



COVID-19 COMMUNICATION RESEARCH PROJECT

Impact Report

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BENEFICIARY	AMOUNT ALLOCATED	AMOUNT DISBURSED
Government Communication and Information System (GCIS)	R 2 000 000	R 2 000 000

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THE SOLIDARITY FUND MANDATE

The Fund has continued to support work on COVID-19 communication in South Africa, with a clear objective of changing public behaviour and perceptions around the virus and vaccinations. This is achieved through consistent and continual communication campaigns and initiatives that focus on preventative measures, which augment the government's response to COVID-19.

The World Health Organisation lists vaccine hesitancy as one of the top ten global health threats, and while vaccines are being rolled out, concerns about vaccines and hesitancy grow. To ensure the maximum positive impact of the campaigns, research is conducted to guide and inform the planning and implementation of various pandemic-related activities. It focuses on specific themes and outcomes to ensure that positive and safe changes are made to public behaviour. This assists with minimising and managing the infection rates, especially amongst our population's most vulnerable.

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PARTNERSHIPS

The research work was a collaborative effort between GCIS and the Fund. The fund provided an overall amount of R2 000 000, with GCIS executing the research through outsourcing to an agreed-upon service provider, Ask Afrika.

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PROGRESS

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase of the research focused on quantitative findings related to hesitancy levels of South Africans to take the vaccine. The second phase set out to explore the reasons for hesitancy/delayed vaccine uptake and unpack ways to improve vaccine uptake amongst South Africans.

This research study phases focused on the following objectives:

Phase 1 – Quantitative Research

Research Objective	Purpose
COVID-19 communication awareness	To determine the extent of the public’s awareness of COVID-19 communications and initiatives.
Key message recall and take-out	To determine the effectiveness of collective communication initiatives in delivering key messaging.
Public perception of COVID-19 communications	To determine the public’s feelings towards communications’ trustworthiness, believability, and reliability.
Attitudes of acceptance vs hesitancy	Assessing the public’s attitudes towards vaccine acceptance and readiness, as well as attitudes towards misinformation and disinformation.
Understanding the plan	Assess the public’s understanding of the vaccine roll-out plan.
Knowledge and readiness to use the online registration site for vaccinations	Assess knowledge of and readiness to accept responsibility, awareness of and readiness to use the online registration site for vaccination and other steps to be taken.

Phase 2 – Qualitative Research

Based on the outcome of the quantitative study, the Solidarity Fund and GCIS set out to explore the reasons for hesitancy in more detail and unpack ways to improve vaccine uptake amongst South Africans.

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FINDINGS

Sustained COVID-19 communication and behaviour change campaign kept awareness of COVID-19 communication on a fairly high level throughout the pandemic management since April 2020. The ultimate reach and impact result from the combined effort of paid and partnership-driven campaigns.



Below we provide a summary of the main findings of the Phase 1 Study (May – June 2021):

- Nearly nine in ten (86%) South Africans were aware of the Vaccine Roll-Out Strategy.
- Television, radio, and current affairs are the three platforms that were found to have the highest level of reference for recall of communicated content on COVID-19 Vaccine Roll-Out Strategy, followed by word of mouth and social media.
- Doctors and nurses were found to be the most trusted regarding vaccine advice, followed by advice from Government, health experts and the World Health Organisation (WHO).
- Specific messages had a better recall, and research findings indicated that South Africans were actively focused on who was next in line to receive the vaccine.
- Most recalled that 60+ year old and healthcare workers would be vaccinated first, however, there was a low recall about older adults who can use cell numbers of the family when registering.
- The findings highlighted an important focus area about a need to still wear a mask, wash hands and social distance after vaccination.
- The most trusted sources of vaccine advice were doctors, nurses, government, health experts and the WHO.
- The campaign yielded high levels of trust in communicated content and vaccine acceptance levels of 62%, with 28% still found to be unwilling to get the vaccine.
- Most people are willing to get vaccinated to protect themselves and others from the virus.
- Self-preservation seemed to be the key motivator.
- Those found hesitant primarily resided in the Western Cape (47%), metro/urban areas (69%), and 44% of hesitant residents were in rural areas, and 40% unemployed.

Summary of main findings for Phase 2 study (October – November 2021):

- Hesitancy stems from various reasons, namely:
 - » distrust in the quick turnaround time in developing the vaccine,
 - » lack of information on how the vaccine was developed and,
 - » general distrust in government.
- Stock availability and long queues were highlighted as barriers to take-up as it increases effort for those deciding to go and get the vaccine.
- Reference was made to:
 - » inefficient procedures that were followed, including the administering of vaccines,
 - » no health checks conducted prior to the administration,
 - » poor COVID-19 stock at vaccine sites and
 - » long lines at the sites that de-motivate people.
- Findings highlighted that people are fixated with conspiracy theories regarding the COVID-19 vaccine.
- Common theories include:
 - » population control,
 - » implantation of 5G trackers,
 - » the idea that the vaccine will turn people into “zombies”, etc.

The research outcome of Phase Two assisted in reinforcing messaging and format of the #RollUpYourSleeve Campaign that ended on 31 January 2022. The envisaged next step is to embark on a follow-up communication impact assessment research study to further assess behaviour change and message take-up from the campaign.



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KEY CHALLENGES

Generally, no significant challenges were experienced in executing both phases as per the envisaged plan in the financial year 2021/2022.

Minor challenges were experienced during data collection for Phase Two about access to selected vaccination sites. In addition, load-shedding was being implemented while phase 2 was conducted, resulting in minor execution delays.

Nonetheless, the phase was completed on agreed timelines, and all deliverables for both phases were delivered satisfactorily.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Rapid and timely research does assist in ensuring effective communication campaigns that may ultimately change behaviour. Consistency in relevant and targeted communication is key for behaviour change.

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CONCLUSION

The Fund takes its responsibility to the people of South Africa very seriously and aims to make informed decisions that yield the most positive impacts to the people most affected. Research is a powerful tool in guiding implementation and execution for major projects like the national vaccine roll-out plan. This guidance helps implement campaigns dealing with vaccine hesitancy and uptake effectively, focusing on areas requiring improved messaging. The Fund aims to continue providing clear and accurate messaging that can help people make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing, along with their fellow South Africans. Together we can curb the spread of the pandemic and keep ourselves and our loved ones safe.

