Congress. President of the Republic of South Africa. Chair of the African Union 2020). <https://twitter.com/CyrilRamaphosa/status/1467854447267172355>; <https://twitter.com/CyrilRamaphosa/status/1467854424622120971>
3. Lord Jonny Oates (Lib Dem Lords Spokesperson on the Climate Emergency & Energy. Co-Chair All-Party Parliamentary Group for Zimbabwe. British-European. Spurs fan. Optimist). <https://twitter.com/oatesjonny/status/1465433699084873731>
4. SAm (South Africa Broadcasting Corporation – SABC) <https://twitter.com/SAmnews/status/1465007508720951299>
5. Prof Lovemore Madhuku (National Constitution Assembly Party President (Zimbabwe) and Professor of Law, lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe). <https://twitter.com/ProfMadhuku/status/1465029048271351813>
6. Peter Lindsay (Conservation Biologist, Director, Lion Recovery Fund). <https://twitter.com/TurgwePete/status/1464247475884208128>
7. Prof Jonathan Moyo (Zimbabwe's former Minister of Higher & Tertiary Education, Science & Technology Development).
8. Reuters (The leading News reporter). <https://twitter.com/Reuters/status/1466151422584627205>
9. Walter Mzembi (World Tourism Network Member) <https://twitter.com/waltermzembi/status/1466342916805341185>
10. Ryan Grim (DC bureau chief at The Intercept. Host of Deconstructed). <https://twitter.com/ryangrim/status/1472948083600371714>
11. Joe Biden (46th President of the United States) <https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/1464317623156580352>
12. Julia Simpson (The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) President and CEO) (<https://wttc.org/News-Article/WTTC-calls-for-borders-to-remain-open-and-safe-travel-to-continue>).

Analysis

Once the data was collated, the analysis proceeded in three iterative steps (not in a linear pattern, but, going back and forth) outlined in Smets & Stryven (2018) and Mkono (2019):

1. *Description* (text analysis): where online narratives were read to understand the context and reactions of persons on COVID-19 Omicron management strategies.

2. *Interpretation* (identifying themes): an analysis of the text-enabled the Researcher to categorize the pattern of words or statements into common themes. Themes were labelled interpretively (rather than descriptively) to establish the meanings and underlying assumptions, based on the discourses they deployed.
3. *Broad contextualisation* (social analysis): when the themes were identified and labelled, a review and synthesis of them in a socio-political context was done.

Rigor

The rigor was enhanced in the study through two main ways. First, data audit trails; a reverse-search on any of the narratives quoted in this article will review the origin of the content and identity of the person. Second, the lurker format was adopted; this entails obtaining data without soliciting input from the persons. This, therefore, minimises biases resulting from leading questions.

Results and discussion

The obtained data were analysed and the themes that emerged are; Afrophobia, anti-scientificity fear and anti-development.

Afrophobia

COVID-19 ignited the deep-seated racial and colonial views and experiences. What emerged to be at the centre of these historical imbalances is a lack of trust. At the onset of COVID-19 in Africa in early 2020 the disease was labelled 'foreign' by most Africans and some sects viewed it as a deliberate plan to eliminate the African population. Following wide engagements, experiences and education, perceptions and views on COVID-19 and the vaccines changed. South Africa became one of the major players in the processes earmarked to limit the spread of COVID-19 globally. The discovery of COVID-19 by South African Scientists and consequent travel bans by European and other countries were viewed as anti-Africanism or Afrophobia. In his words, Professor Jonathan Moyo, an African politician, noted that:

It's outrageous that Britain and the EU have responded to South Africa's diligent detection and publication of the new B.1.1.529 #covid19 variant by banning flights and travel from Southern Africa. The response is knee jerk and racist with no scientific, medical or technical merit!

The knee jerk is associated with death. Meaning that reckless decision was taken by European and other countries without considering the need for survival of the Southern African region. A stoppage in travelling is similar to stopping the blood flow. A situation that was slammed by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, who equates it to the apartheid system by calling the practice 'travel apartheid'. "The social equity elements were used during colonization and Apartheid to exclude people from participating in certain activities such as tourism and conservation" (Musavengane, 2019:323). Walter Mzembe, the former Minister of Tourism and Hospitality in Zimbabwe tweeted "*Covid Omicron, the failure of Diplomacy, threats to Multilateralism the rise of Unilateralism and Afrophobia!*" These sentiments show the failure of the nations to support each other and work with one accord to fight the COVID-19 pandemic (not endemic). Nations suffer economically and families also suffer socially due to such hurried decisions. The South African broadcaster also reported Malawi's position regarding the stance by Northern nations to ban travelling:

The Malawian government says that the travel ban that the UK, US, EU and other countries have imposed on some southern African countries including South Africa and Malawi are tantamount to Afrophobia and not based on science.

The above sentiments by the world, regional and sectoral leaders show that there is still 'unfinished business' dating the colonial era. These greyish areas continue to define race and class issues in the tourism sector. South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa said:

We are deeply disappointed by the decision of several countries to prohibit travel from some Southern African countries following the identification of the Omicron variant. This is a clear and completely unjustified departure from the commitment that many of these countries made at the meeting of G20 countries in Rome last month.

Hence a need to have a platform to discuss these issues openly than suppressing them and waiting for a situation to divulge. Nevertheless, tourism continues to unify persons across the divide through various activities, notably sport, music and events.

Anti-scientificity and fear

COVID-19 is a disease, thus medical scientists have a responsibility to guide the public including politicians. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has been offering guidelines and updates on this pandemic since its discovery in China. Despite the discovery of vaccines and WHO advice, the US, Europe and other countries decided to ignore 'the science'. Emotions and populist approaches seem to inform the decisions of politicians. Geoffrey York, an Africa correspondent for The Globe and Mail (Canada) tweeted that:

Canada's new travel rules: banning Southern Africans and refusing to accept COVID tests from South Africa. "Dismaying", says the WHO. "Panic and anti-African bias," says a stranded Canadian. "A trip from hell," says a family of five.

The above tweet shows how hurried the decision to ban travelling was made, ignoring all the experience gained during the initial announcement of COVID-19. To make matters worse, these decisions were made after the immunization of many persons through approved vaccines. The politicians who are leaders of nations chose to ignore anything to do with science. The South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa raised a pertinent question:

And so one asks, where is science? These countries have always said to us that we should base our decisions on science. But when the time comes for them to apply it to themselves, they do not but resort to their own self-interest.

This sentiment clearly shows that there is still undermining of African nations at the global level. Western science has been passed to the African region through globalisation and WHO agreements. Despite this, the discoveries from an 'African' nation could not be accepted easily. The US President sentiments show that 'fear' led to the hurried decision to ban travel to and from Southern Africa:

The WHO has identified a new COVID variant which is spreading through Southern Africa. As a precautionary measure, until we have more information, I am ordering air travel restrictions from South Africa and seven other countries.

Why fear the unknown and ignore scientific findings by South African scientists? This approach by the US and other European countries has taught many countries not to report any variants in future to avoid being punished. Travel is now a basic human necessity due to globalisation. This conversation was also raised in the UK House of Lords by Lord Oates who tweeted that:

This evening I raised South Africa again in the House of Lords and asked the Health Minister what signal it sent the world about doing the right thing when the result of South Africa's excellent science and exemplary transparency was an immediate travel ban...

Anti-African development

The success of nations and economies depends on the production levels. Banning the travel of tourists hurts the already bleeding Southern African tourism sector. In his Twitter account, President Cyril Ramaphosa lamented that:

These travel bans will devastate the economies of Southern Africa that are dependent on tourism. They go precisely against what was agreed at the G20 in Italy earlier this year when it was said we must open up travel so the tourism sector can recover. Instead, they are closing it down in Africa. This is the hypocrisy of the worst order and must come to an end.

Talking of halting the development trajectory, a renowned law expert in Southern Africa, Professor Lovemore Madhuku, in his Twitter account pointed out that:

The travel bans imposed by Western countries and others against selected SADC countries (including us) are arbitrary, unscientific and wholly unacceptable. They undermine our economies and impede our efforts in combating the Covid-19 pandemic.

The tourism and conservation experts agreed with the views of the above politicians and law experts. The communities are the ones that tend to suffer much from misaligned policies and practices. For example, a conservation expert, Peter Lindsey tweeted that:

These latest travel restrictions are a disaster for wildlife authorities, communities and conservation. The tourism industry, already on its knees, is now on life support. The price of scientific excellence in SA [South Africa] is international isolation for the whole region.

The sentiments by Lindsey are in line with the argument made by Lord Oates:

If UK & others cut Zimbabwe, SA, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho & Eswatini off from tourism critical to their economies then they must at the very least establish an international Covid support fund to support these economies during the flight ban.

The United Kingdom government acknowledged the impact of COVID-19 measures it took by tweeting that "should be in no doubt about the devastation this will inflict on these economies at the most critical time of year for tourism". The bottom line is that, taking hurried decisions with full knowledge that the actions will negatively hurt the economies and livelihoods of other

nations and their citizens were inconsiderate and anti-development. Hence, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) President and CEO, Julia Simpson, said that:

Closing borders will not prevent the spread of new variants. The latest variant is increasingly being detected in countries around the world. The way to keep safe is to focus on the vaccination status of individual travellers rather than placing whole countries onto red lists.

To worsen the situation, some African nations, such as Rwanda, imposed a ban on the travelling of Southern African travellers into their country. Surprisingly, more like political decisions, other banned countries, notably Zimbabwe, imposed ambiguous regulations to control the spread of COVID-19. The Zimbabwean Government through its Statutory Instrument (SI) 267 of 2021 - Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment (National lockdown) (No. 2) (Amendment) Order 2021 (No. 37) announced that:

At every port of entry, all returning residents and visitors have to undergo PCR testing (notwithstanding that they present a PCR negative test from elsewhere), and those found to be negative will be quarantined at their own cost for ten days, while those who are found positive will be isolated in accordance with the provisions of the principal order.

The position has been vehemently criticized by citizens and most tourism players. Somehow, the policy was never enforced at the ports of entry, which is consistent with most of the country's inconsistency policy implementations (see Jones, 2010). Nevertheless, there are great chances that most possible visitors cancelled their trips resulting in the loss of income into the country.

Discussion and conclusions

Wong (2006) asserts that a moral relativism framework implies that if one regards an act as wrong, one should attempt to accommodate different viewpoints and actions. Thus, the findings were presented from a position of seeking to understand and illuminate perspectives of Southern African political, developmental and legal leaders on political actions following the discovery of the Covid-19 Omricon variant by South African scientists. This was done without imposing 'absolutist' right and wrong value judgements. The findings show Southern African leaders and those interested in the region's developmental issues deploying a range of discourses to frame the banning of travelling to and from the region by Western countries and other countries negatively. The discourse pushed for the stoppage of the illegal, irrational and unscientific ban of travelling to and from the region. The discourse showed that the Western countries and other nations used their economic power to assert a hegemonic privilege available to the rich and economically advantaged nations, namely sanctions or ban, in the context of this study they preferred to ban travelling.

Further analysis of the responses presented in this study shows that the underpinnings of ethical principles, in particular, deontology was undermined. The proponent of deontology, Immanuel Kant, developed this system to promote just ethical practices among persons. At the core of deontology is the categorical imperative, which is an *unconditional command*. In other words, it says 'Do the right thing – unconditionally'. Thus, deontology emphasises the fulfilling of a duty. Hence, it is described as an ethical system that considers the correctness of one's action to another (Henry, 2011). The ban of travelling to Southern African countries appear to have been pushed by fear and led to ignoring of the universal principles or agreements/duties.

Kant's categorical imperative emphasises that “Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” (Kant 1785 cited in Johnson & Cureton, 2022). In tourism ethics, in particular, during the crisis, upholding the universal principles is important for inclusive tourism growth. Inclusive tourism encourages all persons to participate equally in the tourism processes. The voices of the people have highlighted the impact of Afrophobia, anti-scientificity & fear and anti-African development in Southern African tourism.

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