

South Africa COVID-19 and Vaccine Social Listening Report 2 February 2022, Report 34

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This is a weekly report of Covid & vaccine sentiment, rumors & misinformation in SA. Further info [here](#).

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KEY TRENDS

Vaccine mandate conflict. CCMA ruling in favour of company that dismissed an unvaccinated employee has dominated social media discussion, with the majority of posts against the ruling. [Here](#) The CCMA news article [Here](#) was also one of the top three shared media stories during the week. Some users stated that they felt that CCMA is part of the government's conspiracy to force people to get vaccinated and that the ruling confirms previous fears expressed that mandates would threaten employment and autonomy. [Here](#) As universities open, the Union Solidarity has taken the University of the Free State to court in a bid to overturn its vaccine mandate policy [Here and Here](#)

Booster confusion and mistrust: Claims are being circulated of people not knowing how to calculate their due dates for boosters or whether they need SMS notification before they can have a booster. The need for boosters has been discussed negatively on social media. Most frequently, question on the ground is about whether the need for boosters proves the ineffectiveness of the vaccine. [Here](#) and [Here](#)

Unverified claims about vaccine and testing sites by community members. There have been conversations about sites running out of stock or sending people away because there are too few clients to justify opening a new batch without providing names of the sites affected for possible investigation.

Ongoing positive reports of beneficiaries' gratitude for pop-up sites – especially undocumented people during community engagement based on the following questions:

Vooma Vouchers implementation problems and criticism continues: Claims being made of vouchers going to people who assist others with registration rather than the intended beneficiary, that giving incentives amounts to coercion, or is insultingly low amount for people to risk their lives for. On the positive side, many other people appreciate the vouchers and would like them to be offered to everybody. [Here](#) and [Here](#)

Digital certificate issues: The call centre has received high volumes of calls around assistance with downloading vaccine certificates. Many relate to changes in mobile numbers, incorrect information appearing and changes to spelling of names. Over 4 500 people interacted with an article ([Here](#)) that raises the problem that QR codes on the verification site are inaccessible to foreign users. [Here](#)

Omicron, vaccines and immunity. The new variant continues to be discussed in newspaper articles and on social media. An Australian article about the need for boosters against the variant ([Here](#)) received 7 500 interactions in SA. On the same theme, a Fox News report on vaccine inefficacy has been gaining attention and is being spread in SA. It claims that new data shows that vaccinated are more likely to contract Omicron than the unvaccinated ([Here](#)). A tweet from Tim Noakes claiming that CDC report ([Here](#)) proves that immunity is better than the vaccine has been one of the top 5 shared tweets this week.

End of the pandemic reports peoples' awareness of other countries lifting NPI obligations and wanting to see mask requirements also lifted here. The news that the fourth wave is abating and the widespread experience of Omicron as a fairly mild disease contributing to low vaccine demand. [Here](#) and [Here](#)

Youth disinterest in all districts: Reports by district communicators of growing disinterest in a Covid vaccine amongst learners and youth due to lack of faith in the

vaccine, belief that the pandemic is weakening, and mistrust borne of fears of side effects and disinformation.

ACDP video on side effects and poor adverse incident care continues to generate discussion and was one of the top 5 tweets shared over the week ([here](#)).

Malaria & Covid diagnosis confusion. NICD reports that Malaria cases are being misdiagnosed as Covid, as the symptoms are quite similar. SA is currently at the peak of the malaria season. It's a concern because undiagnosed and untreated malaria can progress to severe illness. [Here](#)

Covid & Tuberculosis: Covid has resulted in fewer South Africans seeking treatment for diseases like TB. This has resulted in more people dying from tuberculosis than before the Pandemic. The Free State Department of Health is now inviting people who stopped treatment to come back ([Here](#)).

Caring for healthcare workers must be a priority: Healthcare workers have been the backbone of our response through the global Covid pandemic. As we just move out of the fourth wave, we need to show them that they can also rely on us too ([Here](#) and [here](#))

Pandemic modelling feeds conspiracy: NICD reports on-line discussions that modelling showing a potential wave in May is evidence that waves are planned and engineered. [Here](#)

Localised vaccine production has been well received: Increasing positive outlook on the new vaccine production plant opened to manufacture Covid vaccines from start to finish. [Here](#)

More people complaining about prioritisation of Covid-19 and vaccines over other national health priorities: "National Department of Health, all I see is Covid this and Covid that and Vaccinations this and that. How about paying more attention to those who have complaints regarding poor or no service at the hospitals or clinics?" [Here](#)

Digital analytic trends|: Overall there has been an overall decline in social media conversations, but the ratio of negative to positive sentiment remains high. Tweets about Covid vaccines in the country generated 10k engagements, -40% compared to the previous week*. [Here](#) and [Here](#)

Covid vaccine subtopics (twitter and digital news): Online conversations that generated most engagements in the past week were related to effectiveness (23%), access and availability (22%), and certificates and mandates (21%).

Twitter conversation is still dominated by anti-vaxers: Twitter users segmented according to their vaccine sentiments including vaccine sceptic, vaccine hesitant, fringe conspiracy, vaccine neutral, vaccine advocates, vaccine enthusiastic; and

those in favour of the vaccine are the least vocal. Most of the sentiments over this period have been in the negative zone, and negativity is growing. [Here](#)

Viral Facts from the WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA)

Omicron and vaccine effectiveness: The fact that people can have Omicron while vaccinated undermines trust in the vaccine. People see the relatively mild Omicron effects as a sign that the pandemic is nearing its end and that vaccines are not necessary. There is a perception that ineffectiveness of the Covid vaccines is purposeful, as pharmaceutical companies are trying to create a greater need for boosters. Misinformed claims that unvaccinated individuals have a lower chance of dying from Covid than those that have been vaccinated gained prominence through December. [Here](#), [Here](#), [Here](#) and [Here](#)

DISTRICT REPORTS

- **Buffalo City (Eastern Cape)** Vaccine acceptance is decreasing in all ages now that some of the sites have been closed. Challenges include transport, people don't know where the vaccine sites are, and lack of peer pressure on young people to come forward. It is recommended that youth receive incentives.
- **OR Tambo (Eastern Cape)** High acceptance of the vaccine but transport challenges stop people accessing sites. New communication required to educate people about booster shots. Mobilisers need transport and loud hailers to work effectively.
- **Johannesburg (Gauteng)** Increased acceptance of the vaccine amongst learners whose school leadership encourage vaccination. Key challenge in that there are not enough social workers on the ground to address concerns and questions in certain areas. Teenage boys and young men are least likely to vaccinate.
- **Ekurhuleni (Gauteng)** Decreasing vaccine acceptance because 'Covid is over'. Decline in NPI use. Request for more sites for undocumented people as transport is expensive. Suggesting airtime vouchers for youth as an incentive.
- **Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati (North West)** Low uptake because 'Covid is no-more'. Fear about side effects persist, exacerbated by a message of severe side effects that is spreading, and some believe that their culture history does not allow them to vaccinate. Challenges include transport, material distribution, not enough mobilizers in Tswaing, Klerksdorp and Maquassi Hills Sub-district. Successes include vaccine uptake in December, role of the district facilitator in stakeholder management, and good positioning of vaccine sites. Entertainment/sporting events should be organized for youth.
- **Garden Route (Western Cape)** Ongoing concerns about side effects. Youth want to see NPI obligations lifted as in the UK. People coming for boosters are creating long lines that turn off youth who may be coming for the first time. A visit from the Minister was a success and visibility of Vax-taxi and EMS

enabled mobilization, but uptake is decreasing due to removal of mask mandates in other countries.

- **Khayelitsha (Western Cape)** Low student uptake due to lack of interest in the vaccine, although willingness of headmaster to allow a pop-up site at the school gate for vaccination of 684 people. Suggest airtime, youth entertainment/sporting event as reward for vaccinating and encourage others.
- **Winelands (Western Cape)** Low mobilisation effectiveness. Farmers are providing transport for workers to vaccinate and allowing mobilisation on the farms.
- **Umkanyakude, Manguzi (KZN)** Reluctance to go for boosters as this wasn't made clear at the beginning. People indicate that they have adverse reaction to the vaccine, and fear reporting them, or even setting foot back in the clinic. Undocumented people are still reluctant / scared to come to vaccinate.
- **Ilembe (KZN)** Vaccine acceptance seems to have stagnated across age groups especially amongst younger people. Some young people are accusing the government of putting real issues on hold and focussing solely on vaccination targets. Young people are unconvinced of the necessity for vaccination as they believe Covid is not an immediate threat to them, and some claim to know people who died after vaccinating.
- **Harry Gwala (KZN)** Decreased vaccine acceptance and a concern that the booster will become regular.

MISINFORMATION

MISINFO: ~~Covid vaccines make you more susceptible to omicron.~~ **TRUTH:** Vaccinated people are more likely to catch Omicron than any other variant as it is more resistant to vaccines. However, vaccinated people still have far greater protection from all variants than unvaccinated people. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines cause infertility and erectile dysfunction.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support these claims. Covid however can impair sexual performance. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Covid vaccines cause shingles and similar skin conditions.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim. See [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines don't work — if they did, they would stop us from getting Covid to begin with.~~ **TRUTH:** If you have been vaccinated you are less likely to get Covid, and if you do get Covid it very likely to be far less severe. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- **Clarify booster eligibility and process:** New communication is required to explain to people how to calculate their due dates for boosters, that they should take their vaccine cards to the site and that they do not need to wait for an NDOH or medical aid prompt.
- **Help people find sites.** <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/active-vaccination-sites/> link and call centre number 0800 029 999 to be widely publicised and to be shared with provinces.
- **Address Malaria/Covid confusion.** Develop messages for COVID and Malaria messages including symptoms. New communication required to make people aware of these similar symptoms and that they should test for Covid and inform health care professionals if they believe they are at risk of malaria.
- **Transparent modelling science.** Produce communication to show what data is used to model future waves to explain that it is data driven and not engineered by government or pharmaceutical companies.
- **End of the pandemic.** New communication is required to underscore the importance of vaccines to avoid worse severity of future waves of Covid infection.
- **Produce targeted COVID-19 communication with regard to the management of COVID-19.** This speaks directly to the benefit of having a vaccine production plantation within South Africa as this will address concerns related to vaccine apartheid and vaccine availability the public had
- **Create targeted communication related to vaccine mandates,** why they are important, and what are the associated risks.
- **Youth engagement.** Explore the possibility of youth focussed dialogues and activities such as entertainment/ sporting events to reward the vaccinated and encourage vaccination.
- **Celebrate health workers.** Consider a national campaign to nominate great health workers and celebrate our vaccinators to encourage more to take vaccine booster shots.

METHODOLOGY AND COLLABORATION

The Social Listening & Infodemiology team that produces this report is part of the Risk Communications & Community Engagement Working Group of the Department of Health. This report is compiled following the methodology of the WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA, see [here](#)), the “Identify” stage. We pool information from the following:

- **SA National Department of Health**
- **Covid Hotline:** Reports from the national Covid call centre
- **Org:** NDOH Covid WhatsApp system
- **WHO** Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA)

- **UNICEF:** digital analysis of content on Google, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and digital news
- **Red Cross:** Network of over 2,000 community volunteers reporting misinformation and concerns
- **Real 411 Media Monitoring Africa:** a mis- and disinformation reporting and debunking initiative
- **COVID Comms:** a network of communications specialists that produces information on the pandemic
- **DOH Free State & KZN:** Provincial Departments of Health
- **Community Constituency Front (CCF), Covid Hotline, Health Systems Trust**
- **Centre for Communication Impact, Centre for Analytics & Behavioural Change, Section 27**
- **Medical Research Council, National Institute for Communicable Diseases,**
- **SA Vaccination and Immunisation Centre, HSRC, DG Murray Trust, Right To Care**
- **Universities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Free State, Wits, Stellenbosch, Sefako Makgatho**

Other organisations involved Government Communications & Information Service, SA Council of Churches, Clinton Health Access Initiative, Heartlines, Children’s Radio Foundation, IPSOS, People’s Health Movement, and Business for SA, SA Minerals Council, Wits Reproductive Health & HIV Institute, UN Verified, HealthEnabled, Deaf SA, SA National Council for the Blind, Treatment Action Campaign and Disability SA.

Thanks to Brenda Goldblatt for leading the writing of the report, with input from William Bird, Charity Bhengu and Peter Benjamin.

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