

2020: the year in search

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While it goes without saying that the global pandemic dominated search, we asked **Freddy Hornsby**, senior performance account manager, and **Marco Martin**, SEO account executive, both from [iProspect South Africa](#), what else piqued the search interests of people across SSA in 2020.





Freddy Hornsby



Marco Martin

2020 has been a year that nobody (not even Google's advanced machine-learning capabilities) could have predicted. As the everyday routines of people around the world were forced to change so, too, were their search habits.

We've investigated the topics that emerged as the top contenders across the SSA regions this year and there are some interesting insights we'd like to share.

The year of the pandemic

In what comes as no surprise to anyone, "Covid-19" emerged as the most searched topic across all countries. Terms such as "coronavirus" and "virus" saw massive increases in the number of searches, while there was also a significant uptick in users searching for related terms such as "mask", "lockdown", "symptom" and "death".

From a South African perspective, "Cyril Ramaphosa" and "speech" also saw significant increases in the number of times they were searched for as anxious South Africans waited to hear the latest updates from the president and how the various

levels of lockdown would affect the country and its citizens.

Staying close to home

With people around the continent forced to stay at home, there were changes to users' daily routines, and many people turned to Netflix for entertainment.

Although Netflix has been available in many African countries for a few years, 2020 saw countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, Mauritius and South Africa experience large increases in search volumes for the streaming service.

On the whole, interest in online video services is increasing across the continent, and this could be seen in Kenya in particular, where [Citizen TV](#) saw a huge increase in search volumes as the Kenyan broadcaster began to upload a lot of their content onto YouTube.

Virtual shopping malls

Globally, e-commerce has been on the rise for a number of years, but the trend was slow to catch fire on the African continent. Poverty, poor infrastructure and slower technological growth are some of the reasons for the lag, but smartphones have given millions of people on the continent access to the internet and the convenience of shopping online.

While there are few positives to take from the Covid-19 pandemic, the strides made in e-commerce on the continent are definitely one of them and can be directly linked to lockdown. Chinese e-commerce brand Alibaba proved popular in Africa, with countries like Ghana, Tanzania and Mozambique seeing big increases in searches for the brand. Research firm Statista predicts a consistent increase, with revenue forecasts for the sector predicted to reach \$46,94bn by 2024.

The rise of sports betting

A common theme across the continent was the increase in searches for sports betting. The majority of African countries have experienced this trend, with peaks ranging from 100% to 350%.

Sports betting brands vary, but Betway is the most prominent search term in South Africa and Zambia. Other countries tend to have their own local sports-betting agents, such as Mozzart in Kenya, ZEturf in Senegal and Parimatch in Tanzania.

The combination of soccer fanaticism and more seamless and widespread access to the internet on the African continent indicates that this trend is one to watch, and one that will continue to gain momentum.

Successful brand launch or incorrect data?

During our analysis of the data, we discovered that countries such as Senegal, Tanzania and Ethiopia saw large searches for [Castlemaine XXXX](#). After digging a bit deeper, we found out that this is an Australian beer brand, which seemed to have managed a successful launch on the continent during lockdown. We reached out to Google to better understand user interest and their assessment was that the XXXX of the brand name was being confused with searches for "Adult Entertainment", since the beer is still only available in Australia.

The moral of the story? It's important not to solely rely on the power of Google's algorithms and to combine the data with your own personal insights and research.

Online gaming

For many people, one of the perks of being at home during lockdown was the increase in activities such as gaming, which offered a measure of escapism. The search volumes around games such as Grand Theft Auto and PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds demonstrate this shift in user behaviour.

With global advertisers using gamification as a way to interrupt a user during their browsing, African countries look set to follow this global trend in future.

That's a wrap

In one way or another, 2020 has been challenging for everyone, but from a digital perspective, users on the African continent have clearly changed and adapted their search behaviour in order to not just survive, but also thrive.

As we move towards 2021, we can already see trends such as sports betting, online gaming and streaming gaining momentum, and while the coronavirus pandemic remains a focus, we predict search volumes associated with this topic will remain high, especially with a vaccine being rolled out across the UK, USA and Russia.

If this year is anything to go by, there are bound to be a few surprises, but what's certain is that we'll see those unexpected occurrences reflected in search and in users' digital behaviour. Keep searching... we'll be watching with interest.

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