

South Africa COVID-19 and Vaccine Social Listening Report 20 January 2022, Report 32

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

KEY TRENDS

The 4th Covid wave being driven by the Omicron variant is declining with no spikes in death in South Africa. Trending for two weeks globally, the hypothesis that Omicron is highly contagious but less severe has been received cautiously as hopeful news for the many countries grappling with this fast-spreading variant, which highlights SA's national efforts on the global map. Media headlines were relatively balanced and informative, with 29,000 interactions generated by the New York Times' online article alone, 28,000 on Facebook and 981 on Twitter during the period monitored (see [here](#)).

Lack of unified messaging around Omicron causing concern stir. The variant is being discussed as "the common flu" on social media, as a dangerous "South African variant" and lately as "mild" and "less severe" to those who are vaccinated but still poses danger. The inconsistency in messaging as the virus evolves is being discussed on social media as "intentional" or "manipulative" to cause fear to force people to vaccinate by those who do not have full information or are opposed to vaccination. [Here](#) and [here](#).

Expert conversations about Covid becoming endemic creating more confusion. Discussion on whether Covid is becoming endemic are being misinterpreted as Covid disappearing which might cause vaccine hesitancy and non-compliance to non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), with some people already viewing messages about the drop in Covid cases and the rise in recovery rates as a sign for the transition of Covid to being considered like the common flu. However, variations in COVID-19 have not changed the preventative measure protocols according to WHO ([here](#)).

Misinformation on injuries or deaths after vaccination without evidence. There is a video circulating claiming to show a severe adverse effect of vaccination for Zakhele Goqo whose injury appears to be a tumour on his neck. This is not been officially reported and is extremely likely to be unrelated to vaccination. The video shows Rev. Kenneth Meshoe of the ACDP saying that people should "Think twice about vaccinating, you might save your job but lose your life" and "Stop discrediting those who have been injured by the vaccine" with calls for justice for Goqo ([here](#)). This should be considered to be irresponsible fake news until Mr Goqo is reported as a case of severe adverse reaction and medically assessed. The ACDP's role in this regard is worth investigating. There were many mentions of ACDP in write-ups about Goqo.

Interest in injuries and deaths after vaccinations also rose on Google search. Searches on "Zakhele Goqo" greatly increased (+3,500%) and were the highest.

Politization of Covid vaccines. Among the tweets about Covid vaccines in the country, which generated 12k engagements this week, the top tweets showed politization of the vaccine role in conversations about compulsory vaccinations and adverse effects after vaccinations ([here](#)).

Growing anxiety among some parents about vaccination of children as schools re-open. As government announced that over a million teenagers had vaccinated thus far, some parents have expressed

concerns about the “unknown long-term side effects” and others calling for government to “recognise natural immunity” for those hesitant to vaccinate. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFORMATION

- **MISINFO:** ~~Omicron variant is a scam and means to control people and get more vaccine booster.~~ **TRUTH:** Omicron is real, see [here](#) and [here](#). Many vaccines require booster jabs, which makes them more effective. Countries are encouraging people get booster, see [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:** ~~The vaccines South Africa has have expired.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim. Vaccines that have expired have to be disposed on according to strict protocols. The processes are addressed in the Medicines Control Act (see [here](#)) and require detailed policies (see [here](#)) for an example which are followed in SA.
- **MISINFO:** ~~Vaccines don't work – if they did they would stop us from getting Covid completely.~~ **TRUTH:** If you have been vaccinated you are less likely to get Covid, and if you do get Covid it will most likely be far less severe. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

VIRAL FACTS (produced by the African Infodemic Response Alliance, AIRA)

- **Variations in COVID-19 have not changed the preventative measure protocols.**
There is a constant ebb and flow of information around the disease, and more particularly, its variants. This can often cause confusion and frustration, which can be quelled by a direct acknowledgment to that challenging information environment. While transmission, severity, and symptom information may change, preventative measures are constant and can serve as a level of comfort. Reassure that the best practices for keeping yourself as protected as possible remain the same throughout all of the emerging variants, which will not likely subdue altogether anytime in the near future. [Here](#) & [Here](#)
- **Potential impasse in vaccine uptake as a consequence of Omicron**
The Omicron wave of COVID-19 has brought in conversations in monitored social media platforms that underscore the deep divide between those willing to get vaccinated and those who continue to refuse. The share of anti-vaccine rhetoric versus pro-vaccine rhetoric shifts week to week, however, on average the relative shares are remaining consistent over the last several weeks. The Omicron's intensified transmissibility had an initial impact on a surge of pro-vaccine content, but it has waned as anti-vaccine voices have increased. The primary criticism in the last two weeks cites the “mild” nature of the Omicron variant, which is being used as evidence that vaccines are not necessary, and that they are less effective than herd immunity that can be obtained by this less severe variant, see [here](#) and [here](#)

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Clear, repeated, consistent and widespread messaging is needed around Omicron and the continued need for vaccination and NPIs.
- Communicate through Covid-19 champions, i.e. those who have gotten the vaccine and/or influencers championing communication to the public as living testimonies. Produce information for community mobiliser to help them debunk rampant misinformation.
- Continue producing accurate information with verified statistics on the risk of contracting the virus, including information that demonstrates that the risks associated with contracting Covid far outweigh the risks of vaccination, and why vaccines are considered safe and effective.
- Create clear, consistent messaging about vaccine developments and communicate frequently about what is known and unknown.
- Emphasize hopeful messages highlighting vaccines are crucial for ending the pandemic and share solidarity messages around protective measure and safe behaviours.

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:

OTHER RESOURCES

Background info for this report [Here](#)
SA Corona virus website [Here](#)
Real 411 to report misinfo [Here](#)

- **SA National Department of Health**
- **Covid Hotline:** Reports from the national Covid call centre
- **Praekelt.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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