

Afrophobic Attacks in Virtual Spaces: The Case of Three Hashtags in South Africa

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SUMMARY

Contemporary discourse on migration in the Republic of South Africa reveals recurring attacks on foreign nationals over the past decade. Recent literature shows that the attacks have mainly targeted foreign nationals from other African countries. However, this growing literature focuses on physical attacks on foreigners while negating cyberspace ones. This article focuses on attacks on foreign nationals in virtual space. The study sought to answer two research questions: In what way are migration and migrants being portrayed on South African Twitter? In what way are Twitter hashtags being used to perpetuate afrophobia? A study of three hashtags was conducted. The article drew from the scapegoating theory to interrogate tweets on South African Twitter. Data was generated using an online hashtag tracker. A qualitative content analysis of three hashtags (*#PutSouthAfricansFirst*, *#NormaliseHiringSACitizens* and *#SAHomeAffairsCorruption*) was conducted. The study noted the omnipresent view that all black foreigners in South Africa were “illegal immigrants” regardless of their migration status. Besides, black foreigners were stereotyped as criminals. The Department of Home Affairs was viewed as complicit in the influx of illegal immigrants in South Africa through corrupt activities. The tweets also blamed the government for its inability to resolve the problem of illegal immigrants. The study established that hashtags were now the new frontier for afrophobic attacks on black foreigners in South Africa.

KEY WORDS: hashtag, xenophobia, migration, afrophobia, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature on the recurring violence against foreigners in the Republic of South Africa. Most scholars focus on unpacking the causes of violence, the magnitude of violent outbreaks, and the effects of violent explosions within and outside South Africa (Manik and Singh,

2013; Masenya, 2017; Tarisayi and Manik, 2020; Waiganjo, 2017). The violent attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa over the years have led to the loss of lives, injuries, displacement and trauma. Previously, violent outbreaks against foreigners had only resulted in condemnation across the continent, but recently, retaliatory attacks were witnessed in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The discourse interrogating violent attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa has led to the conception of a new term, “afrophobia” (e.g. Tarisayi and Manik, 2020). Contradictions in the nature of the violent attacks on foreign nationals reveal the inadequacy of the concept of xenophobia. The extant literature draws attention to the morphing and racialisation of xenophobia in South Africa. While xenophobia entails “dislike, prejudices or attacks on foreigners” (Tarisayi and Manik, 2021: 187), several scholars have argued that a particular form of xenophobia is evident in South Africa (Long, Chiliza and Stein, 2015; Mbecke, 2015; Tarisayi and Manik, 2020, 2021). Parallels have been drawn between xenophobia and the “racialised xenophobia” noticeable in South Africa, leading to the conceptualisation of the term “afrophobia”. Afrophobia involves the selective targeting of African foreigners in South Africa. Adjai and Lazaridis (2013: 192) state that “South Africans exhibit high levels of xenophobia towards fellow African citizens, subjecting them to different forms of prejudice and discrimination”. The attacks entail a fundamental shift from the traditional hatred, dislike or attacks on foreigners that were previously recorded in South Africa. Roux (2020) states that “South Africa has a fatal history of violence against foreign nationals, particularly other Africans”. Hence, deriving from the conceptualisation of xenophobia, this paper views afrophobia as dislike, prejudices or attacks on foreigners of African descent. Essentially, recent attacks on foreign nationals have taken a racial dimension, targeting black Africans. Manik and Tarisayi (2020) reveal that violent attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa in 2019 excluded white Europeans. The violence was targeted at black Africans only, thus giving credit to the use of the term afrophobia. They argue that hatred of foreigners conceptualised as xenophobia does not consider race but the origin of the foreigners. Previous attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa were recorded in 2008, 2015 and, recently, in 2019. Scholarship reveals that the attacks were fundamentally physical, involving the burning, stabbing and lynching of foreign nationals. However, the recent period has seen a growth in the attacks on foreign nationals in other spaces, such as social media in the virtual space. The increase in the use of the Internet and social media has

provided new spaces for interaction among citizens of different communities and countries. In this article, the focus is limited to engagements on the microblogging site Twitter. It unpacks tweets that stemmed from the hashtags #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SA-HomeAffairsCorruption. While the three hashtags were intertwined, as shall be revealed in the following sections, it was noted that the hashtag #SAHomeAffairsCorruption was an offshoot of the #PutSouthAfricans-First and #NormaliseHiringSACitizens hashtags.

While the issue of whether violence against foreigners constitutes xenophobia causes an emerging discord, there is apparent consensus that its targets have been foreigners. Statistics reveal that a significant number of people of European, as well as Indian descent, live in South Africa (Department of Statistics South Africa, 2019a). If indeed South Africans were xenophobic, foreigners from Europe, India, or Australia would not be spared whenever there are violent outbreaks. However, this article does not delve into the debates on whether violence in South Africa is xenophobia or afrophobia. It rather aims to unpack tweets under the three hashtags and present the argument that Twitter is the new battleground for attacking foreigners in South Africa. Previous attacks in 2008, 2015 and, recently, 2019 involved the lynching of foreigners in physical spaces instead of the current attacks in virtual spaces, such as Twitter.

As Maclean et al. (2013: 295) state, "Twitter is a widely used free social networking tool that allows people to share information, in a real-time news feed through posting brief comments about their experiences and thoughts". The microblogging site contributes to the dissemination of news and information (Sharma and Brooker, 2016). Twitter works with user-generated content, allowing users to share, among other things, audio, images, and videos. One of the distinguishing features of Twitter is the 140-character limit¹ (Maclean et al., 2013). Twitter is characterised by its unique jargon, which includes tweet (a 140-character message), retweet (sharing someone else's tweet) and hashtag (#) (which, essentially, categorises tweets) (Cha et al., 2010). As Dhawraj (2019: 155) argues, "Twitter's short and punchy format allows for issues to be easily summarised or empirically coded in a few sentences and/or a few words". Essentially, Twitter's popularity is increasing due to its succinct messages, which are straight to the point. According to Kricfalusi (2009, in Cunha et al., 2011: 58), "[h]ashtags allow users to create communities of people interested in the same topic by making it easier

¹ Twitter has increased the limit to 280 characters in November 2017.

for them to find and share information related to it". Besides, a Twitter user can create a hashtag by simply adding the hash symbol (#) before a string of letters to enable other users to find tweets with a common topic. Hashtags can be created relating to sports, music, politics, religion and other topics of interest to Twitter users. Each tweet can include images, videos and links to blogs to overcome the 140-character constraint. Despite the limitations posed by the 140-character count, Twitter has grown in popularity since its launch in 2006 (Mollett, Moran and Dunleavy, 2011). Statistics of June 2020 reveal that, in South Africa, Twitter was used by 9.4% of the population, higher than both the world average of 6.5% and Africa's average of 5.7% (Statcounter Global Stats, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A plethora of theories have been used to unpack the portrayal of migrants in South Africa. They include the isolation hypothesis, scapegoating hypothesis, biocultural hypothesis, power theory, and power-conflict theory (Harris, 2002). This paper drew from the scapegoating theory to interrogate the three afrophobic hashtags on Twitter. The theory argues that "prejudice and discrimination are a means by which people express hostility arising from frustration" (Odiaka, 2017: 6). As Harris (2002: 172) explains, "[t]he scapegoating hypothesis of xenophobia states that the foreigner is used as a scapegoat, someone to blame for social ills and personal frustrations. In this way, the foreigner becomes a target for hostility and violence". According to the scapegoating theory, social ills in South Africa are blamed on foreigners. Perennial problems related to limited resources such as housing, education, health care and employment are linked to the influx of migrants (Tshitereke, 1999; Harris, 2002). In contemporary times, social ills, such as crime and drugs, are blamed on migrants in line with the scapegoating theoretical lens. For Tshitereke (1999), the phenomenon of xenophobia entails frustrated people venting their anger on the "frustration scapegoat". Essentially, migrants become frustration scapegoats. Odiaka (2017) terms the shared frustration among perpetrators of xenophobia as "commonness of experience". Claassen (2017: 4) states that the scapegoating theory "holds that poverty produces frustration, and consequently aggression, with aggression then displaced onto some innocent but weak third party". Hence, the frustration and aggression reflected across the three hashtags are viewed through a scapegoating theoretical lens.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study sought to answer two research questions: In what way are migration and migrants being portrayed on South African Twitter? In what way are Twitter hashtags being utilised to perpetuate afrophobia? This study on the new space for afrophobic attacks in South Africa falls under the interpretivist paradigm. The researcher used a hashtag tracking tool to track and monitor three hashtags: #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SAHomeAffairsCorruption. The hashtags emerged around the same time in 2020, with the #PutSouthAfricansFirst first appearing on 27 April 2020. The hashtag tracking tool used in this study was the Brand Mentions hashtag tracker.² It was selected because its features allow for simplified and synthesized results. One key feature of the Brand Mentions hashtag tool is identifying the top influencers in a hashtag. The data for the study was generated using tweets from a period of one week (from 27 April 2020 to 04 May 2020). South Africa was under Covid-19 lockdown from 26 March 2020. The hashtags coincided with South Africa's Freedom Day. Freedom Day commemorates South Africa's first non-racial democratic elections of 1994. Politicians, activists and citizens use the day to reflect on the progress made since the transition to democracy. However, in 2020, public gatherings and ceremonies were not possible due to the Covid-19 pandemic. On 26 April 2020, the government of South Africa announced that Freedom Day 2020 celebrations would be virtual and "all South Africans are called upon to take the opportunity to reflect through different media platforms" (Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, 2020). Thus, the hashtags were posted on the occasion of virtual Freedom Day celebrations. The tweeters knew that there was an audience due to the government's invitation to reflect on freedom on media platforms. Essentially, Twitter became a platform for political activists to access people confined to their homes due to Covid-19 restrictions. Statistics for the period under study indicate that the hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst generated 2,500 mentions, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens was mentioned 209 times while #SAHomeAffairsCorruption generated 211 mentions. Fifty posts with the most retweets and likes were sampled from the three hashtags.

² See on: <https://brandmentions.com/hashtag-tracker/>.

Table 1: Tweets sampled for each theme

Themes	Number of tweets sampled
All foreigners portrayed as “illegal”	15
Stereotyping of black foreigners as criminals	13
Hashtags and political mileage	11
Government’s incompetency	11
Total	50

Table 1 above shows the number of tweets sampled for this study. These statistics reveal that #PutSouthAfricansFirst hashtag generated the most traffic. Most of the tweets using those hashtags were in English. A few Twitter participants also contributed tweets in indigenous African languages like isiZulu and Xhosa, among others. However, for this article, the analysis was restricted to the 20,000 tweets in English. It is also interesting to note that the tweets with the hashtags were posted during the Covid-19 lockdown when restrictions were in place. Previously, violent attacks (in 2008, 2015 and, more recently, September 2019) were physical. Covid-19 restrictions made physical attacks on foreign nationals impossible due to travel restrictions. Therefore, social media provided an avenue for launching afrophobic attacks. It remains to be seen whether they will translate into violence against foreign nationals after lockdown regulations are lifted.

Roller and Lavrakas (2015: 262) explain that the unit of analysis “refers to the portion of content that will be the basis for decisions made during the development of codes”. On the other hand, Milne and Adler (1999) state that in textual content analysis, the unit of analysis may be at the level of a word, a sentence, a paragraph, an article or chapter, an entire edition or volume. Therefore, in this study, a tweet was used as the unit of analysis. The tweets with the three hashtags were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Krippendorff (2004: 18) defined content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use”. Bengtsson (2016: 10) argues that “content analysis can be used on all types of written texts no matter where the material comes from”. Thus, in this study, the written texts were gleaned from Twitter hashtags. There are two types of content analysis: manifest analysis and latent analysis. As Bengtsson (2016: 10) elaborates, “[i]n a manifest analysis, the researcher describes what the informants actually say, stays very close to the text, uses the words themselves, and describes the visible and obvious in the text. In contrast, latent analysis

is extended to an interpretive level in which the researcher seeks to find the underlying meaning of the text: what the text is talking about". In this study, the researcher pursued the underlying meaning of the text posted with the three hashtags. The codes were developed for the tweets that were identified using the hashtag tracker. The themes that emerged were stereotyping of foreigners, link between the hashtags and political mileage and government complacency in the migrant problem. However, the researcher noted that some tweets were coded under more than one theme. For example, one tweet captured the stereotyping of migrants as well as government complacency in the migrant problem in South Africa. Therefore, the themes were not mutually exclusive. The researcher coded the data manually. After reading through the sample of tweets, the researcher proceeded to assign a set of codes. This set of codes was used to generate a flat coding frame with the same level of specificity and importance for each code. The researcher opted for flat coding because it is easier and faster to use (Medelyan, 2021). The hashtag tracker also identified the tweets with the most retweets and likes. The emerging themes were used to interpret and analyse the meanings conveyed by the hashtag.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the themes that emerged from the analysis of the three hashtags: #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SA-HomeAffairsCorruption. The themes include the omnipresent view that all foreigners are illegal, stereotyping of foreigners and fear of foreigners participating in politics. Additionally, the researcher made a number of observations which are presented under the sub-headings "Language used in the hashtags", "Clarion call" and "Dissenting views".

All foreigners portrayed as "illegal"

A key narrative that emerged from the three hashtags was that "all foreigners stayed in South Africa illegally". Tweets with the hashtags #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SAHomeAffairsCorruption converged on the position that, in essence, all black foreigners resided in South Africa illegally. One tweet elaborated: "All foreigners should be deported and we should restart the entire process because the current one has no credibility whatsoever. Home Affairs is neck and neck with Eskom when it comes to being the most corrupt state entity. We can't legitimize

corruption". The above tweet ambivalently classifies all (black) foreigners as staying in South Africa illegally. Besides, the tweet further supports the view that the Department of Home Affairs is complicit in the flooding of illegal immigrants into South Africa. It was interesting to note that the Department of Home Affairs, which is mandated with enforcing and overseeing migration in South Africa, was being accused of corruption by the hashtag #SAHomeAffairsCorruption. The view that all foreigners needed to be deported was justified by suggestions that they had obtained their documents from the Department of Home Affairs illegally. Another tweet stated: "I know some from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho who obtained SA IDs from Corrupt Home Affairs officials". At the epicentre of the tweet's import was the accusation that corrupt Home Affairs officials were complicit in the problem of illegal immigrants in South Africa. This tweet also fed into the narrative that all foreigners in South Africa were either undocumented or possessed illegally obtained documents. Thus, according to this narrative, virtually all foreigners from other African countries were illegal migrants. Besides, the narrative holds that all identity documents obtained from the Department of Home Affairs by black foreigners were granted illegally and corruptly.

Another view shared through the hashtags under the study was that foreigners obtained documents by duping South African women into marriage. "If you get married to a foreigner you must go live in his country because we know they are using South African ladies for citizenship". Thus, some of the Twitter users contributing to the selected hashtags seemed oblivious of other visa categories and requirements to legally obtain South African identity documents, such as critical skills, as they limited the discourse to obtaining documents either illegally or through marriage. Hence, it can be argued that the tweets across the three hashtags perceived black foreign nationals in South Africa as illegal regardless of them being documented. Those tweets largely expressed opinions that foreign nationals were either illegal or had acquired documents in South Africa illegally. The view across the hashtags in this study confirms the scapegoating theory as espoused by Claassen (2017), that foreigners are viewed as perpetrators of societal ills. In this regard, according to the hashtags, foreigners were guilty of obtaining citizenship illegally and fraudulently. Hence, it can be argued that the finding on the labelling of foreigners as illegal regardless of them being documented buttresses the scapegoating theory. Essentially, no black foreign national was in South Africa legally.

Stereotyping of black foreigners as criminals

Another theme that emerged from the hashtags #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SAHomeAffairsCorruption was that foreigners were engaging in criminal activities. Several tweets with the hashtags under study indicated that foreigners, especially Nigerians and Zimbabweans, were involved in drug-related crimes and armed robberies in South Africa. In support of the allegation that Nigerians were involved in criminal activities, a story of Nigerians who converted a farm into a drug factory was tweeted. Reactions to the story stereotyped all Nigerians and foreigners as criminals. Another tweet asked: "Where do Nigerians work in SA? I have never seen them in any place working but can afford flashy lifestyle". It can be noted from the above tweet that Nigerians in South Africa were viewed as not engaging in formal employment but assumed to survive on criminal activities. The tweet further suggested that the reason Nigerians led "flashy" lives was their engagement in criminal activities. Essentially, the views communicated in the selected hashtags are consistent with the scapegoating theory to a large extent. While it is true that some foreigners perpetrate crimes in South Africa, it translates into scapegoating when all foreigners are viewed as criminals. Hence, it can be argued that the hashtags cherry-picked incidents involving foreigners in order to scapegoat foreigners as perpetrators of crime in South Africa. Besides, the mentioning of a "flashy" lifestyle in the above tweet confirms the argument by Manik and Singh (2013) and Tarisayi and Manik (2021) that xenophobia in South Africa is related to jealousy. The success of black foreigners is viewed with envy and thus scapegoated as proceeds from criminal activities.

Hashtags and political mileage

It was evident that there was a political connection among the tweets with the three hashtags. The tweets with the #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SAHomeAffairsCorruption hashtags revealed an apparent link with anti-migration politics. The anti-migration politics was linked with the movement advocating the prioritisation of South Africans on the job market. The anti-migrant movement fronted by the hashtags on Twitter was linked to two political parties. They are ActionSA led by Herman Mashaba and South Africa First led by Mario Khumalo. The #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement advocates the hiring of South Africans and its views coincide with the tweets with the #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SAHomeAffairsCorruption hashtags. The two political parties centre

their ideology around discourses couched with an anti-migration rhetoric. Essentially, it was noted from the tweets on the hashtags that the message was choreographed and manipulated to further the political ambitions of certain political parties. Some contributors to the hashtags explicitly stated that voting for Herman Mashaba would cure South Africa of the migration problem. The #PutSouthAfricansFirst mantra was fused into the conversation to convince the audience that political parties with anti-migration ideology could address problems with the Department of Home Affairs.

The #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement is based on the view that foreign nationals are taking all the jobs in South Africa. The motive of the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement is aptly captured in the following tweet: “SA is the only country in the world that puts other nationalities ahead of local citizens”. There is no consensus on the number of foreigners in South Africa. According to the last census, the figure is officially at two million (Department of Statistics South Africa, 2019a). However, other estimates put the number of foreigners in South Africa at five million (Wilkinson, 2015). The unemployment rate in South Africa is officially at 29% (Department of Statistics South Africa, 2019b). Thus, scapegoating five million foreign nationals for causing an unemployment rate of 29% in a country with a population of 59.35 million (Worldometer, 2020) is questionable. One of the most trending tweets across the three hashtags was tweeted by Herman Mashaba, who wrote: “Let me keep reminding you. Once we remove ANC [African National Congress, political party] out of power in 2024, we are going to immediately set up a special unit to do an audit of all Citizenships awarded since 1994”. Statistics indicate that the post was retweeted 741 times and liked 2,000 times, which means that it received wide coverage among Twitter followers. It can also be argued that the hashtag was an arena for a political campaign as the tweet also promises the electorate change after the 2024 elections. Thus, the analysis of the above tweet gives credit to arguments that politicians and traditional leadership in South Africa contribute to anti-foreign sentiments. The role of politicians in inciting anti-foreigner sentiments is not confined to South Africa, as other studies in Europe have also established the role of political rhetoric in xenophobia (Gross, 2012). Gross (2012) argues that politicians are guilty of pushing a crisis narrative, which inflames anti-foreigner sentiments. The tweet also contributed to the permeating view that corruption at the Department of Home Affairs justified the need to audit their decisions on citizenship. Responses to the tweet by Herman Mashaba indicated that there was a consensus among the contrib-

utors to the hashtags that the Department of Home Affairs was complicit in perpetuating illegal immigration in South Africa. Thus, this study adds an interesting dimension to the scapegoating of foreigners since it suggests that foreigners were viewed as working in cahoots with locals to engage in criminal activities, such as illegally obtaining documents and citizenship from the Department of Home Affairs.

Government's incompetency

The tweets with the three hashtags analysed in this study further blamed the government for being incompetent in addressing the influx of "illegal immigrants" into South Africa. It was thought-provoking to note that, according to this school of thought, the influx of "illegal migrants" was associated with the ANC rule. One tweet stated: "The only reason government officials are corrupt and Nigerians doing as they please is because we have a corrupt, useless and toothless government run by pensioners". Several tweets with the three hashtags converged on the common theme that accused the ANC government of being incompetent. The transgressions attributed to the Department of Home Affairs were extended to the government as the appointing authority. However, the accusation of incompetency made against the ANC government was quickly followed by support for the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement. Besides, the three hashtags linked an influx of illegal immigrants into South Africa with the ascendancy of the ANC to power. Hence, it can be argued that tweets with the three hashtags to a large extent associated illegal immigration in South Africa with the ANC government's incompetency. The three hashtags were used as spaces for the mobilisation of South Africans against the perceived invasion by black foreigners. The hashtags were essentially a call for action, as evidenced by tweets that mobilised people to support Herman Mashaba. Herman Mashaba was portrayed as the only leader capable of thwarting the influx of black foreigners into South Africa.

Language used in hashtags

The researcher also noted that the hashtags were in the English language. The Republic of South Africa is home to people speaking at least 35 languages, of which ten are official languages. The official languages are Afrikaans, Venda, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, English, Swati, Zulu, Tswana, Ndebele, Xhosa and Tsonga. The largest portion of foreign nationals in South Africa originates from Anglophone African countries: Zimbabwe,

Nigeria, Zambia, and Malawi. The main language used across the three hashtags was English, despite South Africa having ten official languages, including English. The content and the use of the English language suggest that the tweets were addressing not only local South Africans but also a larger audience, including the “illegal immigrants”. The tweets were deliberately in English to make sure that a larger audience received the message. Since the messages targeted black foreigners, they had to be communicated in a language they would understand. Besides, the Twitter community in South Africa had previously used hashtags in indigenous languages, but this particular topic required a language comprehended by foreign nationals. Hence, all the hashtags were in English instead of any other official or indigenous language. This argument is supported by some tweets which warned black foreigners to leave South Africa. One of them was frank: “Nigerians and Zimbabweans, we will never accept you in our country it’s best you leave now than later when things get ugly...”. This tweet warns Nigerians and Zimbabweans to leave the country and is written in English to ensure that the intended people received the communication. Warnings like the above tweet had preceded previous attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa and, not surprisingly, they were always written in English. Tarisayi and Manik (2020) reported that afrophobia attacks in September 2019 had been preceded by warnings to foreigners. The language used in the tweets demonstrates that the content of the message and threats were addressed to foreign nationals.

Fear of foreigners participating in politics

Among the conversations under the three hashtags, there was a noticeable fear of foreigners deciding the country’s political future. One tweet, which sums up the fear of foreigners dominating the political discourse stated: “Foreigners are going to start political parties and vote themselves with fake IDs, we have to act!”. The tweet was alarmist in that it was not informed by constitutional and legal awareness that only South Africans could form political parties in South Africa. It is also not legally possible for foreigners in South Africa to form political parties. Another tweet, supporting and feeding into the fear of foreigners, identified political leaders of foreign parentage. The tweet stated: “Look the foreigners are already taking over. Naledi [Naledi Chirwa is an Economic Freedom Fighters Member of Parliament (MP)] is already in our parliament”. The tweet was posted together with her image. The Economic Freedom Fighters MP Naledi Chirwa

was identified as foreign because of her Malawian descent. However, the conversations under the hashtags excluded MPs in the South African parliament with European ancestry. This further buttresses the view that the attacks on foreigners in South Africa are afrophobic and not xenophobic. Besides, the narrative on the fear of foreigners taking over the country also mentioned the ascendancy of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States of America. The conversations argued that the ascendancy of people of foreign origin to the presidency should not be allowed in South Africa. Some South African politicians were misrepresented as foreigners to support the narrative that foreigners were taking over the country. In order to incite fear and hatred of foreign nationals, descendants of migrants with South African citizenship were lumped together with foreigners. Hence, it can be argued that the hashtags demonstrated a fear of descendants of migrants taking part in politics in South Africa.

Dissenting views

Another narrative that emerged from the tweets associated with the three hashtags offered dissenting views. It argued that the hashtags were sponsored by big businesses to divert the attention of South Africans from conversations around the expropriation of land and growing inequalities in the country. One tweet argued: "Just like it's has always been suspected that some incompetent big businesses have always been behind xenophobia attacks on Somali shops cause they are the only ones they have failed to destroy after big supermarkets decimated township spaza. I would not put this beyond this lot". This view pushed a conspiracy theory that big businesses were allegedly behind the hashtags blaming foreigners for the problems in South Africa. Another tweet stated: "This is true [white-owned businesses are behind the hashtags]. They want to defocus [sic] black South Africans, and to change the real problem of black African South Africans to be foreign nationals, not whites. It is an agenda-setting project...". Another tweet argued: "Don't forget that #PutSouthAfricansFirst nonsense is a project". Hence, these minority voices under the three hashtags refuted the majority view that foreigners were a problem. The minority view argued that the hashtags were used to divert the attention of the people of South Africa from more important issues in the country.

Another view within the dissenting narrative argued that #PutSouthAfricansFirst was xenophobia under a veneer of patriotism. One tweet argued: "#PutSouthAfricansFirst is not patriotism but xenophobia against our Af-

rican brothers. Why is it silent about the Chinese? Or Guptas who control our coal mines?”. It can be noted that some contributors to the Twitter engagement on #PutSouthAfricansFirst actually questioned the import of the movement which marketed itself as patriotism. The hashtags were not complaining about the growing participation of the Chinese in the economy. And neither was the apparent control of the mines by foreigners of European origin attacked by the #PutSouthAfricansFirst hashtags. Essentially, the dissenting views posed some serious questions on the apparent exclusion of foreigners of European origin from the attacks on Twitter. Another tweet stated: “In our beloved country, the word foreigner means black African from another African country. Any other foreigner is Boss John. It tough!!! I wish Steve Biko was alive”. Hence, according to the tweet, the word “foreigner” was fluid and applied selectively in the conversations under the hashtags.

Clarion call

The other dominant narrative in the conversations under the three hashtags under the study was packaged as a clarion call. The tweets in this narrative focused on mapping the way forward to address the challenge posed by migrants in South Africa. It was interesting to note that the hashtags identified the problems in South Africa and proffered solutions. Two of the most popular tweets in the study proposed the tightening of borders and citizenship audit as solutions to corruption at the Department of Home Affairs. One tweet, which was retweeted 64 times and liked 155 times, stated: “We need to secure our borders and stop illegal immigration, which is fuelled by corruption at Home Affairs.” The conversation revealed that South Africa could only address the perceived problem of the influx of illegal immigrants through tightening border controls. Another tweet stated: “All officials who fraudulently issued citizenship to foreigners must be charged with treason and jailed for life.” The equating of fraudulently awarding black foreigners citizenship with treason expresses the perceived seriousness of the crime. The above tweets further supported the view that the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa was the culprit promoting illegal immigration due to corruption. Dissenting views, pointing out that by granting visas, permanent residence and citizenship to certain categories the Department of Home Affairs merely implemented government regulations, were not accommodated. It was evident that there was a general consensus among the participants using the hashtag that the Department of Home Affairs was

corruptly allowing foreigners into the country. Hence, it was not surprising that the second most popular solution was auditing citizenship. The tweets calling for a citizenship audit stemmed from the issue of illegally obtained South African identity documents alluded to above. Thus, views shared on the subject of unlawfully obtained documents in South Africa coincided with calls for citizenship audit.

CONCLUSION

This article analysed three hashtags that trended on South African Twitter: #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SAHomeAffairsCorruption. The themes that emerged from the conversations, which were analysed using content analysis, demonstrated that hashtags were the new space for afrophobic attacks on foreigners in South Africa. Previously, the attacks were physical, involving gruesome murder, displacement of foreigners and looting of businesses owned by foreigners. However, this article revealed that foreigners were now being attacked using Twitter hashtags, as shown by the sampled tweets. The article also established a link between the hashtags and an emerging political movement with presidential ambitions. The article revealed that the hashtags #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SAHomeAffairsCorruption were manipulated to further afrophobic narratives. Besides, the studied hashtags are microcosmic of the physical attacks that have been witnessed in South Africa over the past few years. It is interesting to note that the three hashtags trended during the week when South Africans were commemorating Freedom Day. Freedom Day celebrations were held virtually in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, thus providing an audience to reflect on the migration issue in South Africa. The tweeters linked their frustrations with the government caused by the presence of foreigners in South Africa. Furthermore, some political activists used the hashtags to further their political ambitions. From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the three hashtags #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #NormaliseHiringSACitizens and #SAHomeAffairsCorruption were an arena for afrophobic attacks and stereotyping of foreigners. Physical afrophobic attacks previously witnessed in South Africa in 2008, 2015 and 2019 were replicated by the sampled three hashtags albeit without the loss of lives and properties.

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Afrofobni napadi u virtualnim prostorima: slučaj triju ključnih riječi (*hashtag*) u Južnoj Africi

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SAŽETAK

Suvremeni diskurs o migracijama u Republici Južnoj Africi pokazuje da su se tijekom proteklog desetljeća ondje događali opetovani napadi na strane državljane. Novija literatura otkriva da su meta tih napada bili uglavnom strani državljani iz drugih afričkih zemalja. Međutim, ta sve opsežnija literatura usmjerena je na napade na strance, dok se napadi u kiberprostoru ignoriraju. Napadi na strane državljane u kiberprostorima tema su ovog članka. Istraživanjem se nastojalo odgovoriti na dva istraživačka pitanja: kako su migracije i migranti prikazani na južnoafričkom Twitteru i kako se ključnim riječima (*hashtag*) na Twitteru potencira afrofobija? Provedeno je istraživanje triju ključnih riječi. U članku se proučavaju tvitovi na južnoafričkom Twitteru na temelju teorije žrtvenog jarca. Podaci su prikupljeni internetskim alatom za praćenje ključnih riječi. Provedena je kvalitativna analiza sadržaja triju ključnih riječi (*#PutSouthAfricansFirst*, *#NormaliseHiringSACitizens* i *#SAHomeAffairsCorruption*). U okviru istraživanja uočeno je sveprisutno stajalište da su svi stranci crne boje kože u Južnoj Africi »nezakoniti imigranti« bez obzira na migracijski status. Osim toga, prevladava stereotip da su stranci crne boje kože kriminalci. Prisutno je stajalište da Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova koruptivnim radnjama omogućuje priljev nezakonitih imigranata u Južnu Afriku. U tvitovima su iznesene optužbe na račun vlade zbog nesposobnosti da riješi problem nezakonitih imigranata. Istraživanjem je utvrđeno da su ključne riječi novi alat za afrofobne napade na strance crne boje kože u Južnoj Africi.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: ključna riječ (*hashtag*), ksenofobija, migracije, afrofobija, Južna Afrika