CHAPTER 5
A Critical Analysis of Populism and Xenophobic Discourse on Social Media in South Africa: A Case of *@OperationDudula* and *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Twitter Accounts

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Abstract
Anti-immigration sentiments dominate public discussion in South Africa across all social media platforms. Recent literature illustrates how social media debates on immigration and immigrants reinforce stereotypes and anti-immigration views. In some cases, these sentiments are manifested in the sporadic xenophobic attacks in South Africa. Over the years, the implementation of harsher and anti-immigration policies in South Africa mirrors these public sentiments. Concurrently, the online public plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse on immigrants. However, 'the dynamics' of these groups are under-researched. In this chapter, the author explores the strategies of anti-immigration actors on social media in South Africa and the discursive construction of immigrants in user interaction on Twitter. In this chapter, the author emphasises the role of emotions in xenophobic discourse and analyses how two Twitter accounts (*@OperationDudula* and *@Account Citizens* and the *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement) generate and circulate xenophobic sentiments to a large audience. It also analyses the general communicative features of these accounts, including the user interactions between 1 January 2022 and 28 March 2022. Two empirical questions were asked: i) what strategies were used by the anti-immigration Twitter users in their online engagement; and ii) how the users constructed their views of the immigrants. Data were retrieved from (n=500) Twitter posts *@OperationDudula* and *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* accounts and users' reactions. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach was used to analyse the data. Findings from this study expose how anti-immigration and

xenophobic sentiments are constructed through interactivity between actors in the digital public sphere. Moreover, findings from this study suggest that anti-immigration accounts and groups online should be perceived as influential publics, where anti-immigration expressions and explicit xenophobic sentiments are normalised. Findings suggest that these anti-immigration accounts and groups must be considered when addressing contemporary society's causes of anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments.

Keywords: Twitter, Big-tech, South Africa, populism anti-migration, xenophobia, *@OperationDudula* and *#PutSouthAfricansFirst*

1 Background and Introduction

The rapid proliferation and ongoing transformation of digital technologies and social media platforms have substantially impacted the participatory cultures of citizens and their associated social connections (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins 2017). Social media platforms often engender various means to communicate with friends and family living in their ideal state in different parts of the world. This communication is typically done in pictures, audio, and video-based content that can be sustained in 'synchronous and asynchronous contexts' (Borup, West & Graham 2012). Marlowe *et al.* (2017) argue that the different forms of communication and connection through social media arguably constitute key components of the 'polymedia' concept. For Smith, Leonis and Anandavalli (2021), forums such as Facebook, Skype, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat and Viber have become imperative technologies of 'connection and belonging for a wide range of individuals and communities' (Marlowe *et al.* 2017:85).

Social media platforms are powerful tools for members of migrant communities whose lives are often characterised by multi-scalar relations and attachment across multiple identities (Kochan 2016; Marlowe *et al.* 2017). The shifting possibilities of social media communication are also associated with the increased availability and affordability of digital and mobile interfaces that influence how people interact through social media and other communicative platforms (Ennaji & Bignami 2019). Marlowe *et al.* (2017) established that individuals from ethnic minorities and migrants have unprecedented opportunities to utilise online technologies to maintain transnational ties and connect to family and friends overseas. However, while social media technologies are

mostly represented concerning the increased connection, particularly across transnational and diasporic spaces, the proliferation of these communicative forms raises serious questions about how migrants become involved in more localised social formations and the prospects for social cohesion (Costanza-Chock 2011).

1.1 Problem Statement

Studies show that social media platforms (Twitter and Facebook) provide a fertile ground for online bigoted, racially prejudiced, and nationalistic dis-courses (Ekman 2018; Makombe, Sinyonde, Tladi, & Thambo 2016). Farkas, Schou & Neumayer (2018) argue that social media platforms shape antago-nistic attitudes towards immigrants. Because of their size and broad reach, social media platforms tend to influence the mainstream discourse on immi-gration and migrants. The impact of social media platforms on the migration discourse is notable in how they assist in normalising the previously ostracised forms of sentiments, opinions, and attitudes towards migrants (Makombe *et al.* 2020). Ekman (2018:607) established that 'anti-immigration groups and publics on commercial social networking services (SNSs) also seem to amplify xenophobic and racist attitudes among their participants'.

Researchers at the CABC have cited a few examples of social media populism (CABC 2022; Ekman 2018). To illustrate, Ekman (2018) notes an example of a Swedish woman convicted of hate speech after posting several abusive comments on Facebook directed toward Somali migrants. This woman actively participated in one of the largest (Swedish) Facebook groups, 'Stand up for Sweden'. In South Africa, hashtags have emerged on social media as a rallying cry for the government and private sector (Best & Meng 2015) to prioritise local jobs for South Africans over foreign nationals while blaming immigrants for crime and other social issues (CABC 2022). A study by CABC (2022) revealed how hashtags and populist groups are used to weed social discord among the blooms of democracy, particularly during the election process.

In August 2020, the *@uLerato Pillay* Twitter account used online disinformation tactics and infiltrated socially divisive content into over 50,000 Twitter accounts (CABC 2022). According to the CABC's analysis of the *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* conversation between August 2020 and February 2022, elements of misinformation associated with the hashtag persist. An examination of the narrative surrounding the hashtags *#PutSouthAfricansFirst*, and many

others over the last two years reveals how real social issues such as unemployment, crime, and illegal immigration were used to gain traction. These issues became part of the political discourse as election campaigns heated up. As the democratic process of fostering social cohesion progressed, attempts to sow social discord on social media gained traction (CABC 2022).

Despite the increased research that attempts to examine online populism and anti-immigration discourse on social media platforms, much research, up to now, has been restricted to Western countries and thus limited in nature. As a result, available research tends to negate the dynamics of the anti-migration discourse in social media spaces in the global South (Ekman 2018; de Saint Laurent, Constance & Chaudet 2020). Surprisingly, the strategies of anti-immigration actors on social media in South Africa and the discursive construction of immigrants in user interaction on Twitter have not been closely examined. Subsequently, little is known about how Twitter users construct immigrants, and it is unclear what strategies are used in the discursive construction of migrants in South Africa. In this chapter, the author explores the strategies of anti-immigration actors on social media in South Africa and the discursive construction of immigrants in user interaction on Twitter. The role of emotions is emphasised in xenophobic discourse and analyses how two Twitter accounts (*@OperationDudula* and *@Account Citizens (#PutSouthAfricansFirst*), generate and circulate xenophobic sentiments to a large audience. This study concentrates on Twitter because of its importance for mass media agendas and, as a result, for public perception of political issues. Research shows that mainstream news media frequently respond to trending topics on Twitter (Araujo & van der Meer 2020), which can be seen particularly well in the mass media coverage of tweets by US American President Donald Trump (Fuchs 2017). In addition, journalists frequently use Twitter as a source of news. One could even speak of 'a reversed agenda-setting pattern' (Araujo & Van der Meer 2020:647). Thus, Twitter debates influence public debates outside of Twitter.

1.2 @OperationDudula

The increasing debates around anti-immigration have led to the emergence of some populist groups like *@OperationDudula* in South Africa. However, no available literature offers credible information about the history and development of the populist group. As a result, knowledge about *@OperationDudula* is based on public documents such as newspaper reports and information provi-

ed by the leaders and members on various occasions.

@OperationDudula began its operations in 2021 (Charles 2022). It started as an online movement, mobilising South African citizens who believed the plight and economic woes an ordinary South African face were due to the influx of African migrants (Charles 2022). The group also expressed dissatisfaction over how authorities handle the immigration issue. It has no clear organisational structure, and its leadership is not clearly defined. Nhlanhla Lux[1] has recently been cited as the group leader. While the group does not have an ideology that underpins its beliefs or philosophical dispositions, it is well-known for its radical stance against the employment of migrants, mainly from other African countries (Myeni 2022). Among some of its ideas is the argument that all jobs must be reserved for South African citizens (Charles 2022).

The group has a robust online presence. However, since early 2022, the group has been mobilising South Africans of like mind to join efforts to 'safeguard' their communities from migrant 'criminals' and 'illegal' migrants (Myeni 2022). Between January and March 2022, Operation Dudula trolled the streets of Johannesburg, demanding the closure of foreign-owned shops and accusing business owners of selling drugs and human trafficking (Charles 2022). The group has also been visiting restaurants and other businesses, searching for foreign employees and verifying their migration status in South Africa (Myeni 2022). The CABC (CABC 2022:1) argue that 'the *@OperationDudula* movement's recent spate of activities against foreign nationals indicates a resurgence of mobilisation coupled with intensified social media tactics that exploit social divisions by fostering xenophobic sentiments under the banner of nationalism and patriotism'. Online posts from the group often come under scrutiny for violating hate speech legislation. Nevertheless, the group is very active on Twitter, with its posts generating thousands of likes and retweets daily.

1.3 @Account Citizens (#PutSouthAfricansFirst Movement)

The *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement has a more pronounced history than *@OperationDudula*. The anti-migration movement started as an online hashtag that became prominent on social media platforms for rallying behind a cam-

[1] The Dudula leader was arrested after one South African citizen, Ramerafe, opened a case at the police. This followed a raid on his home by the movement's supporters, acting on information they said they had received that linked him to 'drug dealing'.

paign calling on the South African government and the private sector to prioritise local citizens when hiring for jobs (CABC 2022). The group also blames immigrants for crimes and other societal ills, which bewilders most South African communities. Charles (2022:1) argues that 'the *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement has become the first organised group to publicly spew hatred against foreign nationals'. The social media movement was spearheaded by @uLerato_Pillay1[2], a Twitter character with an unknown identity. However, it was later unmasked by the DFRLab in 2020 as one Sfiso Gwala, a former member of the South African National Defence Force (CABC 2022).

The movement does not have defined leadership and thus is not premised on ideological foundations. Instead, the messages shared by the *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement morphed into *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* and intrigued other hashtags like #WeWantOurCountryBack, #ForeignersMustGo (Charles 2022). The movement's messages aim to create tension between South Africans and foreign nationals (CABC 2022). It also divided South Africans into opposing camps; those supporting foreign nationals and those against immigrants. A single post from this movement generates many user comments, creating lively, multi-flow communication. On several occasions, the movement mobilised and operated in some parts of Johannesburg. They visited restaurants and demanded proof that employees were South African (CABC 2022).

2 The Rise of Social Media Populism

It is widely assumed that there is a link between the rise of populism and the increased use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. According to Spiekermann (2020), the way social media has restructured the functioning of the public sphere and how citizens relate to one another in the public sphere is conducive to the populist agenda. Research on social media and populism shows an 'affinity between a populist communication style and the media logic' (Spiekermann 2020). To Bartlett (2014), populist players profit more from the prevalence of new digital media platforms because their inherent logic perfectly matches their communication style. Research by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) shows that the logic of social media involves emotional, controversial, and even violent content typical of populist activism. Users share this content

[2] The account was suspended by Twitter for sending out offensive and derogatory posts. Currently, the Put South Africa First Movement is operating using the twitter handle *@Account Citizens.*

more frequently than information with an impartial opinion expression. This tendency explains why misinformation and disinformation spread quickly on social media. Social media platforms like Twitter have a horizontal architecture that allows uncensored communication. This horizontal setup allows messages to spread to the public easily. In the context of Twitter, 'a handful of hops in a retweet chain is enough to reach a substantial audience, and saturation is usually reached within one day' (Araujo & Van der Meer 2020:636).

Moreover, Pannini (2017), cited in Postil (2018:755), describes an 'elective affinity'. What this means is that there is a strong match between social media and populism, with social media acting as a perfect arena 'for the populist appeal to ordinary people against a liberal establishment by [those who] feel victimised' (Postil 2018:755). Similarly, Pariser (2011) argues that social media provides a social imagination for the people's voices (opinion-building) and an excellent venue for people's rallies (movement-building). Pannini (2017), cited in Postil (2018:755), adds weight to this assertion and argues that 'the social media 'filter bubble' effect strengthens people's sense of belonging and commitment to a populist cause'.

Beyond Europe and the United States, factors other than cultural identity and the failure of neoliberalism have led to the rise of social media populism (Chevigny 2003; Postill 2018). Chevigny (2003) argues that in countries like Brazil, the Philippines and Mexico, a populism of fear may prevail over strictly economic or cultural concerns. For instance, a Philippines study by Curato (2017:91) established that 'Rodrigo Duterte's electoral success was largely due to his penal populism'. To illustrate, it was predicated on two distinct yet mutually reinforcing political logic; the politics of anxiety and the politics of hope (Curato 2017). Postill (2011) adds weight to this assertion and argues that, in most parts of the world, the battle to combat criminal elements often becomes an ecumenical issue that can forge unity between diverse groups around a perceived existential threat. Drawing on the above arguments, it can be summed up that the roots and development of populism in social media spaces are a concoction of economic, cultural, existential, and other factors (Chevigny 2003; Postill 2018). However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to research the rise and roots of social media populism.

3 Anti-Migration Populist Groups in South Africa

This chapter uses the case of two anti-immigration online movements – Opera-

tion Dudula and PutSouthAfricansFirst — to ascertain Twitter users' role in producing and circulating anti-migration discourse. The positions of these two groups are of interest given that South Africa has some of the most liberal policies on refugees and immigration[3]. However, the spate of violence and hate against migrants has increased (Hollifield & Foley 2022). In the past ten years, South Africa has recorded more than 20 xenophobic attacks against African migrants (Mkhize & Makau 2018).

The South African government introduced many changes to its immigration laws, leaving many immigrants facing deportation (Mkhize & Makau 2018). Amongst the changes is the Minister of Home Affairs directive that terminated the Zimbabwean Exemption Permit granted to Zimbabweans in 2009 (BusinessTech 2021). These changes in the migration laws led to a sharp decline in the positive attitude towards immigration and immigrants among the South African public. Reliefweb's (2022) evidence revealed that most South Africans hold negative beliefs about foreigners, particularly those from Africa. The rising negative attitude towards immigration and immigrants is noticeable online, including on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Ekman 2018; Olteanu, Castillo, Boy & Varshney 2018).

Online forums have become fertile terrains for incubating populist groups who express concern over the police and government's failure to address crime, primarily blamed on foreigners and the influx of illegal immigrants in South Africa (Olteanu *et al.* 2018). Charles (2022) observed that small populist groups such as Operation Dudula and PutSouthAfricansFirst were born out of citizen discontent over the government's failure to handle the immigration problem effectively. The group aims to support the South African authorities in combating immigration-related social and economic ills. Operation Dudula and PutSouthAfricansFirst claim to be responsible for raising awareness and mobilising citizens against migrants in digital spaces. When these groups have gained momentum and a sizable following, they transmute their operations into physical and sometimes confrontational encounters (Charles 2022).

4 Anti-Migrant Discourse on Social Media

Much literature has been published on social media and anti-migration senti-

[3] Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that the right to enjoy full legal protection, and the right to remain in the the Republic of South Africa.

ments on digital online platforms (Ekman 2018; Krzyżanowski & Ledin 2017; Papacharissi 2015; van Dijck 2013). For instance, Ekman (2018) assessed the various strategies of anti-immigration actors on social media and the discursive construction of immigrants and refugees in user interaction on Facebook. The study was based on an online Swedish anti-migration group called Surf. In this study, Ekman (2018:608) argues that 'anti-immigration groups online can be understood as affective publics, in which racial expressions and overt racism are becoming increasingly normalised'. For this scholar, the online public should be carefully considered when addressing the causes of anti-immigration and racist sentiments in modern-day democratic societies (Ekman 2018).

Evidence suggests that the role of social media in its various forms has shifted drastically (Papacharissi 2015; Van Dijck 2013). For instance, van Dijck (2013:88) argues that 'social media, including social network systems, are not only digital spaces for entertainment, connectivity and interpersonal communication'. Instead, they have metamorphosed into platforms for political discourse and identity-making (Papacharissi 2015). Farkas, Schou and Neumayer (2018: 464) argue that – to understand the upsurge in anti-migration attitudes – there is an urgent need to recognise and acknowledge the place of social media as a socio-technical system that plays an 'increasingly important role in shaping social relations, including those of race and racism'. This assertion is supported by Alvares and Dahlgren (2016), who argue that besides social unrest, socio-economic circumstances, and dismal integration policies, there should be a specific focus on digital communication roles when assessing the various impacts of anti-immigration and racist political actors in contemporary society. Ekman (2018) and van Dijck (2013) established that social network systems are constituted of diverse and complex sets of technical affordances that anti-immigration users can utilise when creating contentious online publics (Alvares & Dahlgren 2016).

Ekman (2018) describes the anti-immigration strategies the online publics use to create contentious discourses. For this scholar, anti-immigration groups 'remediate and recontextualise mainstream news on issues related to immigration and immigrants'. News stories often focus on negative topics such as crime, public unrest, and economic challenges. However, reframing the news is done by reformulating paragraphs and omitting facts that may explain the story's reality. Ekman (2018:608) argues that 'recontextualisation means that seemingly 'neutral' news items transmute into news pervaded by an anti-immigration or racist agenda'. Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017) add weight to

Ekman's (2018) observation when they argue that recontextualised stories often, encompass a mixture of 'civil framing', for instance, accentuating public safety, and 'uncivil' frames, like reductive culturalist explanations – that is, that foreigners have different behaviours from the host citizens because of their 'culture' or 'religion'.

Philo, Briant, and Donald (2013) argue that the continuous flow of 'depraved news' on immigrants and refugees is sustained by dissemination on enormous social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, to be precise. Thus, by circulating and embedding content published on anti-migrant digital media, anti-immigration populist groups and their followers can reach enormous potential followers with restricted resources. The construction and circulation of anti-migration content depend on the collaborative efforts of both the leaders and ordinary members. To illustrate, Fuchs (2017:40) establishes that 'Facebook users provide anti-immigration actors with raw material for stories by sharing mainstream news, circulating narratives relating to refugees and immigrants, or articulating experiences and in return, share the "news" produced by anti-immigration websites'. However, the participation and circulation of anti-immigration information is not always conscious. Ignorant users like, disseminate, and share information from anti-immigration groups without considering the source's reliability or political objectives.

Social media communication is sustained by constructing and disseminating emotions (Dean 2010). For Dean (2010:88), 'social media thrive on the production and circulation of 'affect as a binding technique''. Affect is conceptualised as the mixture of emotions disseminating between interlocutors in a communicative planetary. Affect is constructed and circulated when subjects and bodies relate. According to Dean (2010:95), this affect is fashioned in a communicative interaction, giving users meaning, attention and enjoyment. Papacharissi (2015:125) adds weight to the previous assertion when he argues that participation in online social forums engenders feelings of mutual recognition and belonging.

On the other hand, this engagement on these forums leads to exclusion. Ekman (2018: 609) argues that users' reciprocal emotions of inclusion and exclusion when participating on social media platforms 'drive the circuits of communication, that is, constitute the gratification of user labour'. Similarly, Papacharissi (2015:125) stresses that the affective public is 'networked public formations mobilised and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiments'. This scholar decries the argument that online racist groups can

serve as examples of effective publics because of the means they use to suppress pluralism and deliberations (Papacharissi 2015:122).

However, effective publics are also formed around uncivil expressions, including racism and hate. To illustrate, Ekman (2018) argues that in the 2016 American presidential elections, some of Trump's supporters used racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic memes and tropes 'developed by "alt-right" white nationalists ... develop[ing] a sort of weaponised, automated affective public' (Karpf 2017: 201 - 202). Though the racism and anti-migration social media groups may not advance pluralism and deliberation, they are founded on 'mutual circulation of affective discourse and social connectivity' (Ekman 2018:608). The social media public creates storytelling exercises, real-life experiences, and affective engagements predicated on the sentiment of mistrust, hatred, fear and hate, group understanding, recognition and in-group solidarity. This assertion fits well with the observations made by Ahmed (2004:117-139) that 'emotions such as insecurity, fear, hostility, or hatred align bodies of individuals within the network (creating a sense of belonging) while excluding other bodies'. To illustrate, communication in anti-migration social media communities build an 'in-group and out-group identification'. Ahmed (2004:117) argues that 'the construction of a common nation, national identity or 'culture' relies on the exclusion of "others" based on fear'.

5 Theoretical Underpinning: Fowler's Model of Critical Discourse Analysis

This study adopts Fowler's (1986) Model of CDA. It examines the strategies of anti-immigration actors on social media in South Africa and the discursive construction of immigrants in user interaction on Twitter. CDA is committed to analysing linguistic and semiotic aspects of social practices and problems (Wodak 2011). To that end, the structural attributes of any given discourse must be interpreted through the relationship between linguistic practices and social practices (Fairclough 1998).

Fowler (1986) claims that the combination of linguistic analysis and social context study always manifests the hidden ideology in the discourse. To illustrate, Fowler (1986) argues that individuals from diverse social strata tend to use various linguistic structures in a similar area of experience. As such, 'the particular set of linguistic features, on the one hand, reflects the language user's particular way of assessment and evaluation, and on the other hand, these linguistic characteristics are, in essence, deeply rooted in the social structure' (Fow-

ler 1986:56). Fairclough (1985:67) agrees with Fowler (1986) when he argues that the 'practical use of language is largely out of the speaker or writer's control but determined by the complex social structure'. To that end, it is crucial to investigate the general social context of the discourse because it allows for a clearer explanation of the conspicuous linguistic features inherent in the text.

Concurrently, language is intimately bound with ideology, and ideology originated from an asymmetrical society (Fowler 1986). Drawing on this assertion, Qianbo (2016:36) argues that 'the interlocutor's distinctive language use must reflect the distinctive ideology of his or her social group, usually manifested in the power relationship and group interests'. Fowler's model of CDA is crucial for this study because it helps the researcher identify the relationship between language and ideology. Moreover, its application to this current study allows the researchers to conduct a careful process of linguistic analysis and social background research. Qianbo (2016:36) suggests that 'the social and historical background helps explain the noticeable linguistic structures in the text, and as a result, reveal the hidden ideology through power relationship and interests of dominant groups'. The author uses the CDA to argue that social media populist groups do not operate in a vacuum. They share hybrid-mediated spaces and arenas with other populists and with non-populists.

6 Methodology

Data for this study comprised n=500 Tweets that were retrieved manually. The tweets were retrieved from two Twitter accounts; *@OperationDudula* and *@Account Citizens* (*#PutSouthAfricansFirst*). A purposive sampling approach was used to select the tweets according to their relevance to the topic. Data were collected from 01 December 2021 to 10 March 2022. To retrieve the tweets, two keywords were used: *#OperationDudula* and *#PutSouthAfricansFirst*. The choice of keywords was informed by the idea that they were already trending hashtags on Twitter and also that they were derived from the topic. The keywords were run on the Twitter search option. The search produced at least 1200 tweets that were collected. However, not all tweets were essential for this study's analysis. Duplicate and irrelevant tweets were discarded after reading and rereading the corpus of data. The final data corpus comprised 500 tweets.

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously using Fairclough's (1998) model for CDA. The CDA stems from a critical theory of language that perceives the use of language as a form of social practice (Fairclough 1998). Moreover, proponents of CDA argue that all social rules are tangled in

specific historical contexts and 'are how existing social relations are reproduced or contested and different interests are served' (Fairclough 1998:67).

Fairclough's (1989) model is composed of three interrelated processes of analysis tied to three interrelated dimensions of discourse. First, these dimensions for analysis involve the analysis of verbal, visual or verbal - visual texts. Secondly, it also examines the processes employed by human subjects to produce and receive the object (writing/ speaking/ designing and reading/ listening/ viewing). Finally, the third dimension of analysis was based on searching for the socio-historical conditions that govern these text production processes.

The analyses involved the three phases of Fairclough's (1989) model for CDA to analyse how anti-migration attitudes are created through communicative interaction among Twitter users. The researchers applied their three formulated stages to assess the user comments on four posts (two from each group) published by *@OperationDudula* and the *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* movement. The researcher strategically collected the four Twitter posts to highlight the differences and similarities; both included 'immigration/ foreigners' and 'crime'. This study's qualitative approach draws on the CDA and assesses the social-political dimension of language use in everyday communication on the micro-level of social network services.

Firstly, all the comments (n=500) were retrieved and read manually. Secondly, the gathered comments were structured thematically. In that process, the researcher kept the original user conversation/ interaction clusters intact (reply comments are ordered chronologically below the 'original' comment and are here called responses) (Ekman 2018:611). Thirdly, the collected user comments were closely analysed, evaluating the construction of 'immigrants/ foreigners' at predicational, referential and argumentational levels (Wodak 2011). What is helpful about this approach is that it enables the researcher to focus on the signifiers that make up the text, the specific linguistic selections, their juxta positioning, their sequencing, and their layout. However, it also allows the researcher to recognise the historical determination of these selections and understand that these choices are tied to the conditions of the possibility of that utterance.

The Twitter profiles for *@OperationDudula* and *@Account Citizens* (*PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement) are publicly available. It implies that the users who post their comments on these platforms are conscious that their posts are open to the public and available to researchers. However, for ethical considerations, usernames were not used in the presentation and analysis of data.

6.1 Data Analysis

6.1.1 Twitter Comments as Cumulative Anti-immigration

Social media platforms such as Twitter are founded on user-generated content. Unlike the traditional media platforms that restrict text production to the media institutions and its elites, Twitter augments networking practices like sharing, commenting, reacting, and even group discussions that come in the form of 'Twitter Spaces'. This characteristic of Twitter is termed 'platformed sociality' (van Dijck 2013). Ekman (2018) stresses that the social media platform provides two pathways to the user. To illustrate, he argues that 'the practices of user responses draw attention to the profile (individual) who publishes content' (Ekman 2018:14). As a result, the affordances of Twitter make connectivity among users possible. It is this connectivity that then transmutes into a novel sense of recognition. The author argues that user engagement with the 'uncivil' public can quicken the construction and circulation of anti-migration discourse through communicative interactions between users. Wahlström and Törnberg's (2019) argument that online group undercurrents can intensify hostile and vicious attitudes and behaviours is supported. In the following section, user comments in four posts from the sample are analysed to understand how user interaction leads to negative attitudes and xenophobia towards immigrants in South Africa. All the posts cover the topics of immigrants/foreigners as subjects. The analysis is developed and constructed to highlight how the interaction between user profiles creates an understanding of the phenomenon. It begins with a post from the official profiles of the anti-immigration movements, then traces the engagement's development and how it shifts focus from one issue to another.

6.2 @OperationDudula

6.2.1 Post 1: We will be duduling BMW, Nissan, Brewery and Coke. Let us all go out in numbers. Jobs will be created for South Africans; please let us go, Madudula...

On 28 March 2022, Operation Dudula posted an invitation flyer on its official Twitter page. The pamphlet invited South Africans to join the Operation Dudula launch in Tshwane (Pretoria) to visit businesses allegedly hiring foreigners. Besides the flyer, the post also captioned, *We will be duduling BMW, Nissan, Brewery and Coke. Let us all go out in numbers. Jobs will be created for South Africans; please let us go, Madudula ....*

Figures 1 & 2: Illustration of Tweeter Post Circulated by *@Operation Dudula* and the Ensuing Responses from Users

The post attracted 113 comments, 537 retweets and 1 697 likes. User responses and comments were directed at the caption instead of the invitation. From the comments, users' expressed disdain and anger about the companies hiring foreigners instead of South Africans. Also, most comments were highly charged with hate and dislike of foreigners because they allegedly took away jobs that belonged to South Africans. Other users went as far as calling for companies hiring immigrants to leave South Africa.

Below are some of the sentiments.

Source: *@OperationDudula* Twitter account (2022)

Below are some tweets from user interactions in response to the post by *@OperationDudula*.

> *If those companies want to employ Zimbabweans while operating in South Africa, they might as well pack and go to Zimbabwe.*
>
> *Here in South Africa, we want companies that will elevate the burden of unemployment on South Africans, not foreigners. So, I'm not fond of these companies at all.*

The post articulates the idea of victimisation using the 'them' and 'us dichotomy'. Victimisation occurs when the users complain that they are losing their jobs to foreigners. In this case, the locals blame the foreigners for the shortage of jobs. 'They take our jobs', 'we are losing our job', and 'the remaining jobs belong to South Africans'. These comments give the impression that the immigrants are victimising the locals. The 'them' and 'us' dichotomy becomes clear when the users express that the job taken by foreigners (them) belongs to South Africans (us). The articulation of the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy creates boundaries of identities where the foreigner is described as the one who cannot be us. Debras (2018) argues that 'the discourse of 'we/us vs them/others' is the construction of a boundary which creates a separation between groups and identities'.

The post advances the idea of belonging and not belonging. In this case, the jobs belong to South Africa, and they do not belong to foreigners. Because of this, most South Africans are unemployed (victimisation). The post invites South Africans to visit the companies and reclaim their reserved spaces – 'their' jobs to address the situation. The discourse of belonging and not belonging is a dominant and recurring argument within the anti-immigration discourse. In the user responses, there is a sense that belonging tends to be naturalised, articulated, and politicised because it is threatened by foreigners (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Operation Dududula posted an invitation to visit companies hiring foreigners to reclaim their sense of belonging. The users' responses did not only direct their attack on migrants who were hired. Instead, their comments began to call for a physical mobilisation to visit these companies and eliminate 'illegal' foreigners. The users' comments below call for physically invading spaces occupied by 'illegal' foreigners.

> *Please, maDudula male, can you please also go to Braamfischer? Zimbabweans and Sothos hijack the place each week. There are murders, especially in-between phases 3 and 4; a neighbour's brother was brutally robbed, stabbed and beaten to death on Sundays fighting together.*
>
> *All foreigners must go now. It is the time for people of South Africans who are not working.*
>
> *People should organise themselves in their townships or suburbs and deal with illegal immigration and business hiring foreigners as cheap labour.*

The comments above also seem to articulate invasion through binary oppositions – producing 'us' as victims of the immigrants' actions and behaviours. There is a sense in the comments that the immigrants have invaded spaces and jobs that belong to South Africans. As a response to that invasion, the South Africans ('us') who are victims must now go to reclaim those spaces and jobs that foreigners occupy. One user said:

> *Let's fight them together. All foreigners must go now. It is time people from South Africa are not working to Khuphuka.*

6.2.2 Post 2: Zimbabweans are now telling us what to do in South Africa. Zimbabweans should make peace with the fact that they are getting deported. The law is the law.

On 8 March 2022, Operation Dudula posted a video on its official profile. In the video, members of the South African Police Services (SAPS) were locking the doors of a shop that supposedly Zimbabwean immigrants owned. In the video, a Zulu-speaking man said:

> *… it's not like we don't know how we handle these foreigners. They did intimidate us. We have respected them long enough. If they don't respect us, we are closing this shop, which will not open again. No one will ever operate this shop here.*

Moreover, a caption accompanied the video saying:

> *Zimbabweans are now telling us what to do in South Africa. Zimbabweans should make peace with the fact that they are getting deported. The law is the law.*

The post had 133 retweets, 21 quote tweets, and 317 likes when that data was sampled. In total, the post had 417 engagements. The profile post was directed at Zimbabweans and the idea that they were breaking the law. The post attracted a cocktail of responses from the users, who immediately blamed the South African authorities for the influx of foreigners and illegal activities associated with foreigners. The government was instantly placed at the centre of the blame. Some user responses highlighted blame as follows:

> *All this mess is because the government is reluctant to deal with and address the problem of foreigners in this country.*
>
> *What is our government gaining from foreigners that make them reluctant to intervene and deport foreigners? African National Congress did South Africans dirt.*

Immediately, the users in this post shifted their focus towards discussing the subject or object of the foreigner. The comments quickly established that the people conducting illegal business in South Africa are foreigners. A recurring idea featured prominently in the comments and responses was that the foreigners are 'breaking the laws' and must be 'deported' back to 'their' countries. Furthermore, from the answers, the users were adamant that foreigners do not belong in South Africa and must be 'chased away'. For instance, some of the phrases used that were suggestive of the fact that the foreigners do not 'belong' in South Africa were: 'we must chase them away', 'they must go back to their country', 'let them go', 'must be deported'. Below are some extracts illustrative of the argument that the Twitter users expressed dislike.

> *Why are you saying Zimbabweans? What about Mozambicans, Malawians and Nigerians? all foreigners must go back to their countries, and Bo mastand [landlords] must chase them.*
>
> *We have our own here .... indeed, Zulus are needed in this matter. We call on the taxi industry to join the revolution. It cannot be that these scumbags harass our people.*
>
> *Enough is enough. We want our country back. If you are carrying a passport, you are a visitor. If you are undocumented, you are an illegal alien. Finish!!*

From the above responses, users evoked the strategy of 'othering', where the line between 'us' and 'them' must be drawn. It was evident when their engagements were calling the foreigners to go. By emphasising that foreigners must return to their home countries, the users played into the common argument of anti-migration and anti-racist discourses that the 'other' who does not belong to 'us' should never be accommodated. In this user engagement, the 'other' is the foreigner who has occupied the place of 'us' (the South Africans). Therefore, these others must be 'chased away' to where they

belong. One user refers to foreigners as 'visitors' who carry a passport and should never forget when it is time to go.

There is also a sense of stereotyping all foreigners as single and homogenous populations. As one user said, 'they are alike, 'they are all the same', 'they all smell armpits', and 'they all don't belong here'. The exercise of stereotyping foreigners can be seen in how the profile in the caption referred to the foreigners in the video as Zimbabweans. The aspect that the objects/ subjects were Zimbabweans was rebutted by users who contested the nationality of the foreigners. However, it was established by other users that the people in the video were not Zimbabweans. The division led to some reaching conclusion that all foreigners are the same. The extracts below illustrate the user reactions and comments on the subject's nationality.

> *Your problem is you think every foreigner is Zimbabwean .... Why are you saying Zimbabweans? What about Mozambiqueans, Malawians and Nigerians? all foreigners must return to their countries. Every foreigner is not a Zimbabwean... why do uu hate those people that much?*
>
> *This Is not Zimbabwean speaking. You are obsessed with Zimbos as if every foreigner is a Zimbabwean*

The responses above show comments from a group of users who opposed the notion of stereotyping and homogenising all foreign nationals as Zimbabweans. Stereotyping is a common practice in the xenophobia discourse where a single characteristic of a group describes all groups not regarded as citizens in that country (Alesina, Carlana, La Ferrara & Pinotti 2018).

6.3 #PutSouthAfricansFirst Movement

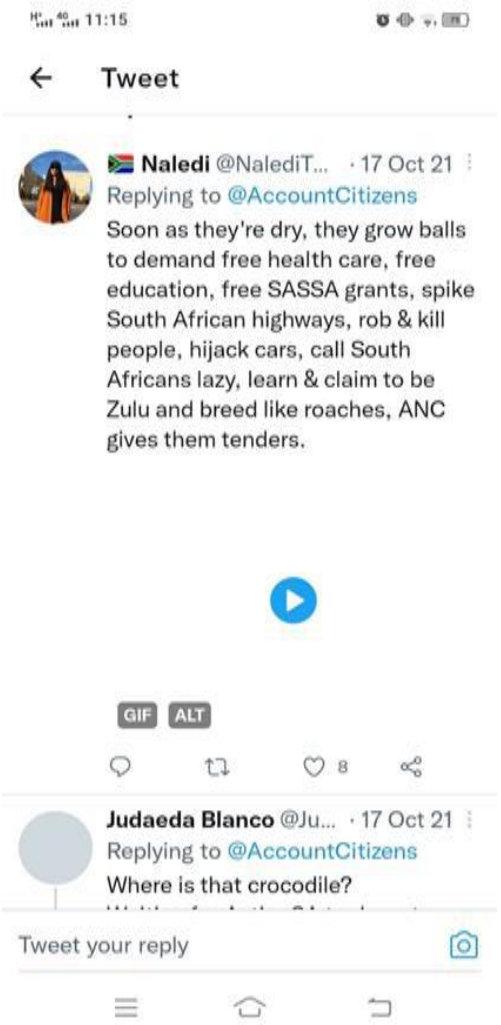
6.3.1 Post 1: Look at these things crossing Illegally into our country only yesterday…

On 21 October 2022, at the height of the calls for the deportation of illegal foreigners from South Africa, the *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement circulated a video (https://twitter.com/i/status/1449559755488387074) clip of a group of Ndebele-speaking Zimbabweans. They were crossing the Limpopo River into South Africa. The Limpopo River is a river that marks the boundary between

Zimbabwe and South Africa. The post attracted engagement from a large pool of users. The post had a total response of 510 users at the sampling time. The video's caption used derogatory terms that dehumanised the people in the video, as shown in the image below:

Figures 3 & 4: Illustration of Tweeter Post from *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement and the User Responses

Comments from the users corroborate the post's caption in 'dehumanising' the subject/ object foreigner in the video. The engagements' subtle sense of agreement upheld the idea that the foreigners were 'things'. The word 'things' when referring to foreigners is common in the anti-migration and anti-racist discourse. It is commonly applied to remove the humanness of foreigners and make them objects. The word, in its literal sense, refers to humans as objects. It deprives the subject at whom this manner of reference is directed of its fundamental human status.



Source: Tweets retrieved from *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* tweeter account (2022)

Below are some responses that add to the argument that the engagements responding to the video applied the strategy of dehumanising the foreigner.

Figure 5 & 6: Illustration of Tweeter Post from *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement and the User Responses

The users' phrases that suggest the dehumanisation of foreigners are 'things', 'no human-like that', 'they are dining with crocodiles', 'they breed like roaches', 'all smell armpits', 'Scumbags', 'Zimbabweans are nauseating'.

Source: Tweets retrieved from *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* tweeter account (2022)

In the comments, the subjects are deprived of human qualities through the association with animal behaviour when depicting them as 'cockroaches', 'they are dining with crocodiles', and 'creatures'. The practice of equating immigrants to animals has been described by Ekman (2018). He states the subjects are figuratively excluded from possessing any human qualities in anti-immigration discourse, saying, 'the use of animals and vermin as metaphors mirrors historical references in war propaganda and genocide. Similar signifying practices have legitimised atrocities against civilians and ethnic groups' (Ekman 2018:607).

The comments from the user immediately morphed into the argument that the people illegally crossing the borders are the perpetrators of crime in South Afri-ca. In the subsequent comments, various phrases were used to link foreigners to criminal activities in South Africa: 'Criminals', 'makwere-kwere's'[4], 'crooks', 'robbers', 'car hijackers', 'terrorising our country', 'rob and kill people'. One user claimed that foreigners 'rape' their sisters and women.

> *Soon as those things dry, they grow balls to demand free health care, free education, free SASSA grants, spike South African highways, rob & kill people, hijack cars, call South Africans lazy, learn & claim to be Zulu and breed like roaches.*
>
> *Why is the government not arresting these criminals before they get to our communities? Crime in South Africa will always be high because of these makwerekweres*
>
> *Are these #Zimbabweans who will be terrorising our country and our people and overwhelming our health system@HealthZA He, guys, let's hear what the Pres of*

6.3.2 Post 2: Parliament says there are approx

On 30 September 2021, the *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement, through its official Twitter profile, posted an image that read, *control immigration. South*

[4] A derogatory neologism for 'foreigners'. It is used by South Africans to refer to African migrants.

Africans cannot accommodate the entire African continent. The photo's caption had figures supposedly taken from the just-released statement of the South African parliament indicating the number of immigrants living in South Africa. At the time of sampling, the post had 310 engagements. The caption was notable: *INVASION OF SOUTH AFRICA*. The post revealed 8 million Zimbabweans, 2 million Mozambicans, 500 000 Lesotho, 1.2 million Nigeria, and 1 million Somalia (see the rest in the figure below). However, what is interesting is that these figures were highly inflated because they contradicted the figure from Statistics South Africa that says there are 4 million immigrants in South Africa. The user began by disputing the authenticity of the figures, arguing that the numbers on the ground are higher than those posted. Moreover, the user stated that more foreigners are in South Africa than the numbers provided by the state.

Figures 7, 8, 9, and 10: Examples of Tweets from the Official Account of the *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* Movement


11:29
Tweet
Mzansi citizens fir... · 30 Sep 21
Replying to @AccountCitizens
There are more than 500k Chinese people in SA. We have a chaotic immigration situation in SA
NorholmC... · 09 Apr
Replying to @AccountCitizens and @ssbl369j
Just think about Zimbabwe's statistics og 14 million so only 4 million is left in Zim
Mzansi citizens first... · 10 Apr
It's possible hey!! I can find you Zimbabweans with ease in SA within an hour. There are just too many. If they were 800k in a population of 60M then I would hardly meet one Zimbabwean.
gofa @gofaona_ram... · 01 Oct 21
Tweet your reply
11:31
Tweet
gofa @gofaona_ram... · 01 Oct 21
Replying to @AccountCitizens
Botswana has a population of just 2 million. And 1 million are in S.A? Impossible.
Mr X @Xollaannii · 01 Oct 21
Zimbabwe has a total population of 15 million and 8 million are in South Africa? Impossible
VK @ACEMIDIAN · 30 Sep 21
Replying to @AccountCitizens
Clearly, many immigrants have listened to Malema and found creative ways of entering the country illegally.
Junior Mos @uBaba... · 30 Sep 21
Replying to @AccountCitizens
Tell this to EFF please
Tweet your reply

Source: Tweets retrieved from the #PutSouthAfricansFirst post and the user interaction on Twitter (2022)

Below are some extracts from the Twitter users:

> *Our country is under invasion by these illegal foreigners. Therefore, something must do as soon as possible. This is war Many immigrants have listened to Malema and found creative ways of entering the country illegally. Foreigners are occupying every corner of our streets. We can't sit and watch. These numbers will only grow if we don't do anything about it. They are so many in this country.*

The comments from the users who engaged in the posts immediately transmuted and shifted focus to the 'invasion' argument. Users expressed fears and anxie-

ties that their country was under imminent invasion from foreigners whose numbers grew exponentially. Various phrases that suggested that the govern-ment was under an imminent invasion were utilised. For instance, standard terms were 'we are under attack', 'South Africa is invaded', 'invasion', and 'occupation'. User's comments also associated this invasion with 'illegality', where most claim that the foreigners are coming to the country illegally and without proper documentation. The comment also became more violent, with some users claiming the invasion should be considered 'war'.

7 Analysis of the Findings and their Implications

In this chapter, the author explores the strategies of anti-immigration actors in South Africa and the discursive construction of immigrants in user interaction on Twitter. The role of emotions is explored in xenophobic discourse and analyses how two Twitter accounts (*@OperationDudula* and *@Account Citizens*) generate and circulate xenophobic sentiments to a large audience. Additionally, the general communicative features of these accounts are analysed, including the user interactions between 1 January 2020 and 28 March 2022. Finally, two empirical questions were asked: (i) What strategies are used by anti-immigration Twitter users? (ii) How do the users construct the immigrants? This section analyses the findings and their implications on the critical research questions and theory.

The first research objective of this study was to examine the strategies used by the anti-immigration populist groups who use Twitter in South Africa. The study identified various strategies the anti-immigration groups employed to raise awareness and mobilise the public concerning their anti-immigration and xenophobic ideas. Results revealed wanton usage of emotive communication techniques. *@OperationDudula* and *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* used similar emotive strategies. Their posts, communicative text, and responses were consciously or unconsciously designed to evoke malevolent feelings of hate and anger against the object/subject, the foreigner. A shared sense of revulsion, vulnerability, anxiety and fear from the 'invasion from the foreigners' was carefully constructed and circulated. These emotive strategies helped create a community of in-group recognition while facilitating the exclusion of the other, the out-group (immigrants). The findings are comparable to Papacharissi (2015:125), who establishes that emotive strategies are common among digital affective publics. According to Papacharissi (2015:125), 'Net-

worked public formations are mobilised and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiments'. These sentiments are either driven towards a unifying objective or an exclusionary agenda.

Additionally, this study's findings that user interactions and communicative engagements on Twitter were predicated on affective and emotive strategies fit well with the arguments from de Saint Laurent *et al.* (2020). These scholars argue that social media users have unique and different behaviours and use different strategies in creating echo chambers online. The analysis of this study shows that the anti-immigration groups used common phrases, words and slogan variations that have precise identity functions and serve the objective of building a community – anti-immigration online groups. The use of common and familiar anti-immigration phrases popularly used in xenophobic and racist discourses seems to support the arguments from various critical discourse studies and scholars (Fowler 1986; Fairclough 1989). For instance, phrases such as 'we' and 'them' suggest that in the communicative process, the anti-immigration groups and their followers effectively pirate, refabricate and reinvent pre-existing anti-immigration sentiments that constitute the broader anti-immigration socio-political discourses in offline spaces.

Evidence from this analysis shows that Twitter provides a fertile platform where toxic and often derogatory language is generated and circulated. For instance, the foreigner was constructed and represented in derogatory ways. De-legitimising and dehumanising 'illegal' and overtly xenophobic constructions of immigrants were an intrinsic part of the data. Common terms like 'illegal immigrants', 'criminals', 'robbers', 'things', and 'cockroaches' were unambiguously used. All these forms of representation dehumanised immigrants and stripped them of all qualities that make a person human.

However, what is important to note is that the users seem to have borrowed common anti-immigration strategies of dehumanising and naturalising the difference between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'. Nortio, Niska, Renvik and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2021) support this finding when they argue that the strategies in the form of phrases, words, and expressions used by anti-immigration xenophobic groups in online spaces bear a strong resemblance with those commonly employed by the traditional media when reporting on immigrants. Lorenzetti (2020) points out that in traditional media, immigrants are dehumanised and often presented as the 'other' who do not belong to the natural group of the so-called 'natives'. Drawing on the previous assertion, it is safe to argue that social media populist groups do not operate in a vacuum. They

share hybrid-mediated spaces and arenas with other populists and with non-populists. The findings in this study confirm Fowler's (1986) and Fairclough's (1998) argument that media and societal discourses are interdependent.

Findings from this study suggest that despite being used as a 'liberating tool' – as in the case of the Arab Spring – social media platforms (specifically Twitter) and user engagement with 'uncivil' publics can quicken the construction and circulation of anti-migration discourse through communicative interactions between users. Analysis from this study shows that *@Operation Dudula* and *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* followers created affective publics of people who subscribe to similar anti-immigration sentiments. The user's efforts to unite created an exclusionary community and an out-group in the object/subject foreigner. Leberecht (2010) argues that Twitter is now and then shunned as a social media platform for propagating misinformation, rumours, and, in extreme cases, untrue information about events and individuals. This study's findings suggest that extreme behaviours and malevolent information generated by communicative interactions in online social platforms transmute to physical spaces. Findings here reveal that the user engagements were cumulative, and the anger generated by the users led them to call for the 'attack' and 'visit' of foreign-owned shops and 'chase away' illegal immigrants. The sentiments generated and shared on Twitter mutate directly into the hate of immigrants in communities. This assertion is supported by findings of a survey conducted by *Relief in South Africa*. The survey results reveal that most South Africans gain knowledge about immigration from online platforms. Furthermore, the results show that most people who gain information about immigrants from online platforms hold negative beliefs.

8 Conclusion

This study, which forms the basis of this chapter, shows that large and open Twitter groups can constitute a 'weaponised, automated anti-immigration public'. Because the technical structure of social media platforms shapes and nurtures anti-immigration and xenophobia in various ways, it can be effectually manipulated by anti-immigration and xenophobic groups and individuals. Anti-immigration discourse depends heavily on affect and emotions to attract enough attention and dissemination. This finding means *@OperationDudula* and *#PutSouthAfricansFirst* facilitate affective and emotive communication using social media architecture and technical affordances. The groups created a forum

where user interaction augmented anti-immigration comments and responses, transforming nationality hostility into discursive violence. Therefore, open Twitter posts and the subsequent user interactions move and shift boundaries of what is typically and publicly acceptable language on topics related to immigration and migrants. Törnberg and Wahlström (2019:2) support this assertion when they say, 'By taking advantage of commercial social media, anti-immigration actors gradually normalise previously unacceptable attitudes and utterances, and as recent research suggests, radical right-wing sentiments on social media may instigate and facilitate violent (anti-immigrant) political action'. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that anti-immigration discourse does not exist on social media only. Instead, they manifest in the groups' actions participating in the online construction and circulation of xenophobia.

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