

South Africa Covid and Vaccine Social Listening Report 28 March 2022, Report 42

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

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KEY TRENDS

Less social media about Covid vaccines. There were fewer vaccine-related search queries and engagements this week. While Google search queries rose on “Astrazeneca Corona vaccine”, “register Covid vaccine Johannesburg” and “vaccine.certificate.health.gov.za WhatsApp downloads”, there was a decline in vaccine-related engagements. Tweets about Covid vaccines generated 10,000 engagements, 15% less than the previous week. Digital news articles generated over 14,000 engagements (50% down on last week). Facebook posts generated about 30,000 engagements (40% less than the previous week). The top articles on digital news by engagement were ‘Mixed reaction to vaccine mandates’ ([here](#)), ‘President Ramaphosa meetings on new Covid regulations’ ([here](#)), ‘Mask requirements are counterproductive’ ([here](#)) and ‘5% of vaccines wasted’ ([here](#)).

Share of engagements on Twitter and digital news in SA by vaccine topics:

Dwindling concern about the severity of Covid. As many countries shift into new phases of Covid public health and safety measures, South Africa announced recently the new regulations as the country moves into Level 1, and many misinformed people have perceived this shift as an indication that Covid no longer exists or is so “weak” and “mild” that it cannot cause severe illness or death ([Here](#)).

Claims of Covid vaccine fatigue. Speculations that exhaustion after 2 years of Covid, vaccine adverse effects, poor vaccine efficacy and duration of vaccine-based immunity are causes of vaccine fatigue. the need to examine factors that shape people’s vaccine fatigue in order to address vaccine hesitancy ([Here](#)).

Masks in indoor public areas. President Ramaphosa announced new regulations that it is mandatory to wear a mask in public indoor spaces. This was generally welcomed, though with concerns expressed about compliance. It was reported that many people now carry masks in their pockets and bags to wear only in places where mask wearing was enforced. Others do not wear masks after vaccination, and many are against mask wearing by school learners or college students ([Here](#)). A newspaper poll confirms mask fatigue. People are concerned about continuing to wear masks in enclosed spaces with poor ventilation and that the emphasised should be on physical distances where possible ([Here](#)). Others are divided on the issue; “We are tired of wearing masks”, “I really don’t care about Covid anymore” and “CR should have left the mask restrictions in place until Covid was eradicated”.

Concerned about Covid and events spreading the virus. Reportedly, “Anyone who gets the virus, even very mildly, has a 10 – 20% of getting long Covid and also run the risk of having cardiac outcomes a year later” ([Here](#)). “Like many countries are doing with their indoor environments, it is believed that “our government is giving confusing signals”. “Vaccine mandates are critical” even at Level 1 ([Here](#)).

Misinformation that Omicron is ‘the last Covid variant’ fuelling uptick worldwide ([Here](#)). A combination of factors, including misinformation that the pandemic is over, adjusted new regulations including, change in treatment protocols,

lifting of mask mandates, ending physical distancing – and a more transmissible Omicron BA.2 variant – are causing an increase vaccine hesitancy and Covid cases globally, the World Health Organization warned this week.

Confusion abounds that the government's latest regulations were reportedly at odds with recent advice from scientists. Newspaper reports spreading disinformation following claims that the ministerial advisory committee rejected border testing and supported an end to social distancing rules. Allegedly, quoting from a document supposedly released on Tuesday night, they said, "The government's latest regulations for managing the coronavirus pandemic were at odds with the most recent counsel it received from its scientific advisers".

KwaZulu-Natal's Covid infection rate is a cause for concern. The province is battling the highest infection rate of over a hundred new cases per day over the past week, with 6 000 active cases, which is the highest in the country currently. Vaccination in KZN is moving at a disappointingly slow pace in townships and rural areas. The province assisted by WHO SA is set to review its vaccination programme and recommendations were made to drive hard-to-reach people to vaccination sites ([Here](#)). Structural problems remain for vaccination, with anecdotal reports that people either did not know where the sites were popping-up or did not have transport to reach the sites and also some sites either did not have enough stock or closed early. "We need to relook at equity through the lens of facilitating transport," said a district communicator.

Focus on vaccination certificates and PCR tests. The National Covid Contact Centre was inundated with requests to correct personal records, assist with downloading certificates, answer questions about PCR tests requirements, and provide clarity on vaccine terminology, such as; "fully vaccinated", "booster shots" or "additional dose". Claims have been made that Germany and other European countries do not recognise the SA QR code on vaccine certificates.

DISTRICTS REPORTS

- **Buffalo City Metro (Eastern Cape):** It is very hard getting new people to vaccinate – maybe we have exhausted the numbers possible. People say they are tired of hearing about vaccination. Undocumented people are reluctant to go to vaccinate. Many feel the Covid pandemic is not over. Some more youth are vaccinating – the #KeReady campaign is having an effect.
- **OR Tambo (Eastern Cape):** People in rural areas really want to vaccinate but many do not have access to a clinic.
- **Harry Gwala (KZN):** Vaccine acceptance is very low in youth 12 – 17. However, we are getting good numbers vaccinating in farms. Older people have no problem with vaccination, but younger are very hesitant with misinformation circulating on social media – especially a long list of side-effects (the Pfizer report).
- **Ehlanzeni (Mpumalanga):** Vaccine sentiment has decreased slightly – there were 12,000 vaccinations compared with 14,000 last week. Men are vaccinating more than women now.
- **Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati (North West):** Many youth are exposed to social media which is very critical of vaccines. People are scared of side

effects. Youth think the vaccine is just for older people as they are the ones who get sick with Covid. The #KeReady campaign has some effect with youth. Vaccine sites are far from many people. There is a problem with many youth not having ID

- **Cape Winelands (Western Cape):** Most people vaccinating are coming for boosters. Youth 12 – 17 are still very vaccine hesitant.
- **Central Karoo (Western Cape):** There is a feeling that Covid is over so why must people still vaccinate. The virus must be created and controlled by people for a 5th wave to be predicted to come soon. People are more concerned about vaccinated than catching Covid. Some people who had side effects after a booster dose are telling others not to get boosters. The #KeReady campaign is causing enthusiasm in the youth.
- **Garden Route (Western Cape):** Some don't want the booster doses as they feel they will always need to take more vaccinations. School children are excited about the #KeReady Flex challenge.
- **Khayelitsha (KESS, Western Cape):** More people are vaccinating, especially for boosters. The #KeReady campaign is motivating youth. People fear that the Pfizer vaccine is more dangerous than J&J and makes you sick.
- **Namakwa (Western Cape):** Many people over 50+ came for boosters, but very few youth vaccinated. Misinformation that predictions of a 5th wave proves that Covid is manipulated intentionally are circulating, and that vaccines cause infertility. There is interest in #KeReady Flex in youth. Youth who take Tik or dagga think these drugs protect them from Covid so they don't need to vaccinate.
- **Swartland (Western Cape):** Vaccine acceptance is increasing, even among youth. Vaccine sites are too far away for many people, especially the elderly. Door to door visits by nurses works well. Many young people refuse the vaccine, especially those using dagga, saying they have survived without catching Covid for 2 years already. Many people do not have good information about Covid and vaccines, and public health education has a positive effect. Gangsterism has a big impact here.

MISINFORMATION

No new misinformation on Covid or vaccines was trending in SA this week. Perhaps the generators of disinformation are, themselves, getting Covid fatigue.

- **MISINFO:** Covid booster vaccines are dangerous. **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim. Boosters shots are normal practice for many vaccines, e.g. with flu vaccines. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** Pfizer's own data shows 1,291 side effects of their Covid vaccine. **TRUTH:** This is a misunderstanding of the report they released in 2021. It includes a list of side effects that they watched out for in the study – it is NOT a list of side effects of their Covid vaccine. The vaccine is safe and side effects are mostly mild. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** Covid vaccines kill many people and there is a high chance they can kill you. **TRUTH:** This is not true. Most side effect are mild and self-resolving. Severe adverse events due to vaccines are tracked very closely

([here](#) and [here](#)). There have been no deaths in SA due to Covid vaccination ([here](#)). Over 11 billion shots of Covid vaccines have been administered globally ([here](#)), with a small number of deaths caused by vaccines. While it is difficult to get reliable statistics of vaccine-related deaths globally, in the United Kingdom, over 141 million doses have been given, and medical authorities believe just 9 people have died due to the vaccine ([here](#)). By way of contrast, the UK has had over 163,000 deaths from Covid ([here](#)). See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

- **MISINFO:** ~~People aren't dying of Covid as fast as planned so now government are pushing boosters to kill more people.~~ **TRUTH:** This is a conspiracy myth – there is no evidence to support this claim, many vaccines have boosters, and evidence clearly demonstrates unvaccinated at far greater risk of severe illness. Most people who lost their lives to Covid in the 4th wave were unvaccinated or partially vaccinated. See [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Covid isn't that bad so we don't need to be vaccinated.~~ **TRUTH:** While some people who get Covid can show no symptoms, vaccines are highly effective in preventing serious illness and hospitalisation. It is true that the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 (the Covid virus) is less likely to cause severe illness and death. However, Covid is still killing people. See [here](#) and [here](#)
- **MISINFO:** ~~Covid cases are low so now we don't need to vaccinate.~~ **TRUTH:** Having lower case numbers in SA is wonderful, but it doesn't mean there is no reason to be vaccinated. We still need to reduce infections and illness now, prevent a bad fifth wave and restrict the likelihood of even worse variants developing. If you are unvaccinated you are more likely to spread Covid and encourage variants. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Covid vaccines and boosters give you HIV.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim at all. Vaccines, including Covid-19 vaccines, cannot cause AIDS / HIV. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Vaccines are dangerous and now linked to "vaccine-acquired immunodeficiency syndrome" or "VAIDS".~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence at all to support the claim of immunodeficiency being related to Covid vaccines. 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:** ~~Vaccines have a tracker chip to track movement and shut you down if you misbehave.~~ **TRUTH:** This is simply wrong and a myth. See [here](#) and [here](#).
- **MISINFO:** ~~Covid vaccines require the use of long painful needles.~~ **TRUTH:** Covid vaccines may cause slight pain, like a poke or pinch, for only a few seconds. See [here](#) and [here](#) for tips and advice on managing fear and discomfort*.

VIRAL FACTS

This section comes from the World Health Organisation's Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA) who carry out social listening on Covid and vaccines throughout Africa, and produce ViralFacts videos to counter misinformation.

- **The importance of getting vaccinated**

As many countries are starting to ease Covid restrictions, some believe the pandemic is over. Covid isn't over and vaccination still serves as the best protection against severe illness, hospitalization, and death from Covid infection. [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#)

- **The pandemic is not over!**

People are still becoming sick, hospitalized and dying of #Covid19. Declining attention to the pandemic doesn't mean the pandemic is over. [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#)

- **Covid effects on sexual performance**

There's no evidence that the Covid #vaccine affects fertility or sexual performance in men or women. Fear of vaccine side effects/ long-term effects continue to be misinterpreted or overstated [\[LINK\]](#)

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Vaccine equity at local level. More affluent areas tend to have more vaccination sites, making it easier for wealthy people, who have advantages of cars and internet access, to vaccinate. Less resourced areas, especially informal settlements and rural areas, have structural barriers to vaccination. Local plans need to be developed at district and sub-district levels to improve access to vaccines for people who currently cannot easily get them. The means working with trusted local leaders, widespread local communication, organising well-advertised pop-up sites and transport ("Vaxi taxi") where there is need, and clarifying that undocumented people are able to vaccinate.

Transitioning into the next Covid phase. The SA Covid Vaccination Communication Strategy needs to be reviewed and adjusted as needed. An impact study of the Social & Behavioural Change Communications Strategy as one of the core capacities of the vaccination strategy will outline the way forward. The Risk Communications and Community Engagement Technical Working Group (RCCE TWG) needs to update the communications strategy and disseminate this to communicators and social mobilisers, focusing on the importance of targeting vulnerable communities.

Continue communicating accurate information. According to WHO AIRA, continuing to provide accurate information as a resource for individuals that may come across misinformation is crucial for not losing momentum in vaccine uptake as the perception of the pandemic being over will increase with diminishing Covid public

health and safety measures implemented across. We need to ensure that it is easier for anyone to find accurate evidence-based information rather than misinformation.

Clarity on operating sites. Some vaccination sites are closing and there have been stock-outs with no vaccine doses available. This has led to frustration as there have been errors in guides to which vaccine sites are working and their operating hours, leading to some people being frustrated when they go to vaccinate. The Department of Health at all levels needs to send weekly accurate information to the National DOH and the Covid Contact Centre, which will be made available through the various location finder lists and Apps.

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.

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