An overview of conversations about foreign nationals on South African social media

From 01 January to 24 May 2022
Issue date: June 2022

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the landscape of conversations about foreign nationals in South Africa in the digital/social media space in the first half of 2022. The conversation about foreign nationals in SA is significant because of the history of xenophobic violence in the country. This report forms part of a series of reports on the topic.

METHODOLOGY

To produce this report, the Centre for Analytics and Behaviour Change made use of social media listening tools to obtain a sample of the social media content that relates to foreign nationals in South Africa in the first five months of 2022. In order to do so, a keyword list was generated and a query created. The query returned a sample rate of 100% with a total mention volume of 3.01 million for the period 01 January 2022 to 24 May 2022.

FINDINGS

Based on the keywords selected, the total volume of **mentions** is up by 130% compared to the previous period, during which there were 1.31 million mentions indicating that unfortunately the extent of xenophobic content related to South Africa on social media is growing. However, the number of unique authors has not grown at a similar pace, indicating that existing authors are tweeting more about the topic.
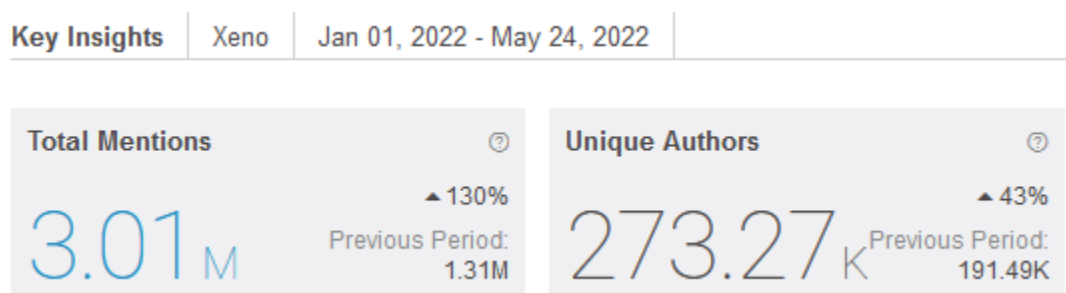

Figure 1: mentions and unique authors: 01 January 2022 - 24 May 2022

Figure 2 below shows the top 10 hashtags dominating the conversation about foreign nationals in South Africa in the first five months of 2022. The relative size of the word indicates the usage volume.

Figure 2: Top 10 hashtags

In 2022, Operation Dudula has come to dominate the conversation, but is posted together with various 'put South Africans first' hashtag formulations, including the misspelt "putsouthaficansfirst" which is second in terms of mention volume. It appears that Operation Dudula has evolved as the more prominent brand, whereas Put South Africans First was the initial formulation. It remains as a secondary but less prominent hashtag.

The figure below shows the **total mention volume over time** and fluctuations in the conversation:

Figure 3: mention volume over time

From January to May 2022, there were 3 peaks that were detected in the conversation. The highest peak in mention volume (A) occurred between 23 and 29 March 2022, when the conversation volume spiked significantly to 70,302 mentions on 25 March - a spike in conversation that is 291% higher than previous volumes for these topics. The top five hashtags in this spike in mention volume were (1) #operationdudula (2) #nhlanhla_lux, (3) #nhlanhlalux,

(4) #voetsekeff and (5) #operationfiela. This was followed by a peak from 07 to 09 April 2022 (B) after the death of Elvis Nyathi, a Zimbabwean man who was killed on 6 April 2022 in a senseless act of afrophobic mob justice outside the Diepsloot police station. The hashtags that were most prominent at this time were (1) #operationdudula, (2) #diepsloot, (3) #voetsekmedia, (4) #nhlanhlalux and (5) #sabcnews. In the days thereafter, CABC detected an uptick in social media activity particularly focused on a claim that seven South Africans had been killed around the same time. It was alleged that this was not receiving comparable coverage in the media. The tweet below is a tweet of this type.
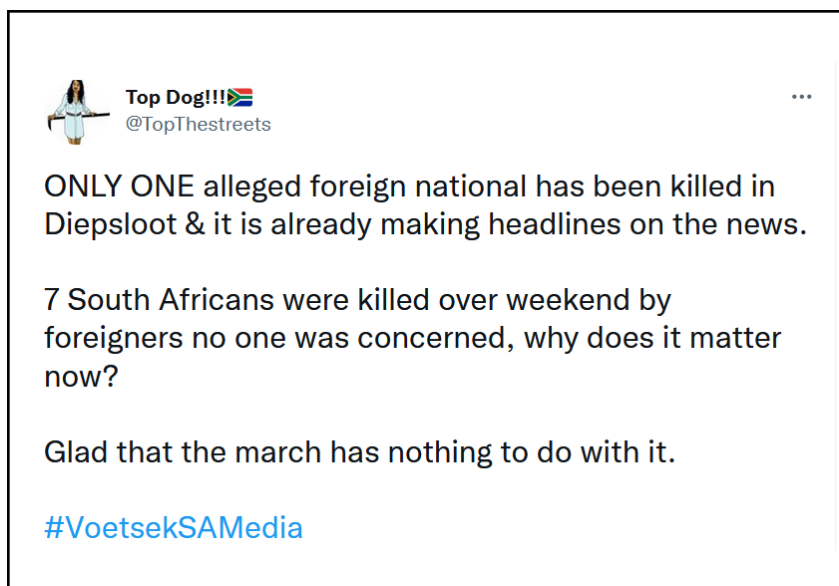

Figure 4: example tweet

Tweets making use of the hashtag #voetseksamedia contained decidedly negative sentiment including attacks on mainstream journalists about the coverage in the media. CABC prepared a report[1] on 'The Diepsloot 7' on the conversation that took place on Twitter between 5 and 10 April 2022, which provides greater insight into the narrative during this period.

The third highest peak in mention volume (C) was on 19 April. On this day, mention volume was 145% higher than usual. The top five hashtags driving the third peak were (1) #operationdudula, (2) #voetsekeff, (3) #putsouthaficansfirst (4) #voetsekanc and (5) #nhlanhlalux. There is notable overlap in the hashtags that were used in these three spikes.

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[1] Centre for Analytics and Behaviour Change. April 2022. The Diepsloot 7. Available at: https://cabc.org.za/2022/04/14/the-diepsloot-7-report/

What is also noteworthy is that there are distinct troughs in the mention volume, as evident in figure 3 above. Ten out of fourteen troughs in the mention volume coincide with weekends (see figure 5 below). This may suggest that this is a paid campaign where the key accounts work on formulating content during work days and take a break on the weekend. However, it must be acknowledged there may be alternative explanations for this behaviour as well and evidence of coordination is circumstantial at this stage.

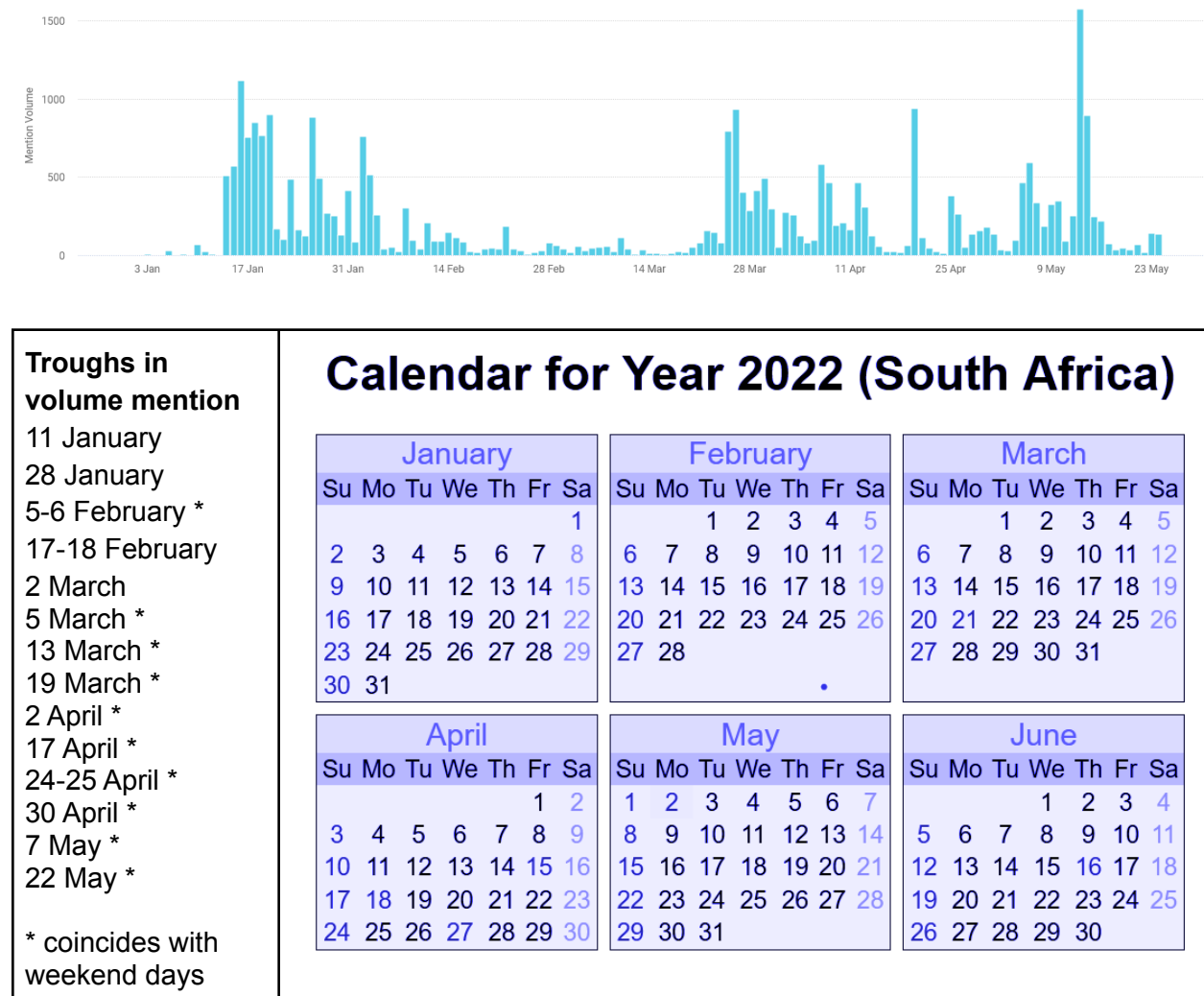| Troughs in volume mention	Calendar for Year 2022 (South Africa)		
11 January	**January**	**February**	**March**
28 January	Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa	Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa	Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa
5-6 February *	1	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
17-18 February	2 3 4 5 6 7 8	6 7 8 9 10 11 12	6 7 8 9 10 11 12
2 March	9 10 11 12 13 14 15	13 14 15 16 17 18 19	13 14 15 16 17 18 19
5 March *	16 17 18 19 20 21 22	20 21 22 23 24 25 26	20 21 22 23 24 25 26
13 March *	23 24 25 26 27 28 29	27 28	27 28 29 30 31
19 March *	30 31		
2 April *	**April**	**May**	**June**
17 April *	Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa	Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa	Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa
24-25 April *	1 2	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4
30 April *	3 4 5 6 7 8 9	8 9 10 11 12 13 14	5 6 7 8 9 10 11
7 May *	10 11 12 13 14 15 16	15 16 17 18 19 20 21	12 13 14 15 16 17 18
22 May *	17 18 19 20 21 22 23	22 23 24 25 26 27 28	19 20 21 22 23 24 25
* coincides with weekend days	24 25 26 27 28 29 30	29 30 31	26 27 28 29 30

Figure 5: Mention volume over time, with troughs in volume mention compared to a calendar. It should be noted that the majority of troughs coincide with weekends (as noted by an asterisk*)

The figure below shows the twitter accounts with the greatest volume of tweets. @Masotobe39's twitter bio says that she is a former correctional officer. The account has a ToonArt generated profile picture and was created in March 2017. The handle @KraalBulawayo was created in October 2021 and has over 1400 followers. @mbuso_siera joined on June 2021 and has over 900 followers. The account with the fourth highest tweet volume is also a recently created account - it was created in February 2022. @21_Be_Positive is the oldest account among the top volume accounts having been created in August 2010. The newest account, @Kea91492014 joined in February 2022 and has the Operation Dudula logo as the account's profile picture. That accounts that are generating the greatest volume of tweets have been created relatively recently stands out.
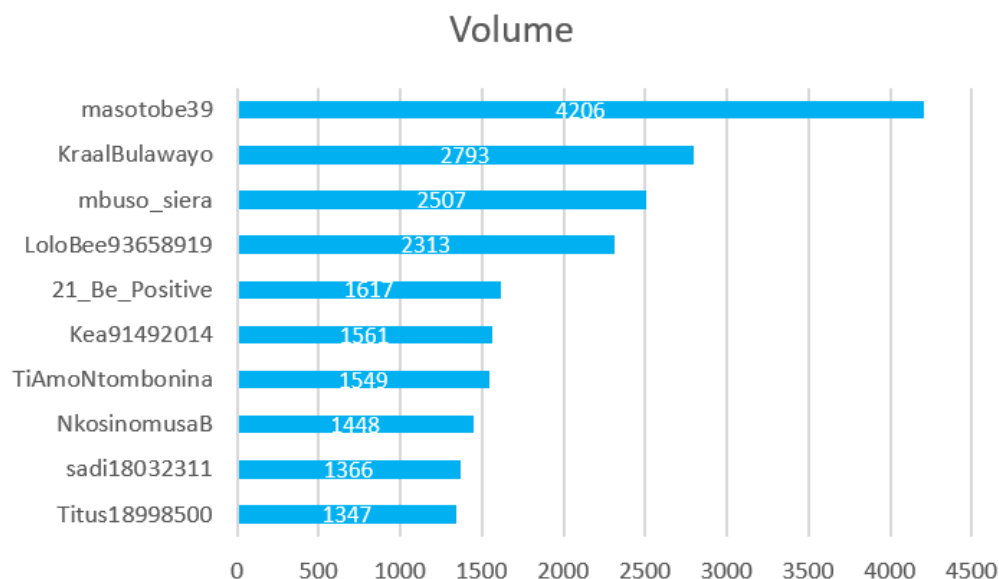

Figure 6: Top tweeters

Most mentioned tweeters

Gayton McKenzie, president of the Patriotic Alliance political party is among the most mentioned tweeters (see figure 8 below). The second most mentioned handle is @onsbaizanie. This account appears to be a Patriotic Alliance account as it contains a votepa link and the account's background picture contains the PA logo with the strapline "Making South Africa Great. For All South Africans". @nhlanhla_lux_ account is the third most mentioned account. This is followed by the @operationdudula account.

The fifth most mentioned account is the @effsouthafrica account. The EFF has been vocal in condemning xenophobic acts. Because of their public stance toward Xenophobia, negative content often identified bythe hashtag #voetsekEFF has been directed towards the EFF. The EFF came out in support of Victor Ramerafe, whose home it was alleged was ransacked by Operation Dudula members amid claims that drugs were being sold from there. Operation Dudula leader, Nhlanhla 'Lux' Mohlauli was arrested after the incident at Ramerafe's home. Lux was granted bail and the matter is due back in court in June 2022.

Most Mentioned Tweeters	TWEETS ▼	RETWEETS	ALL TWEETS	IMPRESSIONS
👤 @gaytonmck	1986	1235	3221	7342516
👤 @onsbaizanie	1911	4613	6524	18361771
👤 @nhlanhla_lux_	1254	4981	6235	16587354
👤 @operationdudula	1014	667	1681	3853795
👤 @effsouthafrica	778	1892	2670	15242301
👤 @sapoliceservice	610	4515	5125	20646049
👤 @enca	590	4305	4895	23476871
👤 @cyrilramaphosa	487	1701	2188	5742079
👤 @myanc	438	1532	1970	6546432
👤 @julius_s_malema	414	1254	1668	5146813

Figure 7: Most mentioned tweeters

When @sapoliceservice is mentioned in tweets, key trends in the content entail highlighting the poor performance of the SA Police Service and edging SAPS to take action while insisting that illegal foreign nationals are criminals. For example, on 21 April 2022, the tweet content below was retweeted by a range of accounts.

RT @Ruraltarain_2 Why is @SAPoliceService not disclosing their nationality? We want their Nationality known, the same they cry "**Xenophobia**" & claim to be "Hard **working**"! SA is made the capital city of unruly Hardcore Criminals frm All over the world including African countrie!#**PutSouthAficansFirst**

Figure 8: Retweet in which SAPS is mentioned

SUBTHEMES IN THE CONVERSATION

A thematic segmentation of the conversation shows that Operation Dudula and foreign nationals come up prominently. What has emerged in the conversation is that whereas Put South Africa First was once the key hashtag, Operation Dudula has come more into focus, but PutSouthAfricansFirst remains a theme that is cross-posted in the hashtag configurations. For example, a tweet will contain all of the following hashtags: #putsouthaficansfirst, #operationdudula, #nhlanhla_lux.

Figure 9: Subthemes in the conversation

In the first half of 2022 a particular focus on directing xenophobic/afrophobic sentiment towards Zimbabweans has emerged. Government has announced that it will not renew the Zimbabwean Exemption Permit (ZEP). Existing ZEPs will expire on 31 December 2022 and Zimbabweans who do not qualify for another visa in South Africa will need to return home or face being deported. It appears that Afrophobic sentiment has contributed to this decision, however the considerations leading to this decision would need to be examined to determine if pressure groups such as Operation Dudula did indeed influence the outcome. How social media conversations may have played a role in lobbying for a particular outcome is that social pressure on politicians to adopt certain stances is applied through approving or disapproving

strongly of a politician who has adopted a particular position. This tactic is also made use of in physical engagements. The tweet in figure 10 below indicates this kind of dynamic.
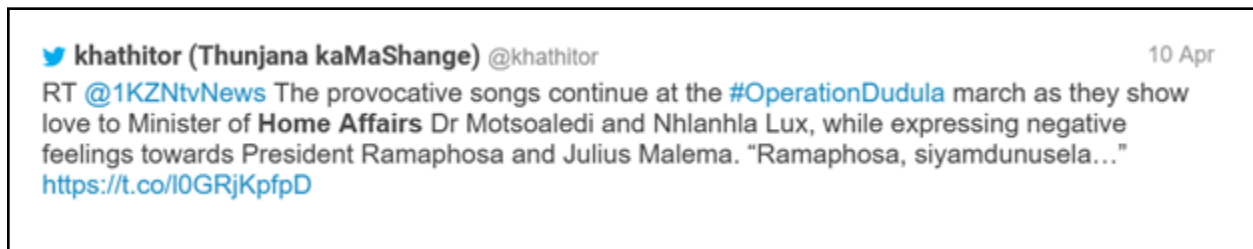

Figure 10: Tweet directing negative and positive sentiment to public figures

Through examining sample tweets a range of subtheme categories were identified and analysed. These are: crime, gender-based violence, jobs, legislation and voetsek as shown in figure 11 below.
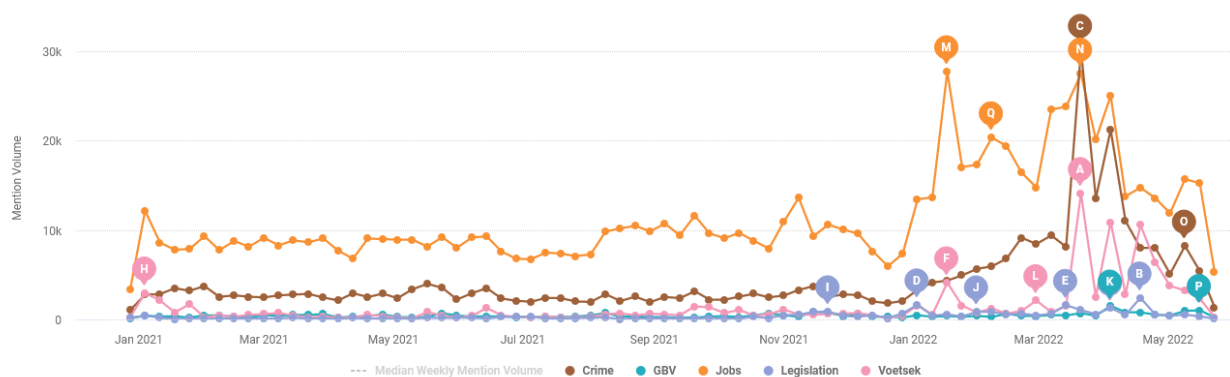

Figure 11: Subtheme categories in the conversation

The category that is to do with jobs entails the greatest proportion of the mention volume in relation to the analysed categories. It is followed by crime and hashtags that contain the word "voetsek" in their formulation. The legislation category has to do with ZEPs and labour legislation. From January 2022, jobs and crime began to spike upwards in mention volume. The kind of content that this entails is 'foreign nationals are committing crimes, taking jobs that South Africans should be getting, and that foreign nationals are abusing women'. The populist tactic involves scapegoating foreign nationals for a range of social ills. A follow-on formulation is to then direct negative sentiment towards a particular societal grouping, for example to a political party or to the media.
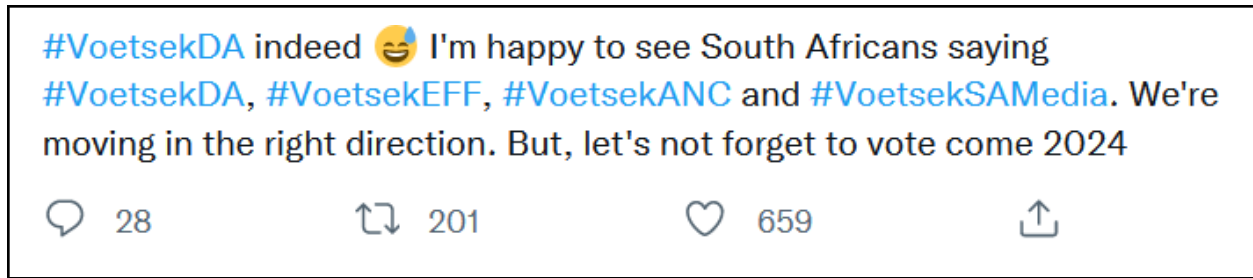
#VoetsekDA indeed 😅 I'm happy to see South Africans saying #VoetsekDA, #VoetsekEFF, #VoetsekANC and #VoetsekSAMedia. We're moving in the right direction. But, let's not forget to vote come 2024

💬 28   ↨ 201   ♡ 659   ↑

Figure 12: Tweet containing voetsek formulations

While the 2024 elections are two years away, which is a long time in civil society discourse, the conversation is frequently about 2024 and voting. It appears calculated and is perhaps done to score voters off of a variety of political parties, making use of populist rhetoric that is xenophobic to create a sense of a common enemy who is responsible for the challenges. This is similar to the election tactics used in the US.

I Stand With South Africa 🇿🇦🇿🇦
@Kea91492014

You know what's the scariest part? @MYANC might actually win in 2024 not because people will vote for them but because people will opt not to vote 😭😭 #PutSouthAficansFirst #OperationDudula #OperationFiela #dudula #OnsBaizaNie

6:11 AM · May 19, 2022 · Twitter Web App

Figure 13: Tweet containing voetsek formulations

DISCUSSION

It appears that social media content paired with real world actions associated with Operation Dudula are aimed at influencing the policy decision-making and implementation landscape very

firmly to particular outcomes. This is particularly with respect to labour policy and ZEPs. The content directs negative sentiment towards the media and specific political parties.

There are indications that this may be a paid influencer operation, but that would require further research to confirm.

Key figures in Operation Dudula have insisted that it is only 'illegal foreign nationals' that Dudula is concerned with, whereas there are indications that Operation Dudula is targeting all foreign nationals. A variety of tweets in the conversation entail what appears to be incitement to violence.

The Breakout Scale is a comparative model created by Nimmo (Brookings Institute, 2020) to categorise Influence Operations[2]. The scale as shown below entails a categorization that indicates the impact of disinformation and influence operations, where category one is the mildest and category six the most severe impact.
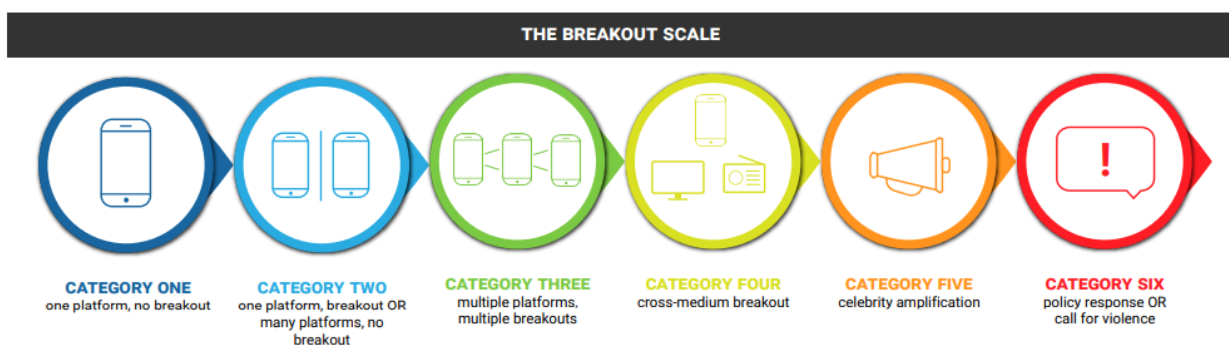

Figure 14: The breakout scale: measuring the impact of influence operations

In terms of Nimmo's breakout scale, Operation Dudula can be considered a level 6 breakout as there are both policy response implications and violence.

A future deep dive can make use of network analysis to determine how follow trains are being used. Additionally, further research could look at what extent the conversation has influenced the actions of officials and policy makers.

CONCLUSION

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[2] Nimmo, B. 2020. The Breakout Scale: Measuring the impact of influence operations. Washington: Brookings Institute

This landscape report has provided an overview of the landscape of conversations about foreign nationals in South Africa in the first five months of 2022. It provided an overview of the volume of the conversation, key accounts and themes. Operation Dudula can be considered a category 6 influence operation. The key metrics indicate that Operation Dudula's influence is growing. This should be cause for concern for both South Africans and foreign nationals - whether legal or illegal - alike, as breakouts of xenophobic violence are sure to impact South Africa's standing and economic relations on the continent, as well as it's global reputation as a bastion of human rights.

It is recommended that going forward a fortnightly report is produced. Themes in the conversation that merit ongoing tracking in the fortnightly reporting include content about businesses employing foreign nationals particularly in the logistics/trucking sector and the evolution of how negative sentiment is directed towards specific groups such as specific political parties and media houses. It is also recommended that two standalone research reports are produced - one which entails network analysis and another which examines whether the conversation has influenced the policy sphere particularly with regards to labour regulations where there is a push for jobs to be reserved for South Africans and policy decisions related to ZEPs.