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Twitter and the politics of representation in South Africa and Zimbabwe's xenophobic narratives during the covid-19 pandemic

The article analyses xenophobic narratives on Twitter in South Africa and Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic from March 2020 to July 2021. The study uncovers the politics of representation through discourse analysis of purposively sampled tweets. The article argues that xenophobic views perpetuated on Twitter during the Covid-19 pandemic period had the potential to influence negative attitudes towards Zimbabwean and other immigrants in South Africa. I show that Twitter was used as a platform to disseminate negative representations of Zimbabwean and other immigrants in South Africa. Political leaders on both sides of the border also utilised these representations to maintain their power. On the other hand Twitter played a critical part in mending the rift between Zimbabwean immigrants and some South Africans as it opened up communication between mainstream culture and other cultures. Regardless of this, social media platforms such as Twitter must be monitored and researched to understand the dynamics of representation of others, registering the need to respect and honour the constitutionally recognised freedom of expression.

Keywords: social media, representation, xenophobia, Covid-19, South Africa, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The way social groups are perceived determines how they are treated. If the perception is negative it will also trigger negative attitudes. It is the politics of such representation in various media and its effects and consequences that places all media as crucial players in the xenophobia discourse. Hall (1997), argues that

[i]n part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we also associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualise them, the values we place on them (1997: 3).

This study was carried out when the novel Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) instigated panic and fear all around the world. Worldwide, the virus not only affected people's health but it affected economies. Economies were hard hit by the partial or complete lockdowns that necessitated the closing down of industry, trade and borders worldwide. Zimbabwe and South Africa were not spared from this. The novel coronavirus had a negative impact on the South African economy and pushed unemployment to a 17-year high and in so doing "awakened a recurrent social demon: xenophobia" (Gattichi and Maseko 2020). This recurrent problem haunts the southern African nation and has dented its image internationally. Pinetha (2017: 1) notes that "although post-apartheid South Africa has become a prime migration destination, the country's economic and psycho-social challenges have influenced the way citizens frame narrations about Africans from other parts of the continent."

This perception has resulted in xenophobic attacks such as in 2008 when about 60 people died and more than 50 000 were displaced, one of a wave of attacks over the years. The major underlying reason is that black African foreigners are perceived as threatening the livelihood and survival of South Africans (Tella 2016, Cohen and Naidoo 2020, Mavengano et al. 2022). The Zimbabwean economy is in dire straits, thus the exodus into neighbouring countries, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and mostly South Africa, in search of better living conditions, education and employment opportunities. It is estimated that there are more than 2 million Zimbabweans in South Africa, the largest group of African immigrants (Gattichi and Maseko 2020). Xenophobic attacks have not only been physical but also virtual as highlighted by South African cabinet minister Lindiwe Sisulu, who cites social media as fuelling tensions between South Africans and foreign nationals (News24.com 2019). Zimbabweans and other foreign nationals have become the object of prejudice and hatred on social media (Ahmed 2015, Gattichi and Maseko

2020). Social media has been identified as a catalyst in today's xenophobic crisis (Mpofu and Barnabas 2016, Croucher et al. 2020, Pei and Mehta 2020, Chenzi 2020, Choli and Kuss 2021). The popularity of social media stems from the fact that it allows users to generate and share news (Chibita and Ugangu 2017), and the accessibility of mobile phones has allowed social media to become a major source of news. There are an estimated 1,3 million social media users in Zimbabwe while South Africa has 28 million (<https://datareportal.com> 2022). Social media networks have enabled ordinary citizens to become their own broadcasters and reach large numbers of people at little cost, as opposed to traditional media such as radio, television and newspapers. Despite these emancipatory qualities, social media use has also given room to hatred and prejudice as such views cannot be aired on mainstream media, which is regulated. Social media is vast and it is not feasible in this study to investigate all social media platforms. This study therefore focuses on Twitter, a microblogging site, which allows users 140 concise words to break the news for other users to read, comment on or retweet instantly, enabling faster dissemination of the content. This article will identify and analyse xenophobic Twitter narratives in South Africa and Zimbabwe during the pandemic with an aim to uncover the politics of representation and the possible consequences of such representation.

As highlighted above, Zimbabweans are the largest group of immigrants in South Africa and have become more visible than any other African nation (Mavengano et al. 2022). This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the xenophobic narratives on both public and private Twitter accounts on Covid-19, between Zimbabweans and South Africans from March 2020 to July 2021?
2. What are the politics of representation behind these narratives?

Xenophobia, social media and Covid-19

Xenophobia, racism, discrimination, prejudice and hate have been on the increase during the Covid-19 outbreak worldwide; during a crisis, migrants or foreigners are often blamed; this is not peculiar to the current situation as it was already happening in the 14th century. The Black Death in 14th century Europe saw a rise in xenophobic violence especially against Jews, who were accused of having poisoned the wells (Cohen and Naidoo 2020). The Chinese today have been in one way or the other stigmatised because the first cases of coronavirus were identified in Wuhan, China in 2019. Chinese nationals all over the world suffered discrimination and hate.

Xenophobia is defined as discourses and practices that are discriminatory towards foreign nationals (Fourchard and Segatti 2015: 2). Neocosmos (2008: 592) calls it a political discourse, a set of ideological parameters within which solutions to our pressing problems are being conceived. It has also been further defined as the fear or hatred of foreigners or strangers; it is embodied in discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, and often culminates in violence, abuse and exhibitions of hatred (Mogweku 2005). Not only has this ended in violence and abuse but also in the deaths of foreign nationals and this can escalate to outright conflict and war.

What causes xenophobic attitudes however, is much more complex. A study by Croucher et al. (2020) explores the links between prejudice and hate toward Asian-Americans, in particular the Chinese. The study focuses on social media use during the Covid-19 outbreak. They observe that since the outbreak there were increased incidents of racism, discrimination and violence against 'Asians', particularly in the United States with more than 100 reports of hate crime per day (2020). According to Croucher et al. (2020), from January 2020, "many Asian Americans have reported suffering racial slurs, wrongful workplace termination, being spat on, physical violence, extreme physical distancing, etc. as government officials increasingly stigmatise and blame Asians for the spread of Covid-19" (Croucher et al. 2020: 1). In their findings they note that social media use "reinforces the elements of intergroup threat which could lead to prejudice" (Croucher et al. 2020: 9). They observed that during the Covid-19 pandemic in the US, the more a person engaged with social media the more likely they were to believe that Chinese Americans or any Chinese represented a realistic and symbolic threat.

Pei and Mehta (2020) echo Croucher et al. (2020) by observing that because the disease is suspected to have originated in China, Chinese nationals and Asians in general have been discriminated against and socially excluded, what they term "Sinophobia". Matamoros-Fernandez (2017), cited in Pei and Mehta (2020), refers to the term "platformed racism" to describe racism on social media which is constructed and constantly amplified by users. This "platformed racism" often contributes to the reproduction of off-line social inequalities in online public spheres (Pei and Mehta 2020). In March 2020 many countries went into lockdown, closing national borders and these actions likely reinforced xenophobia within and outside these borders. They also point out that historically, borders were central in the management of contagion, acting both as geopolitical and symbolic barrier between the ill and the healthy (Pei and Mehta 2020). The borders became walls to keep infected outsiders out. Restricted in movement, social media became a place to vent racism, xenophobia and to attack political systems.

Xenophobic and prejudiced remarks were made on social media about people of Chinese origin who were marked as the 'outsiders', the 'others'. These statements, however baseless, were perpetuated by influential political leaders such as Donald Trump, former US president, who referred to the virus as the 'Chinese virus' and 'China virus' on Twitter. Choli and Kuss (2021: 9) note that there was an increase in the number of tweets specifying 'Chinese virus' instead of 'coronavirus disease' shortly after Trump's statement. Thus social media can be implicated in fanning xenophobic and prejudicial statements that can lead to irrational behaviour from the public and can incite fear. To buttress the above, the literature on xenophobia also shows that governments can also incite xenophobia by their statements and policies. Thus policies or legislation by governments to contain the pandemic while trying to protect their citizens can exacerbate oppressive tendencies or long-running xenophobic desires.

Xenophobia in South Africa has also been labelled as Afrophobia (Mpofu and Barnabas 2016), while Mbembe (2015) calls it "black on black racism". Several reasons have been proffered as to why this problem manifested and persists in post-apartheid South Africa. A hegemonic notion of South African exceptionalism is one of the reasons offered to explain xenophobia. Neocosmos (2008: 589) observes that "the country's progressive constitution and its role in leading democracy on the continent has given most citizens a sense of superiority over other black people from the rest of Africa". There is a belief in South African circles sadly carried over from apartheid that South Africa, although on the African continent, has more in common with the USA and Europe due to economic advancement. South Africans do not see themselves as Africans; Africa is the place of the other (Fourchard and Segatti 2015, Tella 2016).

The second reason, scapegoating, is argued to be behind most xenophobia in South Africa. South Africans tend to blame immigrants or foreigners for their misfortune, they are viewed as a threat to development, social services and national stability and are stereotyped as criminals (Harris 2001, Neocosmos 2008, Solomon and Kosaka 2013, Tella 2016). Scapegoating in South Africa is a result of unfulfilled expectations and thus the foreigner is responsible for unemployment, poverty, deprivation and even disease (Harris 2001). This points to "unresolved issues of symbolic and economic resource distribution" (Fourchard and Segatti 2015: 7). Thus, studies on xenophobia have attributed such hatred of foreigners to a number of causes such as fear of loss of social status and identity, threats, perceived or real, to citizens' economic success, a way of assuming the national self and its boundaries in times of national crisis (Harris 2001).

Closely linked to the above is the state and its organs such as the police, who wittingly or unwittingly practise xenophobia, in the way they differentiate foreigners from locals, or the way politicians, government departments, the media and even South African successive presidents address issues around migration, the movement of people and diplomatic relations (Nyamnjoh 2010, Mpofu and Barnabas 2016, Tella 2016). Xenophobic violence thus is legitimised or institutionalised by the state either intentionally or unintentionally (Fourchard and Segatti 2015). The summary to a March 1998 publication by Human Rights Watch points out that “[i]n general, South Africa’s public culture has become increasingly xenophobic, and politicians often make unsubstantiated and inflammatory statements that the ‘deluge’ of migrants is responsible for the current crime wave, rising unemployment and even the spread of disease” (quoted in Neocosmos 2008: 589). As highlighted by Choli and Kuss (2021), the state through its policies and legislation can also exacerbate xenophobic attitudes. At the other extreme, policies on racial harmony can run the danger of presenting a ‘mythical’ world, an image politicians would rather portray than address the xenophobic issues that are simmering beneath the surface (Campbell 2017, Mavengano et al. 2022).

The fourth explanation for xenophobia in South Africa is the bio-cultural hypothesis. It argues that xenophobia is triggered by the biological and cultural differences between South Africans and foreigners (Tella 2016). Indigeneity is used as an argument to allocate resources and opportunities to locals (Mpofu and Barnabas 2016). Foreigners are labelled as ‘*amakwerekwere*’ or ‘*makwerekwere*’ ‘stutterers’ or people with an unintelligible language (Nyamnjoh 2010). This belief is informed by a false assumption of exclusion that “there is an ultimate insider” yet such “frozen representations of cultures and identities” do not reflect real life (Nyamnjoh 2010: 58). It is these ‘*amakwerekwere*’ who are blamed for real and perceived criminal activities. In this way, foreign nationals have come to be viewed as a hated drain on the already struggling system.

Although the above have been cited as the causes of xenophobia, literature is emerging that the media, that is mainstream, alternative and social media, have played a role in entrenching these attitudes not only in South Africa but elsewhere in Africa too. Nyamnjoh (2010) highlights that the media in Africa is partisan and divides citizens into righteous or wicked depending on their cultural or ethnic belonging. He observes that the media in South Africa serve elite interests and how they cover immigration and migration represents the dominant views of the elite. In the South African scenario, Solomon and Kosaka (2013: 12) say that media reports promote “negative bias” and are “extremely unanalytical in nature” and dominated by “unbalanced reporting” and they “echo erroneous public perceptions”. Tella (2016: 151-152) further asserts that “while the linkage

between explicit anti-immigrant comments in the mass media and xenophobia appears to be axiomatic [...] A fundamental effect of the mass media is agenda-setting – the media influences our perceptions of issues in society.”

Chenzi (2020: 1) highlights that the prevalence of fake news disseminated by social media is becoming a key aspect in South Africa’s contemporary xenophobia challenge. He says the influence of fake news has bred socioeconomic and political tensions within and outside South Africa. In his analysis, Chenzi (2020: 6) notes that post-2010 xenophobic attacks have been given more attention largely because of the proliferation of social media technologies. In South Africa, social media as an agent provocateur has greatly contributed to the political populism against immigration and it has become a loudspeaker for conspiracy theorists to disseminate fake news, unlike prior to the advent of social media.

Thus, social media platforms are very critical in understanding the nuanced nature of xenophobia and how it is perceived by both the autochthons and aliens within and outside South Africa. This stand-off between South Africa’s autochthons against the foreign ‘other’ is where social media and fake news come into play. Hence, social media-driven fake news though not necessarily the cause of the current manifestations of xenophobic acts as a catalyst (Chenzi 2020: 8).

The study at hand adds to the literature cited above by further examining Twitter and xenophobic discourse between Zimbabwe and South Africa during the Covid-19 era.

Representation and social media

Stuart Hall’s seminal work on representation opens by stating that, “[i]t is by our use of things and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them meaning. Meaning is produced in a variety of different media, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures” (1997: 3). Campbell (2017) asserts that the term representation as used by Hall describes the complex ways in which different media not only present images, but how they actually engage in re-representing images that have multiple meanings, especially when it comes to meanings about race and ethnicity. Representation has largely been studied in the realm of mainstream media but its key tenets can be applied to the study of social media in contemporary times. Just as media outlets make choices about how to frame issues, users on social media make choices about what to post and how to post and the language to use. Campbell (2017) observes that Hall’s work on representation is still applicable in today’s digital media environment as audience members are re-representing, unaware

of “bias and stereotypical thinking that are deeply rooted in the cognitive and cultural processes in the society they live in” (2017: 15). Thus users on social media sites can create or construct or amplify and forward xenophobic representations.

The following key tenets of the theory outline the main issues in representation: firstly, representations naturalise meanings, these being meanings about race and ethnicity (Burton 2002). They make certain ideas seem natural and hegemonic, permeating the very fabric of society. Anything that threatens this way of life should be dealt with, as Hall points out. Symbolic boundaries keep categories ‘pure’, giving cultures their unique meaning and identity. “What unsettles culture is ‘matter-out-of-place’. The breaking of our unwritten rules and code or marking difference leads us to stigmatise and expel anything which of defined as impure, abnormal” (Hall 1997: 237). As Nyamnjoh says of the South African scenario, “The hierarchy of humanity inherited from apartheid South Africa is replayed, with white South Africans at the helm as superiors, black South Africans in the middle as superior inferiors, and ‘makwerekwere’ as the inferior scum of humanity” (2010: 66).

Secondly, representation creates identities for social groups, for instance the derogatory labelling of immigrants as criminals, ‘*amakwerekwere*’, thugs, demons, and aliens. These xenophobic representations or myths denote inclusion and exclusion (Nyamnjoh 2010). Thirdly, representation emphasises difference or ‘otherness’ between a given group and the views and values of those in mainstream culture, a culture of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. The hegemony of South African exceptionalism inherited from apartheid positions Africans as the other. Otherness or difference and how it is then interpreted is a constant and recurring preoccupation in the representation of people who are racially and ethnically different from the majority population (Hall 1997: 236).

Lastly, representations are bound up with the process of signification, referring to the making of meanings through signs. As pointed out by Hall (1997: 61), representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning. The idea of representation becomes significant if, for example, a given group is represented mainly in one way which works against their interests, and which disempowers them (Burton 2002: 37). Representation is therefore about power and domination, maintaining the status quo. The ‘other’ is oppressed, disempowered and stripped of certain human rights. New media (social media included) has altered the role and nature of audiences and consequently representation. Livingstone (2004: 5) asserts that “in today’s new media environment the user is a prosumer, both a producer and consumer, people are simultaneously interpreters of media-as-text and users of the media-

as-object" (2004: 9). Social media users can thus play into these dynamics of power by reflecting or deflecting these attitudes in the messages they construct or forward on social media. This study examined the discourse in Twitter narratives between sampled South Africans and Zimbabweans public and private Twitter accounts to uncover the nuanced dynamics of the politics of representation in the xenophobia discourse during Covid-19 from March 2020 to July 2021.

Research methodology

The research is mainly qualitative. I conducted manual searches using keywords through Twitter search (twitter.com/ search). Essentially, I used search terms and/or hashtags such as *Zim-South African Relations*, *Covid-19 and xenophobia*, *Covid-19*, *Zim*, and *SA* to identify relevant data. Twitter search can retrieve up to seven days of historical data. I copied and pasted the search results into a database. I selected the previously specified period because March 2020 was the month when the coronavirus was officially declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation and by July 2021 the vaccination drive was well under way. I sought to cover narratives before and after vaccination. After collecting tweets every seven days, I did a qualitative review of those tweets to determine if the search terms were identifying relevant content. As I examined xenophobic narratives on Twitter between South Africa and Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic, I began by identifying a specific news story related to the coronavirus pandemic and xenophobic attacks in South Africa to assess how these issues were being discussed publicly on Twitter. Due to the dynamic nature of user-generated content, I considered slang, abbreviations, and hashtags relating to the topic under study. Although the search enquiry generated a substantial volume of data, I could not analyse all of it. I created a study sample of coronavirus pandemic-related tweets by taking a random sample of 25 posts from every hour of every fourth Sunday of the study period. I sampled the tweets with the most followers to examine how they might have shaped public opinion. I finally analysed a total of 2784 tweets for 15 months, which cannot be all presented here. The data therefore in no way claims to generalise the findings but is rather a glimpse into the representation of xenophobic discourse between South Africa and Zimbabwe on Twitter. I analysed the data thematically and the following three themes emerged: 'covidising the "*makwerekwere*" bodies'; 'politics, leadership and xenophobic narratives'; and 'xenophobia online and the "Other" talks back'. I discuss each in turn below.

Covidising the '*makwerekwere*' bodies

The image of foreigners or outsiders in South Africa is labelled '*makwerekwere*'. This surfaced in the tweets as they were blamed or became scapegoats for the pandemic, criminal activities, and suffering inflicted on South Africans during the pandemic. By implication the '*makwerekwere*' were responsible for bringing the virus; they were the 'infected viral others'. Such tweets echoed the negative representations of Zimbabwean immigrants during this period despite the fact that scientifically, the virus did not discriminate, all were in danger. One tweet reads:

Doubtlessly a Zim Kwere who is in the country without any Covid-19 certificate or documentation. A clear sign of the promise being kept, the promise not to send them back to Zim. Reason and details behind the promise? What about the safety of SA citizens (Tweet accessed 12 January 2021).

Illegal Zimbabwean immigrants in particular were the notorious '*makwerekwere*' who brought in the virus and must therefore be kept out. These Makwerekwere, already notorious for murdering and raping South Africans, were also the infected viral others who threatened the safety of South Africans. The frozen imagery of 'Us vs the rest of Them' was also revealed with Africa being more backward or the place of the 'other'. The sentiments expressed here have no clear logic but indicate anger against foreign nationals especially those of Zimbabwean origin. The issues raised were oscillating from Covid-19 to documentation, indicating that the issue of Covid-19 was just a scapegoat. In terms of statistics, by the end of 2020 South Africa had 1 057 161 confirmed cases and 28 469 deaths (Covid-19 Online Resource and News Portal source: SAcoronavirus.co.za: 31 December 2020) from Covid-19 infections while Zimbabwe had 13 867 confirmed cases and 363 deaths (source: Ministry of HealthZW@ MoHCCZim: 31 December 2020). The virus was on both sides of the border and blaming the spread of the virus on anyone's nationality was unjustified. There are no clear factors from these statistics to apportion the increase of Covid-19 cases in South Africa to Zimbabwean immigrants whether documented or undocumented.

As in other countries worldwide affected by the coronavirus, tight border controls were instituted to minimise movement in line with WHO guidelines. However inasmuch this was an effective measure to minimise the spread of the pandemic, physical and symbolic borders flared up from long drawn out border disputes between South Africa and Zimbabwe. The news about South Africa building a fence along the Beitbridge border between Zimbabwe and South Africa ignited a heated conversation on Twitter. According to *BusinessTech* (11 May 2020) the border fence, costing R37 million, between Zimbabwe and South Africa

was built to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The Public Works minister Patricia De Lille was quoted as saying the fence was “in line with a raft of interventions announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa when he declared the coronavirus a pandemic”. Comments on Twitter in response showed mixed reactions on both sides to the erection of such a fence with some users wondering how this would keep out the virus when there were more cases in South Africa than Zimbabwe (*Tweet accessed 28 March 2020*). One comment explicitly cited the minister of Public works Patricia de Lille:

Karma is a bitch. The witch Delille hurriedly put up a fence along the Zim border to stop Zimbabweans bringing Covid in SA, As we speak there is more Covid-19 deaths in Western Cape than in Zim. It wasn't science based just hate, propaganda and classic buck passing- (*Tweet accessed 14 June 2020*.)

What emerged from the border discourse on Twitter was the need to keep ‘infected’ Zimbabweans out but the irony was that the infections were on both sides. Even Zimbabwean citizens legally in South Africa were viewed as the source of the virus. Thus even as a citizen documented and legally in South Africa one is still an outsider.

The very clever Zimbabwe now tightens the borders from SA as they do not want affected SAns to cross the borders. Zim confirm they don't have a single diagnose of Covid-19. What about these millions of Zim citizens in SA – (*Tweet accessed 15 March 2020*).

The imagery of a ‘deluge’ of, and invasion by, infected Zimbabweans, despite the “volatile Covid-19 environment” fuelling the spread of the disease, meant Zimbabweans were referred to as ‘Covid-19 suicide bombers’ who must be barred at the border by the national army, with one user calling for ‘1000s’ of soldiers at the Beitbridge border post to prevent Zimbabweans from entering South Africa and to keep them where they belong (*Tweet accessed 5 January 2021*). Such extreme incidents of name-calling go beyond the issue of Covid-19, a global pandemic as opposed to a Zimbabwean pandemic, and in no way warranting the dispatch of the military. Giving Zimbabweans such a bad name (suicide bombers) is not value free but speaks volumes of the hatred some Twitter users have against Zimbabweans and how they wish such people to be treated. Narratives of exclusion and inclusion are also highlighted in these messages as shown by the need to ‘keep them out’ at all costs.

While some called for the exclusion of all Zimbabweans others tried to point out that not all Zimbabweans are bad as shown by the following tweet:

We are happy about the ones who do great but we still continue to voice out our disapproval of those who do crime here. How you feel about it is not our business. We will not nurse your feeling like your brothers run amok here and then cry xenophobia when they are caught- (Tweet accessed 2 July 2021).

All issues, especially to do with crime seem blanketed as xenophobia. The tweets also show the dilemma in separating the issues. When does an issue get labelled xenophobic or just as an ordinary crime? Even medical xenophobia was cited, as some tweets intimated that some foreigners were also experiencing medical xenophobia as they were being denied vaccines and food, though whether this was widespread and an indication of xenophobia could not be determined. An example is a tweet posted by the Open Society foundation that called upon President Ramaphosa to denounce xenophobia and “halt the cycle of exclusion through the action of ensuring widespread equitable access to the Covid-19 vaccine” (Tweet accessed 15 Feb 2021).

What also emerged in these blame narratives were voices of reason that the virus could not be blamed on outsiders or ‘*makwerekwere*’. The question is why only immigrants, especially those from Zimbabwe, were blamed for spreading the virus? When 24 Covid-19 cases were recorded in South Africa with all cases being people who were coming from Europe, someone tweeted, “24 Covid 19 cases in SA. Virtually all coming from Europe. And to think people were afraid cases would arrive from the Zimbabwean border” (Tweet accessed 13 March 2020. This was in response to an announcement by the then Minister of Health; Zweli Mkhize, on 13 March 2020). It further emerged as another user observed that when white people brought the coronavirus to SA, the black people kept quiet. However, had it been brought in by Nigerians, Congolese or Zimbabweans, there would have been serious xenophobic attacks in African townships. This gave the impression of superiority to the white race, who, it seems, were above blame. The posts also showed that there seemed to be a common sense perception that Covid-19 would come with African immigrants from surrounding African nations. These tweets called on other users to objectively look at the Covid 19 virus and its origin, and to not play the xenophobia card, as everyone knew the origin of the virus was China and not Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Swaziland or Namibia (Tweet accessed 30 December 2021).

There was also a call to not blame ‘others’ but to at least to look within, as South Africa was the epicentre of Covid 19 (Tweet accessed 6 January 2021). The discourse also brought to the fore the dynamics of race in South Africa. Besides disrupting the xenophobia discourse of portraying black immigrants as aliens or thugs, there seemed to be the questioning of black and white relations, thus echoing inherited colonial representations within South Africa.

Politics, leadership and xenophobic narratives

As highlighted by Finn and Kobayashi (2020), political leaders were likely to take advantage of the pandemic to introduce segregationist policies. To cover up their shortcomings in delivering on their promises, they used foreigners or illegal immigrants as scapegoats. It seems blaming foreigners for everything from joblessness to poor public services is a vote winner (Gattichi and Maseko 2020). Besides Patricia de Lille, then Minister of Finance Tito Mboweni also made headlines in April 2020 for announcing that “South Africa needs to rethink the structure of its economy as it emerges from the coronavirus pandemic, and ensure locals are favoured for jobs and other economic opportunities” (Cohen and Naidoo 2020). While such policies in themselves are set to benefit citizens, politicians can, despite their good intentions, trigger xenophobic attitudes as echoed in the twitter discourse in response to his statement:

SA needs to put its citizens 1st because of job losses how do they do this if there is an influx from #zim because of defending police who rape our mothers and sisters- (Tweet accessed 31 May 2020).

Other ministers and government officials in South Africa have intentionally or unintentionally made xenophobic statements. In a news article by Eliseeva (2020), Faith Mazibuko, an official responsible for Community Safety in Gauteng, was shown allegedly celebrating the rounding up of illegal undocumented migrants. Such actions and statements showed how politicians and government officials fanned xenophobic attitudes during the pandemic. The justification for such policies is that South Africa cannot afford to think of the others because they are criminals and rapists who should simply go back to where they belong, as emerges from the tweet above. Thus Covid 19 “is being exploited by the government as an excuse to express those it has always wanted to repress” (Eliseeva 2020). Representation suits and is reinforced by those in power to ensure continued hegemony (Nyamnjoh 2010, Burton 2002). Thus the negative representation maintains power dynamics in South Africa.

When criticised for such policies, some Twitter voices pointed out there was nothing discriminatory as it was not only South Africa but also some neighbouring countries which were putting in place such legislation. Zimbabwe’s empowerment policies came under the spotlight in this debate as comments were made to the effect that Zimbabwe was mulling over the introduction of such policies and no one called it xenophobia but in SA Zimbabweans played victims:

It’s xenophobia when it suits you? When it is South Africans trying to implement that you call it xenophobia, when it’s you it’s something else, hypocrisy. (Tweet accessed 6 July 2021).

Thus the leadership on both sides of the border in one way or the other contributed or fanned xenophobic attitudes. The Zimbabwean political leadership seemed to be taking no action rather burying their heads in the sand and pretending there was no crisis as shown below:

Chaos is reigning at Beitbridge border post as Zimbabweans, fleeing the country's deep political and economic crisis, scramble to return to South Africa for work, business and other things in a volatile Covid-19 environment. Zim leaders deny there is a crisis; S.A - (Tweet accessed 5 January 2021).

This was reflected in the tweets that constantly called on SA authorities to act on the Zimbabwe crisis by intervening or calling Mnangagwa, the Zimbabwean president, and his government to order.

The news of Zimbabweans crossing into SA illegally, producing fake Covid 19 certificates and murdering SAs in SA has reached the President of Zim. Now the question is this, has Mnangagwa apologised on behalf of Zimbos? Ramaphosa will have apologised #CloseBeitbridgeBorder - (Tweet accessed 5 January 2021).

Desperate to get into South Africa, some Zimbabweans used fake Covid-19 certificates. The above tweets are calling on Mnangagwa to act on the matter and it seems he is also to blame as he seems not to take responsibility by apologising to South Africans. The leadership crisis on the Zimbabwean side is highlighted here, the Zimbabwean government is being called upon to deal with the economic issues that have caused an influx of Zimbabweans into South Africa with some using illegal or fake documents to enter the country.

Xenophobia online and the 'Other' talks back

Hatred can be aired and damage done in the few words that appear in these tweets. Some tweets revealed stereotypes: for instance, Nigerians are associated with drugs, the Congolese with racketeering and diamond smuggling, while Zimbabweans, especially the women, with prostitution (Nyamnjoh 2010). Thus comments such as, "we don't want drug dealers, stay in Nigeria with your drugs, we will stay in SA with our Xenophobia" (Tweet accessed 6 July 2021) or

These jerks are nuts, the likes of Namibia, Kenya and Nigeria put up legislations to hire strictly their own nationals in the wake of Covid-19, they didn't fart a single word of 'xenophobia' but when it comes to SA, they want to have a say in almost everything, that's Bull!!!! - (Tweet accessed 1 September 2020).

Movements with hashtag *#PutSouthAfricanFirst* or *#ProudSAproduct* were also vitriolic attacks on African immigrants. Such strong messages or platformed hatred may contribute to the reproduction of online and off-line xenophobic hatred.

However, what also emerged from this study is that critical debate was generated. The 'Other' talked back, questioning South African hegemony of exceptionalism. The tweets highlighted that all African countries were facing the same challenges, corruption, inflation, and Covid 19, among other ills. A post revealed how Zimbabweans viewed South Africans, "we are the same after all" in a tweet that was commenting on the misuse of Covid-19 funds in South Africa after an audit released in 2020 (Tweet accessed 3 September 2020). These narratives were also more of a plea to South Africans to stop isolating or viewing themselves as superior or immune and to assist in solving the issues that bedevilled southern Africa especially neighbouring Zimbabwe, as this would go a long way in bringing to an end the problem of illegal immigrants (Tweet 10 May 2020). Turning a blind eye or practising quiet diplomacy or using Zimbabweans as a scapegoat were not the answer. If South Africa helped Zimbabwe then Zimbabweans would not need to invade South Africa to make a living.

Thus on that note, Twitter has the potential to 'bring people together' and bridge the critical fault lines in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. The disempowered or disadvantaged groups found a voice on social media to protest against unfair treatment as the following post showed:

Mashaba's one until he was called out for it. You also have a political party standing strongly against xenophobia in SA, they won't have that stance if it wasn't a problem. Illegal immigration does not include calling people garimbos or kwerekwere or looting and burning (Tweet accessed 4 July 2021).

Calling out or protesting against social ills has been one of social media's hallmarks. Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms have been known to give the subaltern a voice. It might not lead to revolutionary changes such as the Arab spring but they can be platforms to begin conversations that can bring peace and harmony to the region. The sample used is small and is probably not reflective of all social media but as highlighted by Chenzi (2020: 2), social media platforms manifest as weapons of choice utilised in forging online communities to trumpet concerns of both autochthons and aliens. To echo Nyamnjoh (2010) such platforms offer "opportunities for new solidarities to challenge undemocratic forces, ideologies and practices that stand in the way of social progress" (2010: 84).

Conclusion and recommendations

Xenophobic views from Twitter users during the Covid-19 pandemic were likely to inflame negative attitudes towards immigrants in South Africa. Twitter users can perpetuate negative representations of Zimbabwean immigrants and also immigrants from other African nations. By 'covidising' them, social media reflects online prejudices against foreigners. Political leaders and government officials in South Africa and Zimbabwe can fuel these representations and continue to use these narratives as a scapegoat for undelivered promises; thus it has become a strategy to maintain power. Like two sides of the same coin, social media platforms such as Twitter also offer hope as they challenge these xenophobic representations between not only Zimbabwe and South Africa but other African countries. Social media can also play a part in redefining identities and belonging in Africa (Nyamnjoh 2010). However, solutions need to be found to curb xenophobia in online and offline spaces without taking away constitutionally recognised rights. Further research is required to uncover how these online attitudes actually contribute to the brutal xenophobic attacks in South Africa.

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