

South Africa Covid-19 & Vaccine Social Listening Report

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This is a weekly report of Covid-19 & vaccine sentiment, rumours & misinformation in SA. Further information that provides the background to this report is available [here](#). Please give feedback on these reports in the brief survey [here](#).

KEY TRENDS

“Covid is over” versus fear of new Covid variant. While widespread sentiments in SA is that Covid has largely finished, the World Health Organisation has called for new and improved Covid-19 prevention measures amid the new Covid variants. WHO cautioned that there are new waves of Covid infections in Europe, US and India. They called for improved prevention measures just as many governments have abandoned coronavirus restrictions in the last few months ([Here](#)). The BA.5 variant has been described as the “worst ever transmissible” and the “ninja variant”, with only vaccines helping to blunt infections ([Here](#)). The sentiment in SA that Covid is ending is driving vaccine hesitancy, in contradiction with WHO’s statement that “Covid-19 is far from over” ([Here](#)).

Controversial Covid vaccination mandates ending. Standard Bank has ended its controversial Covid vaccination mandate. The bank had required all staff to be vaccinated against Covid by 4 April or be dismissed and 40 people were fired ([Here](#) and [here](#)). Old Mutual dismissed 49 employees for also refusing to vaccinate and placed others on special leave pending hearings ([Here](#)), and several other companies have already suspended vaccine mandates ([Here](#)). Most social media response has been supportive of the change: “*common sense prevails*” and “*hope they’re compensated for this*” ([Here](#)), “*I’ve lost a lot of respect for both these companies*” ([Here](#)), and others were questioning how these vaccine mandates worked for these companies ([Here](#)).

Covid vaccines safe in pregnancy. A paper reviewing 30 studies ([Here](#) and [here](#)) into the safety of vaccines for pregnant women has been widely circulated and appreciated in SA. Many are concerned about vaccine hesitancy in pregnant women, with worries of life-threatening side effects for them and their babies. The study confirms the safety of the Covid vaccines for pregnant women: reactions to the vaccine by pregnant women were similar to the reactions of other adults; Pregnant women’s immune response to the vaccine was similar to the response of women who were not pregnant; Vaccinating pregnant women is much like vaccinating other adults. An advantage is that it protects babies too.

Unease wearing masks. There are ongoing reports of people feeling uneasy or harassed when wearing a mask in places where they feel at risk and receive ‘funny looks’ or comments. The Department of Health’s position in this regard is that “even though it is no longer mandatory for South Africans, individuals can choose to wear masks to lower the risk of getting an infection, especially when in crowded or enclosed spaces” ([Here](#)).

Covid in SA social media. There were large increases in Google search terms for ‘ninja Covid variant’, ‘standard bank vaccination’, ‘Biovac Covid vaccine’ and ‘compromised immune system’. Digital news with the highest engagements included Employees rights on Covid vaccination ([Here](#)), Cabinet urges people with Monkeypox symptoms to seek treatment ([Here](#)), and scrapping the Standard Bank mandatory vaccination policy ([Here](#)).

Many people with bad experiences of Covid vaccines are now anti-vax. There have been many anecdotal reports from several parts of the country of vaccine accepting people who received two or more doses and boosters now being anti-vaccination due to experiencing unpleasant side effects. They “*don’t want to vaccinate anymore*” and influence others not to.

Vaccination in integrated health service outreach. There have been successful health outreach services which have encouraged people to vaccinate, for example the Health Market drive in Mpumalanga ([Here](#)), offering integrated vaccination, screening & testing health services including medical male circumcision ([Here](#), [Here](#) and [Here](#)). However, many community and NGOs initiatives promoting Covid vaccination are scaling down as funding is ending. Covid health promotion and communication is being integrated with other routine vaccination and other health services.

Challenges to vaccination from KZN. Community engagement in KZN highlighted that most people know that Covid infection numbers across the country have dropped substantially. Outreach teams are reporting that people are now ignoring vaccine messages. The compounding issue is that vaccine side effects are well known. So the perception of no risk coupled with undesired side effects results in low probability of vaccine adoption.

MISINFORMATION

MISINFO: ~~Big banks and insurers have cancelled their compulsory vaccine mandate for employees because the vaccines don’t work.~~ **TRUTH:** Two of the big financial services companies that have cancelled mandates say they now have over 90% of all staff vaccinated so there is no need for compulsory vaccination. There has also been pressure from trade unions to end vaccine mandates. This is not about vaccines not working. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Now that Covid regulations been dropped there is no need to get vaccinated.~~ **TRUTH:** With the Covid regulations ending, vaccination is even more important. Covid-19 is still widespread and killing people every day. Vaccination is the main way to protect yourself and your family. It’s still recommended to wear masks in indoor public spaces and to ventilate rooms. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~People who have been vaccinated are more likely to get seriously ill from Covid-19.~~ **TRUTH:** The evidence does not support this claim. People who have been vaccinated are far less likely to experience severe symptoms. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines cause infertility and erectile dysfunction.~~ **TRUTH:** There’s no evidence to support these claims. Covid-19 however can impair sexual performance. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Monkeypox is just the new Covid-19 scam to control and or kill us OR monkeypox is the scam name for the side effects of the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine.~~ **TRUTH:** Monkeypox is a viral disease and not an auto-immune disease, so it cannot be a side effect of a vaccine and the vaccines do not have any live virus in them. Monkeypox is not new but recently has mutated to be more contagious and has spread to SA. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: Ivermectin is an effective treatment for Covid-19. **TRUTH:** The SA Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) carried out a study into the use of Ivermectin and concluded that “there is currently no credible evidence to support a therapeutic role for Ivermectin in Covid-19”. They therefore ended the trial early. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: Vaccines side effects are being under reported and can kill you. The SA Adverse reactions site shows how many have died! **TRUTH:** This is false. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). SA has excellent adverse event reporting mechanisms backed by evidence (see [here](#) for a credible local site on adverse reactions). The SA Health Products Regulatory Authority has conducted research and found that no one in SA has died due to Covid-19 vaccines ([Here](#)).

MISINFO: Vaccines are dangerous and are linked to “vaccine-acquired immunodeficiency syndrome” or “VAIDS”. **TRUTH:** No evidence at all to support the claim of immunodeficiency being related to Covid-19 vaccines. See [here](#) and [here](#).

WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA) & Viral Facts

AIRA is the Africa-wide initiative of the World Health Organisation, managing the infodemic of misinformation and communications overload related to Covid and vaccination. They produce the Viral Facts content responding to misinformation which can be used freely. Here are the latest [Viral Facts Africa](#) resources (please use them):

Key **COVID-19** Misinformation Trends

- COVID-19 Vaccines Cause Infertility
- Vaccinated are More Contagious than Un-Vaccinated

Key concerning **Disease** Trends

- Marburg Virus in Ghana is a Scam

Links to most recent **Viral Facts Africa** productions:

- EXPLAINER: HISTORY OF MONKEYPOX ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))
- DEBUNK / LITERACY: MONKEYPOX DOESN'T EXIST([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))
- DEBUNK / EXPLAINER: PFIZER COVID VACCINE CAUSING MONKEYPOX (CORRELATION v CAUSATION) ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))

Gavi resources to build vaccine confidence ([Here](#))

Viral Facts tools to counter vaccine hesitancy ([Here](#))

PROPOSED ACTION FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Vaccination protects against Ninja variants. Messaging needs to explain that Covid vaccination is the most effective tool in limiting the spread of new transmissible variants of Covid, such as the BA.5 ‘ninja’ variant. Communications should stress that vaccination is the best way to avoid large waves of Covid infection in the future – we want to keep Covid infections in SA low.

Vaccine safety in pregnancy. The study reported above should be communicated through all channels as there is widespread concern that Covid vaccination is not safe during pregnancy.

Masks & ventilation are still a good idea. The non-pharmaceutical Covid interventions such as mask wearing, physical distancing, avoiding indoor crowds and ventilation are no longer in regulations, they are still a good idea to reducing spread of Covid and other infectious diseases such as flu. Everyone does many good behaviours to protect their own and other's health without being forced to. This should be encouraged through communications channels.

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-19 contact centre:** The national call centre
- **Praekelt.Org:** NDOH Covid-19 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-19 Comms:** a network of communications specialists producing information on the pandemic
- **DOH Free State & KZN:** Provincial Departments of Health
- **Community Constituency Front (CCF), Covid-19 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 RESOURCES

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

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, 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.

Contributors to this report through writing and inputs include the following members, who also participated in this week's discussions co-chaired by government and civil society; NDOH, Free State DOH, KwaZulu-Natal DOH, NICD, UNICEF, Real411, University of Free State, Right To Care, Project Last Mile, Community Constituency Forum, Health Systems Trust, DG Murray Trust, and Covid Comms.

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