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# #PUTSOUTHAFRICANSFIRST: EXPLORING HOW HASHTAG ACTIVISM ON BLACK TWITTER PROMOTES XENOPHOBIA

## ABSTRACT

Social media challenges the idea that mainstream media shapes the public, media, and policy agenda. The fragmentation of audiences and their selective consumption of content also challenge the agenda-setting theory and the influence of discourse. Fittingly, principles of the agenda-setting theory and discourse theory apply to this study that explored which discourse under #PutSouthAfricansFirst sets the public agenda for misperceptions and violence towards black African immigrants in South Africa. The study used netnography and discourse analysis to assess purposively selected tweets using the hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst from June 2023 to July 2023, a period during which there were a significant number of xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The results indicate that crime, political rhetoric, strife over jobs, and dehumanisation are pivotal topics of the #PutSouthAfricansFirst xenophobic discourse dominating the online community Black Twitter on X. These issues appear to set the agenda among the public and in the media for negative perceptions and physical violence targeted at black African immigrants.

**Keywords:** online communication, social media, #PutSouthAfricansFirst, Black Twitter, hashtag activism, xenophobia, agenda setting, netnography, discourse theory

## INTRODUCTION

Hate speech has become ubiquitous on social media, particularly pertaining to culture, religion, sexism and racism, and often resulting in physical violence towards victims (Aldamen, 2023). Studies by Münch *et al.* (2021) and Blank (2017) associate the social media platform X with promoting discrimination through GIFs, memes, and the clever use of comedy circulated alongside racism, populism, and stereotypes of minorities. Although there is minimal research on Black Twitter (an online community using X), Taylor

(2022) writes that Black Twitter is prone to propagating discrimination towards specific ethnic groups. This study explores a prominent xenophobic hashtag activism case on Black Twitter, namely #PutSouthAfricansFirst. Hashtag activism refers to a social media movement whereby innumerable posts are made using the same hashtag to make social or political statements (Dobrin, 2020). For example, the Black Lives Matter movement, following the death of George Floyd in the United States of America, spurred online anti-racism hashtags globally (Guo & Liu, 2022). The hashtag activism was translated into sustained protests that garnered support from approximately half a million people from 550 different places in the USA (Buchanan *et al.*, 2020). Following the nationwide protests, police reforms were implemented to combat racial bias and misconduct in policing (Boudreau, 2022). This online movement serves as evidence that hashtag activism can determine public, media, and policy agendas (Strickland, 2022). In this study, we empirically investigate #PutSouthAfricansFirst as a hashtag activism case using the theoretical framework of agenda-setting. Specifically, we explore which discourse under #PutSouthAfricansFirst sets the public agenda for misperceptions and violence towards black African immigrants in South Africa.

## XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

Since the end of South Africa's apartheid regime, there has been an increase in prejudice and xenophobia towards people from other countries (Warner *et al.*, 2003). After apartheid, a significant number of African and Asian immigrants entered the country seeking better opportunities (Hove, 2022). However, over the years, African immigrants have been experiencing xenophobia, fear, and prejudice (Hlatshwayo, 2023; Hove, 2022). There is a perception that African immigrants are associated with crime, violence, taking jobs meant for South African citizens, as well as drug and human trafficking (Hlatshwayo, 2023). The labelling extends to specific groups of black immigrants being associated with particular crimes, for example, Lesotho nationals are associated with illegal mining and Nigerians with drug dealing (Crush, 2019). This anti-African or Afro-phobia sentiment resulted in xenophobic attacks from 2008 that culminated in the death and displacement of many immigrants (Gilili, 2022). Masuku and Nkala (2023) report that "between 1994 and 2021, there were 796 incidents resulting in 588 murders, 1,000 physical assaults, and the looting of nearly 4,700 stores owned by foreigners".

Some scholars (Khumalo, 2022; Crush, 2019) posit that the South African government through prominent political parties such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is fuelling the negative discourse and violence through contradictory stances. In recent years, social media has become a key driver in organising xenophobic movements (Barnabas & Mpofo, 2017) due to the ease with which users can conveniently publish and share news (Chibita & Ugangu, 2017). Moreover, the opportunity to remain anonymous, especially on X, propels fake news and hate speech (Barnabas & Mpofo, 2017).

## BLACK TWITTER AND #PUTSOUTHAFRICANSFIRST: CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISING

Black Twitter in South Africa is a vibrant online community where xenophobic hate speech often thrives through hashtag activism (Molefe & Ngcongco, 2021). The term Black Twitter started as an online collective of African American persons using the social media platform X (previously Twitter) to interact in dialogues, disseminate media, and actively engage in diverse digital exchanges about black culture, identity, social concerns, activism, social justice and related topics (Graham & Smith, 2016). Over the years, the term Black Twitter has been used to delineate the distinctive cultural sphere and digital conversation that has evolved on X among black users globally, including South Africa. Black Twitter is renowned for its unique linguistic patterns, comedic expressions, and cultural allusions, frequently mirroring the actual encounters and viewpoints of black people (Molefe & Ngcongco, 2021). The discourse is often coordinated with hashtags that can be sustained for a long period, often influencing mass media, public opinion, and culture, as is the case with #PutSouthAfricansFirst.

Before 2020, xenophobic discourse targeted at black immigrants in South Africa was dominant offline (Hlatshwayo, 2023). However, following the Covid-19 pandemic, and the subsequent economic challenges affecting already disadvantaged black South Africans, regular online activism targeted at black immigrants has intensified (Bezuidenhout, 2020; Dratwa, 2023). This activism is aggressively portrayed on Black Twitter through #PutSouthAfricansFirst. #PutSouthAfricansFirst trended on X following xenophobic tweets posted by an anonymous X user using the handle @uLerato\_pillay (Dratwa, 2023). The fake account garnered a cult following with innumerable likes, shares, and retweets with the key message that, “1) African immigrants in South Africa must be sent packing, 2) that they’re depriving South Africans of jobs; 3) that they are burdening the country’s public health system and, that they are responsible for crimes, and even infrastructure damage” (Bezuidenhout, 2020).

The Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) examined the conversation surrounding the hashtag and discovered evidence of a “dangerously orchestrated narrative” (Bezuidenhout, 2020). Dratwa (2023) elaborates that the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement is based on the narrative of the “harmfulness of Pan-Africanism and the conspiracy of modern-day slavery”. Most of the tweets fall just short of provocation, or what is technically classified as hate speech, demonstrating that the account holders are aware of X’s rules and how to abuse these (Dratwa, 2023). Peralta (2022) writes that the tweets capitalise on South African political parties and service delivery problems, and that the result of this destructive discourse is dissent and a lack of social cohesion that fuels anger and eventual physical violence. For instance, the violence towards black African immigrants at Diepsloot in South Africa that resulted in the mob killing of a Zimbabwean black immigrant in 2022 was fuelled by the xenophobic discourses under #PutSouthAfricansFirst (Gillii, 2022).

Moreover, this online movement demonstrates its power to shape a xenophobic agenda through anti-immigrant movements such as Operation Dudula, which claims to operate as a “legitimate voice for South Africans with a sense of grievance

towards foreigners” (Mncube, 2022). Operation Dudula often operates in tandem with #PutSouthAfricansFirst, perpetuating misperceptions and violence towards black African immigrants.

Some scholars argue that despite the extensive influence of hashtag activism in promoting xenophobia, the media also plays a role in setting the xenophobic agenda about black immigrants based on what it portrays about them. Masuku and Nkala (2023) report that the media frequently employs terminology that negatively depicts black African immigrants; thus, dehumanising them. This includes terminology that exaggerates the number of black African immigrants in the country, their legal status, and activities associated with them (Tarisayi & Manik, 2020).

#PutSouthAfricansFirst is a form of online civil society organising. It encompasses the collective attempts and initiatives undertaken by people, groups, and organisations inside a given society on social media to tackle diverse social, political, and environmental concerns while advocating for transformation (Narayan, 2013). The key characteristics of this form of civil society organising is that it occurs on social media, specifically Black Twitter using X, it garners great support, and it unifies South Africans around key issues that seek to promote the well-being of South Africans (Bezuidenhout, 2020; Dratwa, 2023). Similar to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the online discourse and activism appears to shape public opinion and the media agenda (Strickland, 2022; Taylor, 2022), and organising offline in the form of xenophobic attacks.

Considering the public attention to and engagement in this hashtag case, this is an opportunity to explore which discourse under the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement sets the agenda for misperceptions and violence towards black African immigrants. The rationale is understanding which issues underlie the hashtag to aid the government and policy makers to address these pertinent issues to reduce the negative discourse that fuels xenophobia towards black African immigrants.

## AGENDA-SETTING THEORY

The agenda-setting theory is a communication theory that examines the correlation between the media and the formation of public opinion (Guo & McCombs, 2011). The origins of this concept can be traced back to the work of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw during the 1970s, when they researched the 1968 American presidential election. According to these scholars, the media possesses influence not in dictating individuals’ thoughts, but rather in shaping the subjects or matters that they should contemplate. Fundamentally, the theory posits that the media exerts a substantial influence on the formation of the public agenda by deliberately selecting and emphasising specific news events, problems, and subjects, while simultaneously diminishing or disregarding others (Vargo, 2018).

Three components comprise the theory: the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Vargo, 2018). The media agenda refers to the compiling of subjects and issues that the media chooses to address and deliver to the general public, where the public’s perceptions of the significance of these subjects are

influenced by the prominence, frequency, and location of the news (McCombs, 2004). A public agenda is a comprehensive compendium of issues and topics regarded as significant and pertinent by the public (Vargo, 2018). There is a lack of studies about precisely how the public agenda develops, although studies by Guo and McCombs (2011), Vargo (2018) and Uscinski (2009) report that the public agenda develops from prominent news in the media. Discourse occurring in various settings can contribute to the public agenda; thus, the influence of the media can result in a positive relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda, in which the subjects emphasised by the media become those that the public deem significant (Guo & McCombs, 2011). The policy agenda is an exhaustive compilation of issues and topics that are of great significance to policymakers and legislators, guiding their prioritisation and decision-making processes. The effect of media influence on the public agenda can have repercussions for the issues that legislators choose to address and the policies they develop.

Traditionally, the media agenda was operationalised by the mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, the advent of social media has allowed the public to set the agenda and shape policy through interactive and immediate online communication (Demirsoy & Karakoç, 2016). Even though the mass media continues to play a significant role in determining the public agenda, freedom of speech combined with online anonymity have created a space wherein the public organise around topics that are transferred to the mass media (Feezell, 2018). X, in particular, is identified as a social media networking site that permits the rapid distribution of news (Demirsoy & Karakoç, 2016); in South Africa trending topics on Black Twitter rally the public around prominent issues and hashtags.

Although some scholars argue that the agenda-setting theory can solely be explained in terms of traditional media, studies by Aldamen (2023) and Dobrin (2020) show that the agenda-setting theory applies to social media, particularly concerning activism. For instance, similar to the focus of this study, scholars such as Guo and Liu (2022) and Strickland (2022) studied hashtag activism and the #BlackLivesMatter social movement. In this perspective, the power and influence of agenda-setting shifts between the media and the public based on the prominence of a cause. Feezell (2018) highlights that the public agenda developed and sustained on social media appeared to have greater influence, in turn shaping the media and policy agenda. The discourse that occurs on social media therefore could determine the public agenda.

## DISCOURSE THEORY

Discourse theory was pioneered by Michel Foucault, who proposed that language, communication, context, and power dynamics shape social interactions and relationships (Torfing, 2005). According to the theory, language is more than a tool but a means to develop and shape relationships, societal structures, and policy (Torfing, 2005). However, language and communication are not limited to speech but includes text, audiovisual content, non-verbal cues, context, and affiliations. Context also influences language and communication, contributing to meaning, intent, and impact

(Hodges *et al.*, 2008; Torfing, 2005). Each of these factors is led by power dynamics whereby, through language and communication, one can be in power or be subject to power (Torfing, 2005).

Social media, through its ability to permit multiple interactions at the same time about a specific issue, permits users to organise around a discourse creating unique ways of communicating that form the public agenda and often influence the media agenda (KhosraviNik, 2022). As such, online communities and hashtag activism can have their own unique discourse that welcomes and excludes those who cannot appropriately join the discourse based on language, communication, context, and power. Discourse analysis is the data analysis method drawn from discourse theory, which assesses discourse based on language, communication, and contexts to obtain meaning about the discourse (Hodges *et al.*, 2008; Torfing, 2005).

Despite the prominence and recurring use of #PutSouthAfricansFirst on Black Twitter, little attention has been paid to investigating hashtag activism in correlation to the agenda-setting theory and the discourse theory, and in particular, exploring which discourse under the #PutSouthAfricansFirst sets the public agenda of misperceptions and violence towards black African immigrants in South Africa. This is an important area to explore considering that it potentially reflects social media's capability of forming users' opinions, organising by propelling online activism, and possibly influencing offline behaviour. Therefore, the research proposed the following research question:

- ◆ Which discourse under #PutSouthAfricansFirst sets the public agenda for misperceptions and violence towards black African immigrants in South Africa?

## METHODS

The study used qualitative research to obtain in-depth insight on the phenomena under investigation. Netnography was used as a data collection method to qualitatively explore and understand the conversations occurring on Black Twitter about #PutSouthAfricansFirst. Netnography was suitable because it offers the opportunity to obtain a deeper understanding of online communities; thus, allowing the researchers to immerse themselves in the Black Twitter online community to capture interactions as they occurred in real-time (Viljoen, 2022). Although there are no common guidelines among scholars about how to conduct netnography, Wade (2020), Bowler Jr (2020), and Kozinets (2010) outlined three key steps that can be followed: 1) entrée, 2) data collection, and 3) analysis and interpretation of data.

The first step required the researchers to develop the research question. It was important that the population sample for the study be chosen with the research question in mind. For data collection, the researchers gathered information from a sample population. There are two sorts of data: information that the researcher can obtain directly from the forum, and information gleaned from watching the activities

occurring in the online community (Bowler Jr, 2010). In this study, the researchers obtained direct data using the hashtag. The final stage of performing netnography involves the researcher evaluating and interpreting the information gathered, as well as their own observations. In this case, the data is categorised and coded in order to develop (or support) a theory, or answer a research question (Kozinets, 2010).

## Sampling

Considering the research question, the sample was selected purposively by including select tweets posted on Black Twitter from June 2023 to July 2023 that contain the hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst. The time frame was selected because there was suspected fear of a rise in xenophobic attacks in South Africa (Khumalo 2022). Moreover, the short-term analysis of the hashtag permitted the researchers to assess how the users organised and interacted on Black Twitter about the hashtag during this period. The short-term evaluation of activist movements receives minimal attention, but it can provide insights about reasons why people organise around an issue at a specific time (Piamjariyakul *et al.*, 2024).

## Data collection

Tweet Binder was used to search for and download all the required tweets for the period under investigation. Tweet Binder is an analytics tool that permits the generation of reports and monitoring of X hashtags, mentions, keywords, and profiles (Shibly, 2019). Retweets and replies were excluded to allow the data to focus on original posts. The data was cleaned to remove duplicates and in total 1317 tweets were retained for analysis. Microsoft Excel was used to manually examine and organise the data to identify patterns and themes because it was cost-effective and allowed for flexible data organisation and sorting. The initial coding process involved assigning descriptive labels or codes to parts of the data that were pertinent to the study. The codes were then organised into overarching categories or themes that encompassed primary ideas or thoughts from the data. It is important to highlight that the coders operated autonomously throughout the initial coding phase. This implies that each coder independently assessed the data without consulting or making comparisons with other coders (Hodges *et al.*, 2008). This approach is used in order to avoid the potential danger of one coder exerting undue influence on the decisions made by another coder. Following the initial round of autonomous coding, the coders engaged in consensus meetings or coding reconciliation sessions. During these sessions, coders engaged in discussions regarding their coding judgements and effectively addressed any inconsistencies or arguments through the process of discourse and consensus-building (Cheung & Tai, 2023). Overall, the coding process exhibited a dynamic nature, characterised by the presence of constant feedback loops, reflexivity, and possibilities to deepen their understanding whilst reducing bias (Oprea, 2019).

## DATA ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis was used to analyse the data because it unearthed the underlying meanings, ideologies, and social constructions of the language or communication used in the specific context (Hodges *et al.*, 2008). Drawing from the codes and categories, key themes were constructed, and conclusions were drawn using the literature review, the agenda-setting theory, and the discourse theory.

## FINDINGS

### Language

A total of 1246 tweets were in English while the remaining were in local South African languages such as IsiZulu and Sesotho. The tweets that incorporated South African languages and slang received the most engagement.

### Context

Although the study did not investigate user profiles, it remains important to provide an outline of the user profiles, as it contributes to the discourse. Most of the tweets originated from South Africa, and although it was challenging to determine the true identity of the users because of the overabundance of trolls, we assumed that some of the X handles and user profiles belonged to South African users because the names are black South African names, and the images/photographs are of black persons. The majority (958) of the users used X on Android, with 167 using an iPhone.

### Communication

There were 714 contributors, with 248 contributors having between 1000 and 5000 followers. The tweets encompassed written text with 171 tweets including visual images, links, and emojis. The communication included #PutSouthAfricansFirst and incorporated English and South African languages.

Four salient themes were constructed: (1) criminals, (2) political rhetoric, (3) strife over jobs, and (4) dehumanisation.

## THEMES

### Criminals

The portrayal of immigrants as disproportionately inclined towards criminal activity was the most prominent theme. This became apparent in the tweets as immigrants were accused of illicit activities wreaked on South Africans, who appeared to be excluded from being the perpetrators of crime. Different black African immigrants were



associated with different types of crime, with Nigerians and Zimbabweans targeted the most. Nigerians were associated with drug dealing and human trafficking whilst Zimbabwean black immigrants were associated with murder and hijacking. One tweet stated the following:

*To say illegal immigrants must be arrested is not xenophobic. To say Zimbabweans are taking our jobs is not Afro-phobic. To say Nigerians are drug dealers is not self-hate #xenophobia #malemaonFrankDialogue #PutSouthAfricansFirst #OperationDudula* (tweet accessed June 2023).

## Political rhetoric

Political rhetoric on the alliance of South African political parties on xenophobia and immigration was also a leading theme; discourse leaned greatly towards the differences of opinion between the ANC and the EFF. This rhetoric had the potential to foster unfavourable sentiments towards immigrants about their role in exacerbating economic difficulties. Two tweets reflected this stance:

*#PutSouthAfricansFirst will continue to fight for South Africans until ordinary @EFFSouthAfrica supporters WAKE UP and realize that PATRIOTISM doesn't mean hating others BUT taking care of the country first before foreigners* (tweet accessed July 2023).

*The ANC government is to blame for this mess #PutSouthAfricansFirst, Phala Phala* (tweet accessed June 2023).

## Strife over jobs

Strife over jobs refers to bitter discourse about the perception that black immigrants are the preferred job candidates for jobs meant for South Africans. The economic burden associated with immigration is a topic often discussed in political discourse when immigrants are portrayed as potentially displacing native-born people by competing for employment and resources (Cohen & Naidoo, 2020). One tweet stated this:

*To Say Illegal Immigrants must be arrested is not Xenophobic. To Say Zimbabweans are taking South Africans jobs is not Afrophobic. #xenophobia #MalemaOnFrankDialogue #PutSouthAfricansFirst* (tweet accessed July 2023).

## Dehumanisation

Discussions on the dehumanisation of immigrants frequently centre on the manners in which immigrants are depicted as subhuman, objectified, or subjected to marginalisation (Paskuj & Orosz, 2022). The act of dehumanising immigrants has the potential to result in the infringement of their rights and gives rise to ethical considerations. One tweet stated:

*Somebody tell me why are all the "good" Nigerians so quiet. Why are they not saying anything about the horrible actions evil Nigerians do towards innocent South Africans in SA unprovoked🤔? #sizokthola #PutSouthAfricansFirst* (tweet accessed June 2023).

## DISCUSSION

The study aimed to explore which discourse under #PutSouthAfricansFirst sets the public agenda for misperceptions and violence towards black African immigrants in South Africa. It is important to explain again that the public agenda is formed as a result of “agreements” among the public about certain issues (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Vargo, 2018). There is a lack of studies on how exactly the public agenda develops, but in this study discourse analysis provided deeper insight on this matter. On X the agreement may not be overt but through certain languages and communication, including the frequent use of a hashtag, users can show support for an issue or cause.

Although the results indicated that “black African immigrants as criminals” was the most prominent theme, the four themes are not mutually exclusive but rather influence each other, especially to set the public agenda for misperceptions and violence toward black African immigrants in South Africa. The prevalence of narratives characterising immigrants as criminals frequently originate from misunderstandings, prejudices, and limited understanding of the intricate dynamics associated with immigration and criminality (Hove, 2022). These discourses may be influenced by political motivations, media representations, and societal perspectives. For instance, although crime reports have revealed that black African immigrants perpetrate various crimes, similar reports highlight that South Africans dominate prisons in the country (Dayimani, 2022). Thus, tweets about the criminality of black African immigrants, substantiated or not, promote stereotypes about these particular groups, which has been sustained over years. For instance, one tweet reads:

*Illegal foreigners are assaulting a white South African farmer telling him that they will kill him next time. When they do eventually kill him, Black South Africans are going to be blamed by the likes of Afriforum for something they know nothing about 🗣️🗣️🗣️*  
#PutSouthAfricansFirst (Tweet accessed June 2023).

This assertion fails to recognise that illegal conduct does not accurately reflect the characteristics or conduct of an entire community. It is crucial to recognise that crime rates are influenced by a variety of factors, including socioeconomic conditions, education, employment prospects, and the broader social milieu (Hove, 2022). Similar to any other demographic, immigrants exhibit a wide spectrum of characteristics and cannot be subjected to broad generalisations based solely on the actions of a small number of individuals. The dissemination of preconceived notions or false information regarding immigration and crime not only perpetuates harmful prejudices, but also impedes efforts to effectively resolve genuine concerns regarding crime and its fundamental causes (Aldamen, 2023). Khumalo (2022) asserts that it is such stereotypes that make xenophobic attacks re-occur; thus, promoting misperceptions that encourage violence.

Moreover, such narratives appear to influence the media agenda, whereby media portrayals are characterised by an overemphasis on the participation of immigrants in criminal activities (Solomon & Kosaka, 2013), which potentially perpetuate and

strengthen unfavourable impressions. The tweet below speaks about the host of a television show, Xolani Khumalo of *Sizok'thola*, who portrays black immigrants as the leading drug dealers in South Africa. It states:

*As South Africans we know longer need ANC cadres on the government strategic positions, Xolani as Minister of police will do wonders* (tweet accessed July 2023).

The disproportionate emphasis on offences committed by immigrants relative to those committed by native-born citizens distorts the picture. This is likely to result in confirmation bias, which is the cognitive tendency for individuals to favour information that supports their already negative attitudes toward immigration, while ignoring or downplaying data that contradicts these beliefs. Instead of exploiting fear for political or ideological gain, constructive discourse and policy formulation must be based on precise and reliable evidence (Fourchad & Segatti, 2015), as well as a balanced understanding of the circumstances.

Political officials also employ rhetorical strategies that depict immigrants as being a potential threat to the cultural fabric of a nation. This discourse has the potential to instil anxiety over the potential erosion of traditional values due to the increasing presence of other cultures (Hove, 2022). The discourse around national security often draws connections between immigration and potential threats. This form of communication has the potential to cultivate an atmosphere characterised by scepticism and apprehension towards those who have migrated to a different country. This can be described as scapegoating – the unfair attribution of social problems to immigrants, thereby diverting attention away from other fundamental contributors to these problems (Machinya, 2022). The use of rhetoric in this context has the potential to capitalise on the prevalent public discontent by presenting excessively simplistic solutions to complex and multifaceted problems. The use of political discourse that portrays immigrants as potential threats, an economic burden, or criminals has the potential to cultivate an hostile environment that encourages prejudiced attitudes and apprehension. This style of language has the potential to increase societal acceptability and the incorporation of discriminatory policies and practices. In certain cases, political leaders incite xenophobic attitudes to elicit support from a particular segment of their constituency (Maharaj, 2009). The use of populist language that depicts immigrants as individuals who do not belong can cultivate an “us versus them” mentality, which is evident in the following tweet:

*Sending them back pregnant or not to their elected leaders should and must awaken Edson Mnangangwa, Bola Tinubu, Lazarus Chakwera and the rest. SAns can no longer be expected to carry “African” leadership problems. We refuse to understand* (tweet accessed July 2023).

Negatively connecting political discourse to migration will continue to make it difficult for immigrants to integrate and assimilate in a country, especially in terms of economic contribution. The “strife over jobs” discourse posits that immigrants are displacing local employees in terms of employment opportunities, particularly within industries characterised by lower earnings or higher rates of employee turnover (Machinya, 2022; Maharaj, 2009). The aforementioned notion may underscore the proposition that

immigrants exhibit a willingness to accept lower wages; hence, potentially exerting a negative impact on pay levels across the board, especially because of the perception that South Africans are lazy and not willing to accept low-wage jobs (Jeske, 2020).

However, it is essential to recognise that the relationship between immigration and employment accessibility is complex and it is frequently influenced by a variety of economic and societal factors. Immigrants have the potential to enhance a nation's economy by addressing labour market shortages, establishing new businesses, and engaging in the consumption of goods and services (Sitompul, 2023). Studies have shown that immigrants can have both positive and negative effects on the employment and wages of native-born workers (Portes, 2019; Sitompul, 2023).

Attributing work-related challenges solely to immigrants oversimplifies the complex dynamics at play and diverts attention from larger economic policies, technological advancements, and other variables that exert a greater influence on employment availability. Frequently, the propagation of xenophobic agendas, which specifically target immigrants due to economic concerns, is fuelled by the dissemination of misleading information (Hove, 2022). Such agendas undermine efforts to promote a culture that is inclusive and diverse (Guo & Lui 2022). It is important to have a serious discussion about labour markets and economic policy that recognises the complexities of these issues. It is also essential to avoid utilising divisive language that singles out particular groups.

Recognising the influential role of political speech in influencing society's perspectives highlights the importance of responsible and courteous communication as a means to foster inclusion and promote understanding. Facilitating well-informed and empathetic dialogues on immigration and cultural diversity can mitigate the negative effects of xenophobic discourse and nurture a more inclusive and harmonious social environment.

Xenophobic agendas, as discussed above, are effectively advanced through the use of dehumanisation. The act of dehumanising immigrants entails depicting them as subhuman; thereby justifying discriminatory practices, abuse, and possibly even acts of violence (Paskuj & Orosz, 2022). Through dehumanisation, natives tend to view immigrants as potential hazards or as requiring less empathy and fair treatment. This phenomenon can cultivate an environment in which xenophobic beliefs and behaviours are more readily accepted and maybe even supported. Dehumanisation frequently involves the use of derogatory language, the propagation of stereotypes, and the construction of a negative image of an entire group based on the actions of a small number of individuals:

*Zimbabweans are stupid and there's nothing we can do to help them.  
Mayweather is more important than Schools, clinics and Hospitals 🤔🤔🤔🤔  
#AwahambeAmaKwerekwere #PutSouthAfricansFirst (tweet accessed July 2023).*

Influenced by such online discourse, the representation of immigrants in the mass media frequently focuses on the impact of negative stereotypes and sensationalised narratives on the dehumanisation of immigrants (Hove, 2022). These depictions

oversimplify complex individuals, reducing them to one-dimensional characters who are wholly defined by their immigrant status. In addition, government policies that categorise immigrants as “other”, rather than as individuals deserving equal consideration, may result in unjust and inhumane treatment. The phenomenon of dehumanisation can have a significant impact on the mental health of immigrants and on society as a whole (Warner *et al.*, 2003).

The findings of this study revealed that the language commonly used by users for the #PutSouthAfricansFirst hashtag activism was derogatory and stereotypical. Often, because of the normalised use of this divisive language, users who wish to join the community must post using similar language to be accepted as part of the online community. The use of local South African languages and slang on Black Twitter resonate with users, influencing how the messages are received and understood. It creates a divide between those who understand the languages and those who do not, highlighting the notion of power in the discourse (Hove, 2022). Moreover, the hashtag greatly plays on problems in South Africa mostly affecting black South Africans and “perpetuated” by black African immigrants (Peralta, 2022). The opportunity to share frustrations and have others to blame fuels the divisive language, and sustains the discourse, especially considering the growing problem of crime, corruption, and service delivery in South Africa.

## Limitations

The study has limitations. Firstly, the use of netnography neglects the opportunity to probe further through interviews or focus groups. Secondly, the observation of tweets for a short period from June 2023 to July 2023 may not be sufficient to fully understand the phenomenon under investigation. Thirdly, the development of the public agenda is a complex process shaped by numerous factors that were not addressed in this study.

Notwithstanding, adopting a worldview that views immigrants as culturally and economically enriching additions to society fosters a positive perspective that combats the dehumanisation of this population. Thus, addressing xenophobia should involve recognising the shared humanity of all people, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, and promoting the values of respect, understanding, and empathy (Solomon & Kosaka, 2013). Engaging with and confronting dehumanising words and actions is necessary for nurturing a culture that is inclusive and compassionate. Future research may focus on exploring how #PutSouthAfricansFirst sets the public agenda for misperceptions and violence towards black African immigrants in South Africa through interviews and focus groups.

## CONCLUSION

Black Twitter and the hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst have granted South Africans the opportunity for dialogue and to share opinions about issues affecting their lives, but it has also created a space where harmful and divisive discourse encourages violence. Xenophobic hashtag activism such as #PutSouthAfricansFirst could contribute to the

spread of false beliefs and incite violence against immigrants. When recurring themes such as criminality, political scapegoating, and media sensationalism are constantly emphasised in public discourse and political discussions, especially on Black Twitter, these have the potential to alter public opinion and exert influence on policy decisions that may specifically target immigrant groups. It is clear from the findings that this hashtag amplifies negative narratives about immigrants, portraying them as cultural, economic, or security risks. These narratives are used divisively and may not accurately reflect the truth, but they can gain traction if they resonate with certain communities in South Africa. Moreover, those who were initially neutral or uninformed on the issue may be persuaded otherwise if it becomes more prevalent. This may make it easier for certain people to justify or even commit violent acts towards immigrants. To counteract the negative effects of xenophobic hashtag activism, efforts should be made to disseminate accurate information that debunk myths and stereotypes, foster critical thinking, and cultivate positive conversations that promote empathy.

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