



Project Name: Xenophobia

Social Media Analytics Report 4

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1. Findings Summary

- The following suite of organisational hashtags; #PutSouthAfricaFirst, #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #PutSouthAfricansFirst (spelt with no letter “R” in Africans) and #OperationDudula are used as vehicles to drive engagement with xenophobic posts and identify common ties between authors sharing the same anti-immigrant interests for the purposes of amplification. (see Sections [4.1](#), [4.2](#), [4.3](#), [4.4](#))
- Smaller hashtags such as, #WeWantOurCountryBack, #PatrioticSpace and #Xenophobia were predominantly driven by individual actors and held their own unique forms of content creation and dissemination. #Xenophobia was an outlier within this group, as organisations debunking mis- and disinformation also utilised the hashtag to disprove myths about immigrants in South Africa. (see Sections [4.5](#), [4.6](#), [4.7](#))
- Directed hashtags such as, #VoetsekANC, #VoetsekEFF and #GoldMafia were found and supported with external evidence as primarily organic hashtags. While proponents of the anti-immigrant rhetoric blame the ANC and EFF for their ‘lax’ approach and ‘pan-Africanist’ stance, instances of hashjacking were also detected within this space. (see Sections [4.8](#), [4.9](#), [4.10](#))
- Our analysis of the top authors in the conversation also revealed that some accounts engage with more than one hashtag in the conversation. We have also detected instances where some authors play an amplification role with respect to one hashtag and a content generation role in another. (see Section [5](#))
- The conversation about immigrants in South Africa remains heavily infused with mis- and disinformation, as well as inaccuracies. These are mostly centred around alleged crimes believed to be committed by immigrants, some including “statistics” to create the illusion of legitimacy in their posts. (see Section [4.3](#))

2. Introduction

Xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment is currently being heavily mobilised in South Africa for political gain. New political formations such as ActionSA, the Patriotic Alliance (PA) and Put South Africans First (PSAF), liberally espouse rhetoric that scapegoats immigrants and refugees - through mis- and disinformation and distortion of facts and narratives - to garner electoral support. Using hashtags such as #VoetsekANC and #VoetsekEFF, proponents of the anti-immigrant narrative also continue to criticise the ANC and EFF, the former for a perceived lax approach toward immigration in South Africa and the latter for their pan-Africanist stance to the matter. Given South Africa’s recurring incidences of both widespread and localised xenophobic and anti-immigrant public violence, the rhetoric that has been deployed is of grave concern.

It exploits pre-existing social fractures in South African society, particularly around access to resources and opportunities such as housing, social grants and employment, respectively. These efforts mirror the rise of xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric in other parts of the world, particularly that which unfolded during the Brexit campaign in the UK and in the US elections, which led, in part, to Donald Trump's ascendance to the presidency¹. Subsequently, anti-immigrant political rhetoric has also been very effectively deployed across many European countries, underpinning the ascendancy of anti-democratic authoritarian right-wing governments². Examples also exist in the Global South where minority communities are used as scapegoats to distract from more pressing socio-political and economic concerns, and deflect the electorate's attention away from those in power who are - in reality - responsible for their predicament(s)³. Social media played a key role in seeding and amplifying xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment in these cases and the same is true of South Africa today. The effectiveness of these efforts was evidenced by the gains that smaller parties - who espoused anti-immigrant rhetoric - made during the 2021 local government elections in South Africa⁴. This serves as an indicator of the extent to which South Africans are currently willing to accept political posturing that is populist in nature but is disguised as promoting nationalistic pride and sentiment. Understanding how social media is being used to artificially amplify and spread xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment is hence critical for understanding and anticipating how this rhetoric is being mobilised for real-world political gain in the national political spectrum.

Accordingly, this report focuses on xenophobia and anti-immigrant conversations on social media in South Africa (SA). It covers the period from 01 January to 30 June 2023. It is the fourth of a series funded by the European Union (EU) to support the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) Xenophobia programme. The report is designed to provide bimonthly analysis and reporting on problematic and socially divisive narratives on South African social media about xenophobic content. The CABC has been monitoring this conversation since May of 2020 and released a [Lay of the Land](#) report in June 2022, which described the key narratives driving the xenophobia conversation in South Africa up until that point. This report is the fourth of a series of reports that falls under the title of *Promoting Human Rights, Democracy and an Equitable Society*; where the main objectives are to reduce discrimination and hate speech against migrants and minorities by countering disinformation and social division.

[Xenophobia Social Media Analytics: Report 1](#) released in March 2023 established a foundational understanding of the targeted xenophobic narratives by looking at the data through the lens of known

¹ [Racism and xenophobia experienced by Polish migrants in the UK before and after Brexit vote \(Rzepnikowska, 2019\)](#) ; [Keep America Christian \(and White\): Christian Nationalism, Fear of Ethnoracial Outsiders, and Intention to Vote for Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election \(Baker et al., 2020\)](#)

² Applebaum, A. (2020). *Twilight of democracy: The seductive lure of authoritarianism*. Anchor.

³ Populism and inequality: Does reality match the populist rhetoric? (Strobl et al, 2022)

⁴<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-11-03-local-parties-announce-themselves-as-unambiguous-election-shepherds-in-a-period-of-uncertainty/>

xenophobic behavioural drivers. [Xenophobia Social Media Analytics: Report 2](#) released in May 2023 focused on how the online anti-immigrants conversation was being mobilised for political gain. At the time, the CABC found that parties such as the EFF continued to be criticised for their pan-Africanist views, which some believed could cost them voter support in the coming elections. Proponents of the anti-immigrant narrative also believed that corrupt officials were either aiding or turning a blind eye to immigrants entering the country. [Xenophobia Social Media Analytics: Report 3](#) released in July 2023 analysed and categorised key individuals and organisations in the online conversation about immigrants in South Africa.

Report 4 delves into the key hashtags and content themes which drive the conversation in order to investigate the potential for co-ordinated and inorganic campaigns based on the use of certain hashtags within the space. The CABC has previously identified coordinated narrative manipulation by xenophobic actors and has utilised open source techniques to determine the veracity of amplified inorganic political sentiment against the government⁵.

3. Research Methodology

To obtain the information presented in this report (and subsequent reports), social media listening tools were used. Keywords were gathered in a qualitative phase of the process, during which the researchers and dialogue facilitators drew on their existing knowledge, conducted desktop research, a literature review and a review of social media. This informed the keywords used to isolate the conversation about immigrants in South Africa. The keywords were then enriched by manually checking each keyword identified during the research phase. We entered this list of words into a social media analytics tool to create a query into the conversation about xenophobia on public social media in South Africa. The social media listening tool that is used for this research collects data and supports analytics from multiple sources, however, Twitter is by far the largest source. Twitter hence has outsized influence when compared to other social media platforms. Most South African politicians have Twitter accounts and all media houses make extensive use of the platform. Consequently, conversations about key topics of public concern can move rapidly between traditional media and social media platforms such as Twitter. Other sources include websites such as blogs, digital media publications and forums.

It is estimated that SA has between 3.65 and 9 million active Twitter users according to *Data Reportal's Digital 2023: South Africa* report⁶ and *World Wide Worx's Social Media Landscape 2022*⁷ report. According to the

⁵

https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-18-ulerato_pillay-how-the-xenophobic-network-around-putsouthafricafirst-was-born-and-then-metastased/ ; [#PhalaPhalaFarmGate: Manufacturing Dissent](#)

⁶ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-south-africa>

⁷ <https://website.ornico.co.za/2022/06/29/social-media-landscape-2022/>

former report, there are 43 million internet users in SA, resulting in an internet penetration of 72% of the entire population and almost 26 million social media users in SA, equating to 43% of the entire population. The lower estimate of 3.65 million twitter users represents approximately 6% of the entire population. Twitter activity often serves as an early warning of what conversations and narratives may penetrate the broader societal ecosystem and become normative⁸. This, however, does not exclude the relevance or importance of other social media platforms (like Facebook or WhatsApp) within the online conversation about immigrants in South Africa. WhatsApp, for example, has historically been used to incite, mobilise and organise xenophobic violence in SA⁹.

This report consists primarily of a narrative analysis of various hashtags and phrases (hereafter referred to as “search terms” or “terms”) found within the initial xenophobia query explained above. Isolating conversations from Jan 1 - June 30, 2023, a word cloud of the top 50 most commonly used hashtags and phrases (search terms) was created. These search terms were exported to an Excel document and qualitative checks for relevance were conducted by a team of researchers and media professionals. Twenty search terms were deemed relevant, due to their use alongside xenophobic content following these checks. Once the terms had been assessed, the relevant terms were isolated and used to create a new query which restricted data gathering to specific instances of these terms. Thereafter, Nimmo’s Coefficient of Traffic Manipulation (CTM) was calculated for each, alongside three control search terms, namely “Tuesday”, “Friday” and “South Africans” (see *Appendix A*)¹⁰.

Nimmo’s Coefficient indicates the potential for related conversation to be artificially manipulated, where a higher coefficient, relative to control coefficients, indicates a greater potential for manipulation. The mean and median coefficients were calculated and returned 29.83 and 29.09 respectively, all control terms returned a coefficient less than 21. Search terms that held a coefficient of 30 or more were selected for analysis in this report, resulting in ten distinct terms. Each of these search terms were assessed individually for evidence of manipulation and, for the purposes of thematic analysis, the results of these investigations are explored in graph 1 below.

Thereafter, our analysis shifts toward commonalities in the data. A network map was created and interpreted to understand which authors appear multiple times within the search terms identified as potentially artificially manipulated. Notably, as a result of the constraints imposed on the Twitter API, we presently find ourselves restricted to a monthly allocation of 50,000 tweets at the application level or 3,000 tweets at the user level¹¹. Furthermore, under the Basic tier, access to read capabilities is capped at 10,000 tweets. Regrettably, these

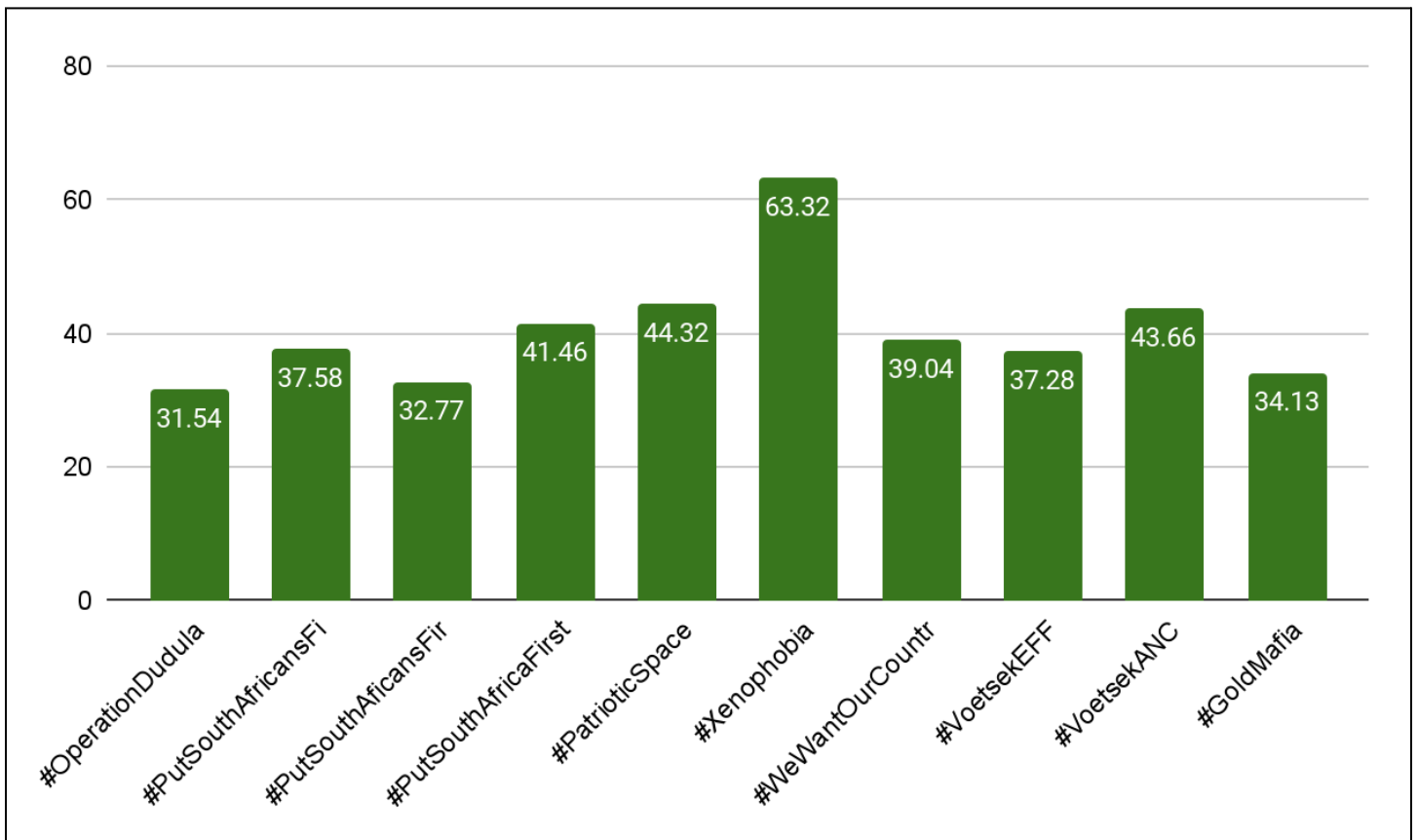
⁸ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Nimmo_influence_operations_PDF.pdf

⁹ [Mail & Guardian: Security Cluster Probing Circulation of Xenophobic Messages \(2015\)](#)

¹⁰ [Nimmo. 2019](#)

¹¹ <https://www.theverge.com/2023/5/31/23739084/twitter-elon-musk-api-policy-chilling-academic-research>

limitations have implications for our ongoing stranded network analysis, which is based on connections between users. The new read limit provided a limitation for the scope of our analysis, requiring us to match authors and hashtags manually. Our procedure involved exporting the top 50 authors for each search term and cross-referencing the authors which appeared in more than one search term (see Appendix B). Thereafter, the selected authors were compared to the top 50 authors in the overall conversation to identify high-volume accounts who engaged across the anti-immigrant conversation.



Graph 1: Coefficient of traffic manipulation for the 10 hashtags

According to graph 1 above, #Xenophobia has the highest CTM. It was followed by #PatrioticSpace, #VoetsekANC and #PutSouthAfricaFirst. A detailed analysis of each of these hashtags will be given later in this report.

4. Overview

The overall conversation about the top 10 hashtags garnered 263 330 mentions from 36 387 authors between 1 January and 30 June 2023. Approximately 82% of all mentions are retweets.

#VoetsekANC was the most popular hashtag during the research period, accounting for 26% of all mentions (see Figure 1). It was followed by #OperationDudula and the misspelt variations of the PSAF line of hashtags, i.e. #PutSouthAfricansFirst.

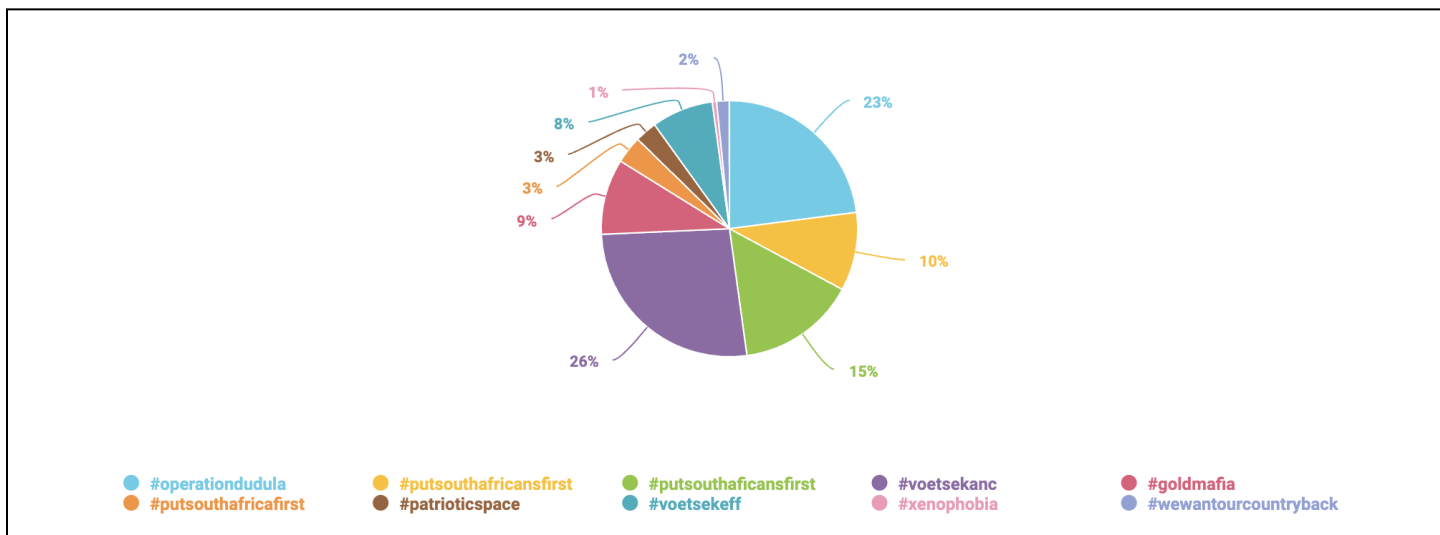


Figure 1: Proportional breakdown of collated conversation

An analysis of the top 10 most retweeted content in our dataset reveals that three of the most retweeted posts were not related to the conversation about immigrants in South Africa.

The first post, which was the most retweeted, was shared by [Al Jazeera Investigations](#) - as part of its Gold Mafia series of investigations into money laundering and corruption in Zimbabwe with ties to SA. #GoldMafia was among the top hashtags within our initial xenophobia query, due to the inclusion of Zimbabwe-related keywords in the query.

The second post, which was the tenth most retweeted, came from the [@ali_naka](#) account. The account shared an image of the Diamond Jubilee State Coach used at King Charles’s coronation earlier this year, with the caption: “Africa’s stolen wealth on display #Goldmafia #Coronation”.

The third post was shared by the [@ZaBornfree](#) account - and was the sixth most retweeted in the conversation. It read: I was born Intelligent and education ruined me. In Mbuyiseni Ndlozi 's case - He was born Intelligent and met Julius Malema. #VoetsekEFF Nhlanhla lux Soweto Hillbrow #NationalShutdown”

The remaining seven of the most retweeted posts shared anti-immigrant messaging, predominantly about alleged crimes committed by immigrants in SA. Five of these were shared by the [@PSAFLive](#) account (see Figure 2 below).

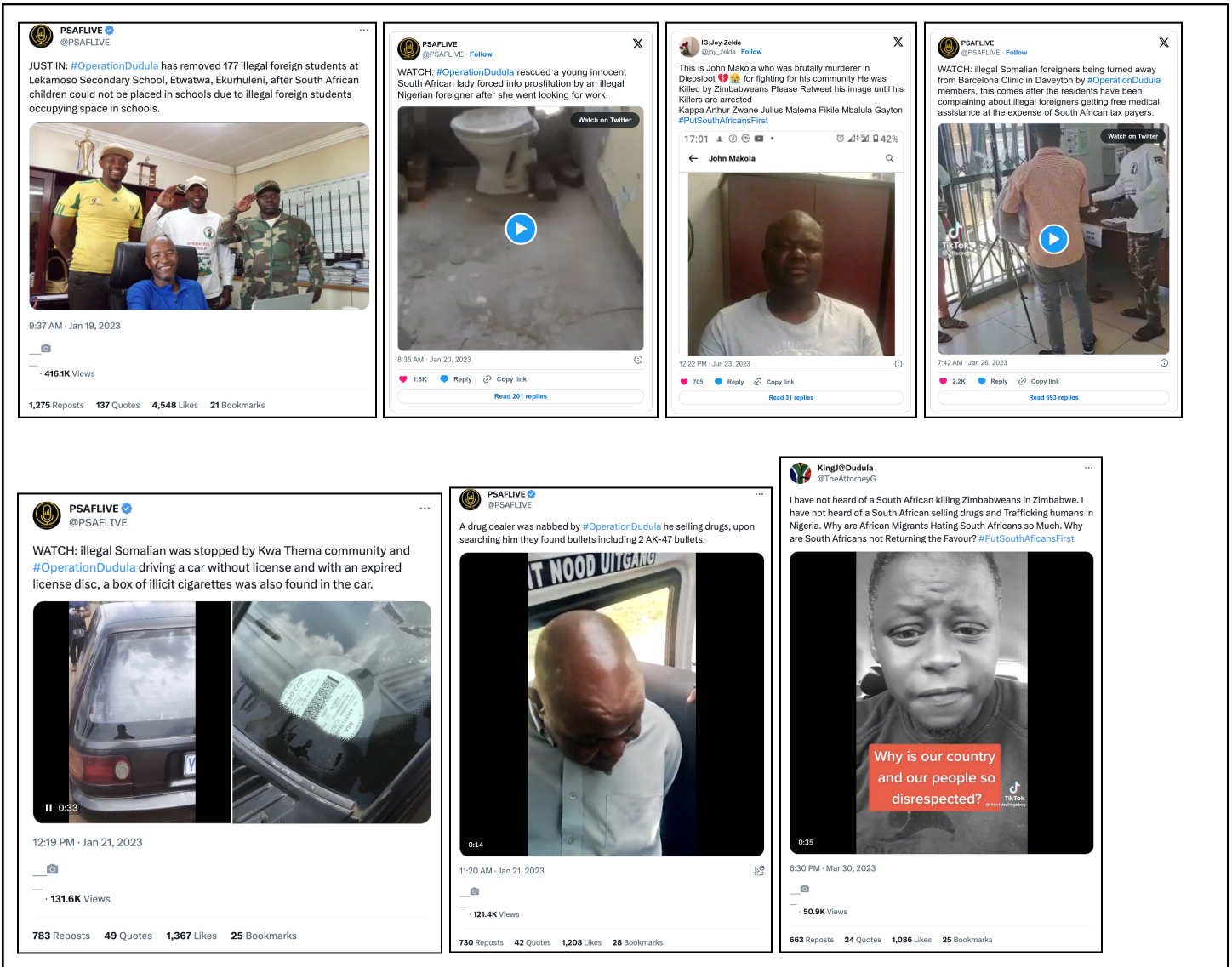


Figure 2: Examples of the seven most retweeted posts within the overall anti-immigrant conversation

The next section of this report analyses each of these search terms individually. The aim is to unpack the themes within each/search term and the peaks within the conversations. Later, this report will analyse the authors engaging in multiple hashtags within the anti-immigrant conversation.

4.1 #OperationDudula

#OperationDudula had the second-highest number of mentions, with 75 844 mentions between January 1 and June 30, 2022. It is preceded by #VoetsekANC, which will be unpacked in Section 4.9 of this report.

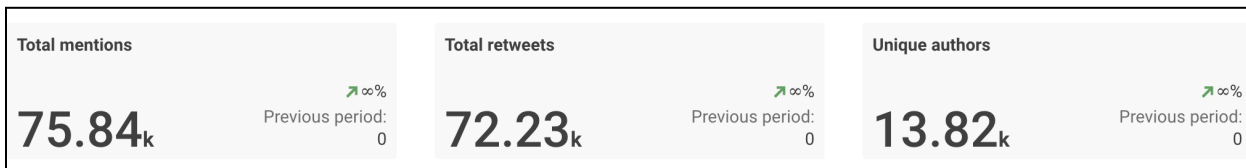


Figure 3: Total mentions within the #OperationDudula conversation

The first peak in the conversation, Peak A, was recorded on 20 January (see Figure 4). High engagement tweets in this peak focussed on topics such as:

- #OperationDudula allegedly rescues a young, innocent South African lady forced into sex work by an illegal Nigerian immigrant after she went looking for work. The tweet, shared by [@PSAFLive](#), is accompanied by a video of a woman in a seemingly building packing what appears to be clothing items.
- #OperationDudula allegedly “nabs” a man selling nyaope targeting South African youth. This was also tweeted by [@PSAFLive](#)
- Members of Operation Dudula chase away immigrants from Jeppe Clinic. Reports of this surfaced on Jan 18 on [GroundUp](#). Some organisations including [Amnesty International](#) reacted to this report around Jan 20
- Members of #OperationDudula removing learners who are immigrants from schools in Ekurhuleni. Tweeted by [@PSAFLive](#)

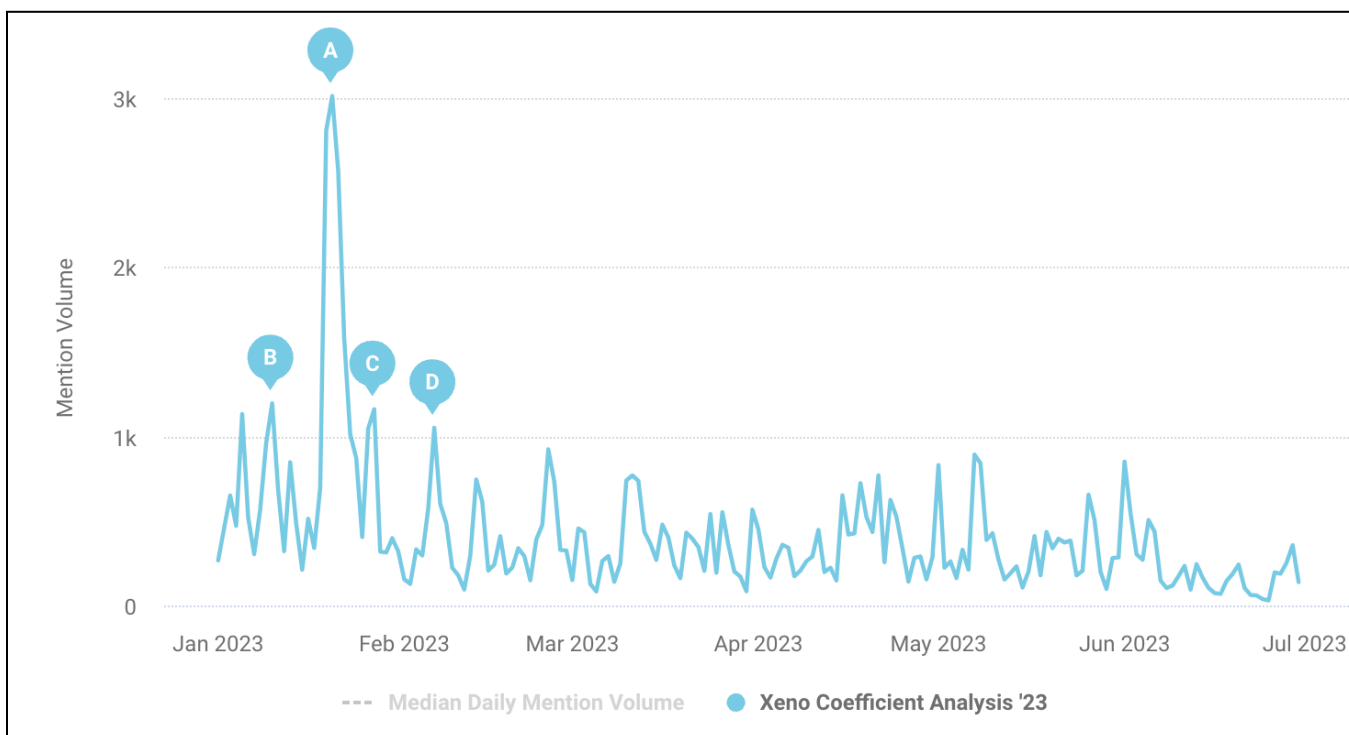


Figure 4: #OperationDudula between Jan 1 and 30 June

Peak B, recorded on 10 January - and was driven by the @Umalumewabantu account, which shared a tweet captioned: “High court rules that the employer should have proven beyond reasonable doubt that they couldn't find South Africans who could do the job. Zimbabweans & their fellow travellers are finally going home.”

The tweet contained a link to a Business Live article titled “Hiring [immigrant] workers in South Africa – the new case you should know about. This tweet, was also behind the highest peak recorded in the conversation about #PutSouthAfricansFirst, as discussed later in this report.

Peak C, recorded on 27 January, was driven by a post by the @_PatriotSA account, which posted that South African doctors were struggling to find jobs, “yet we have illegal immigrants with fake qualifications in our hospitals. We have doctors from Cuba. South Africans are not prioritised in their own country”.

The post came around the time that South African doctors protested¹² against unemployment in January. Another post, which received high engagement during this time, was by the @Faith21972393 account, which alleged that Nigerians in SA were selling drugs and destroying the youth and that the ruling party was not saying or doing anything to address this.

¹²

<https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/hundreds-of-qualified-doctors-sit-at-home-with-no-employment-prospects-protestors-20230126>

A post unrelated to the conversation about immigrants in South Africa, but using #OperationDudula was also detected in the top three most retweeted posts in this peak. This post came from the @KeaGqi account, a central, content creation account in the #PatrioticSpace conversation analysed later in this report. It read: “In Indonesia they just passed a law that makes cheating illegal, you cannot have sex with someone who isn't your spouse and if you are caught doing so you will get a 5yr jail term... half of married people in SA would end up in jail 😂😂😂😂 #PutSouthAfricansFirst #OperationDudula”.

The final peak, recorded on 6 February, was driven by Operation Dudula’s march to the Pretoria High Court, to oppose the Zimbabwe Exemption Permits¹³ (ZEP). The PSAFLive account has been among the most influential accounts in the use of #OperationDudula. Our analysis revealed that eight of the top 10 most retweeted content in the online conversation about #OperationDudula came from the @PSAFLive account.

This account has positioned itself as a news outlet, reporting predominantly on alleged crimes committed by “illegal” immigrants - as well as the activities of members of #OperationDudula. At the time of this report, the account had more than 50 000 followers. The remaining two posts came from the @Tsentsho1 and @JohnWickwaMams accounts.

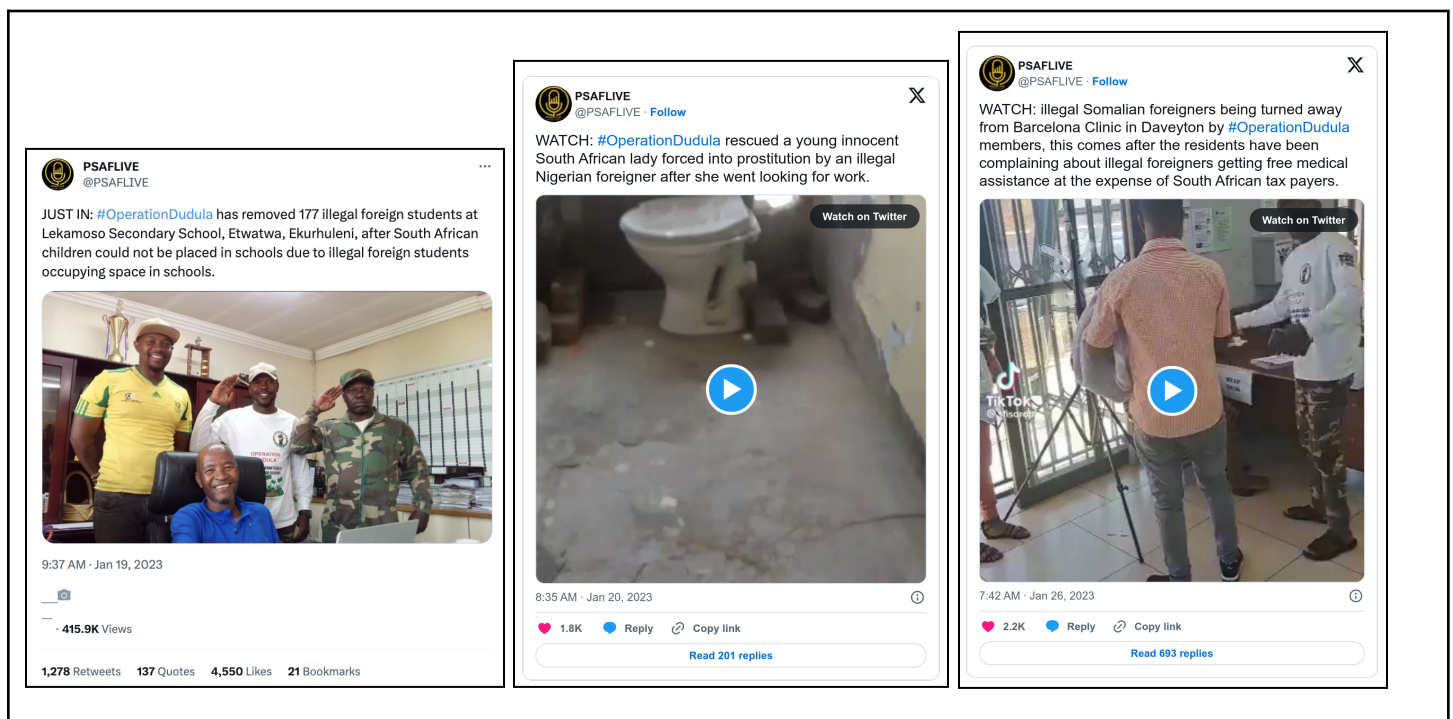


Figure 5: Top three of the top 10 most retweeted content in the #OperationDudula conversation

¹³ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-06-21-zimbabwean-exemption-permits-what-you-need-to-know/>

A common trend in posts shared by this account is the emphasis on the term “illegal foreigners”. While it is unclear how the account determines the status of immigrants in SA, the term “illegal foreigner” has been deemed as prejudicial, distorted and derogatory in a 2022 report by the Institute for Security Studies¹⁴. According to the report, the term ‘illegal’ encourages the false perception that immigrants deserve to be mistreated. When an immigrant has a suspended or expired permit or visa, they assume an ‘irregular’ status, but are not ‘illegal’.

Whose Dudula is it anyway?

#OperationDudula is among the hashtags with the highest mentions in our dataset - and is used to refer to the mobilisation group, Operation Dudula. However, there seems to be confusion on Operation Dudula’s Twitter account. This confusion dates as far back as last year, as shown by some of the tweets in figure 6 below.

According to some users, Operation Dudula does not have a Twitter account, while others regard @ODudula to be the group’s official account. One user posted that the @OperationDudula account, which describes itself as an NGO and has more than 25k followers, is [fake](#), spreads [fake news](#) and is “[owned by a Zimbabwean](#)”.

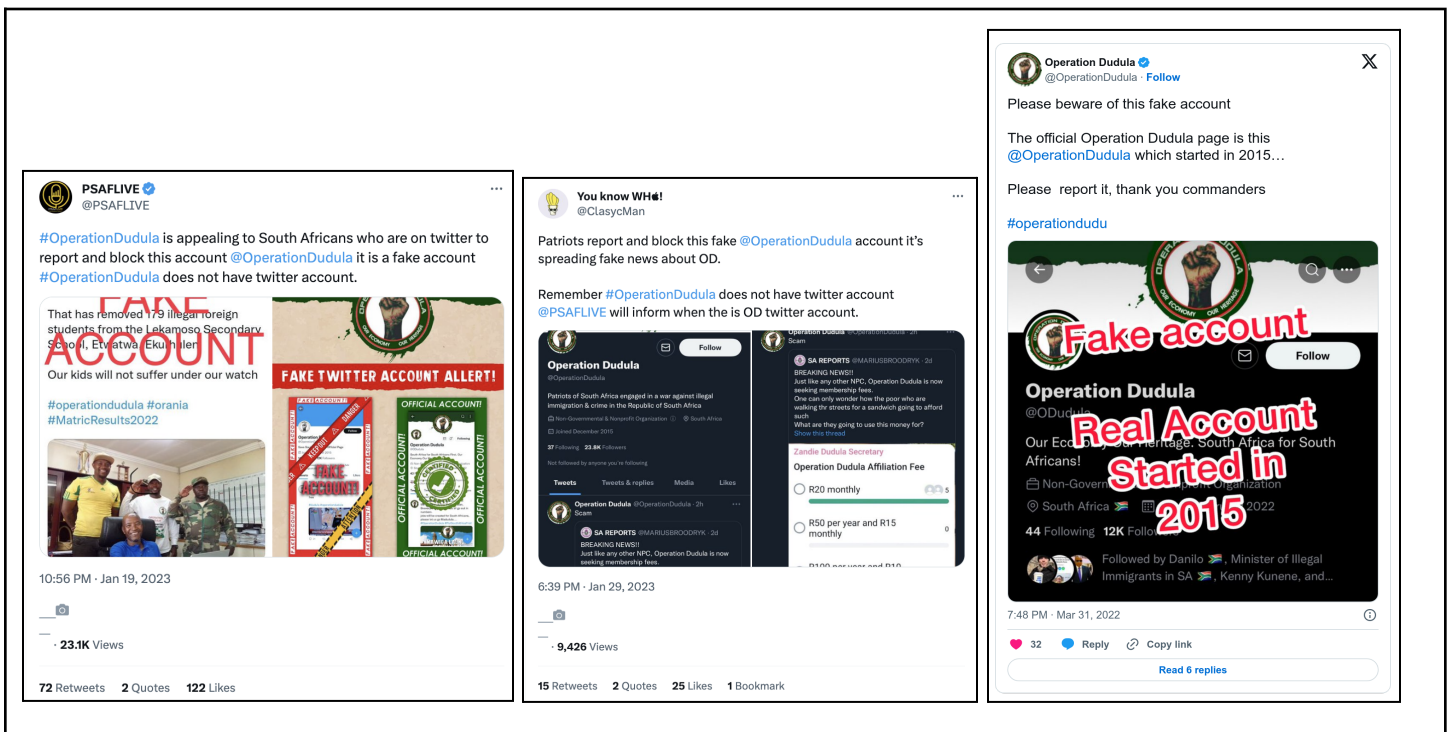


Figure 6 Images showing posts with different messaging about Operation Dudula’s Twitter account - if it exists

The @OperationDudula account was created in December 2015, however, no tweets were recorded between December 2015 and December 2021. There are a number of reasons why this could have happened. The

¹⁴ <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/sar-53.pdf#page=9>

account could have either deleted tweets between December 2015 - December 2021 or only started tweeting in January 2022. The account's tweets predominantly focus on issues of immigrants in South Africa.

Another nefarious tactic is the buying of old or dormant accounts that already have a large following, and then disseminating information that aligns with an ideology that is being driven¹⁵. In the Philippines for example, an entertainment page was created on Facebook and after gathering thousands of followers the initial administrator admitted to selling the account to a new administrator who began pushing political propaganda to the followers of that page¹⁶.

Meanwhile, @ODudula, regarded as the group's official account by @Ruraltarain_2 last year, has also been regarded as fake by @OperationDudula. A desktop search for @Odudula reveals that the handle is linked to an account created in January, with five followers and zero tweets. Meanwhile, @PSAFLive - adopting the role of online news and current affairs - has played a key role in informing users of the activities of Operation Dudula, with its content being among the most retweeted as discussed earlier in this report.

It remains unclear whether Operation Dudula has a Twitter account - and if so - which one? Without clarity, online supporters of the anti-immigrant narrative risk falling prey to false information about Operation Dudula and its activities - without knowing who the people behind these accounts are.

This should be a cause for concern, especially considering Operation Dudula's modus operandi of intimidating and mobilising against immigrants in various parts of the country. Should instruction to mobilise come from any of these "fake" Operation Dudula accounts - thereby encouraging supporters to join in - the "real" Operation Dudula (whichever one it is) could distance it/themselves from the chaos.

'Heroes' and villains?

The CABC analysed the most mentioned tweeters in the #OperationDudula conversation.

In summary, the ANC is being blamed for a variety of social ills, including its alleged inadequate management of South Africa's borders. Some users have theorised that the ANC's lack of action (tightening laws around immigration and deporting immigrants) will cost them votes in the upcoming elections (see figure 7 below).

¹⁵ Can Online Falsehoods Spread Fast When Internet Is Slow? (Tandoc, E as found in Disinformation in the Global South; 2022)

¹⁶ Ibid.



Figure 7: Examples of the anti-ANC posts within the #OperationDudula conversation

Posts mentioning @effsouthafrica and @julius_s_malema criticise the two for their pan-Africanist stance when it comes to the issue of immigrants. Some users even blame the EFF for crimes reportedly committed by immigrants in South Africa.

The anti-ANC and anti-EFF sentiment has been recorded in other hashtags, especially #VoetsekANC and #VoetsekEFF, discussed in Sections 4.8 and 4.9 of this report.

Most Mentioned Tweeters	TWEETS ▼	RETWEETS	ALL TWEETS	IMPRESSIONS
@myanc	266	2332	2598	5067348
@psaflive	231	987	1218	2801292
@effsouthafrica	158	1338	1496	4075495
@onsbaizanie	143	530	673	1477024
@gaytonmck	137	503	640	1635387
@julius_s_malema	123	455	578	1067914
@homeaffairssa	113	666	779	1519869
@sapoliceservice	103	956	1059	2312063
@hermanmashaba	81	134	215	530018
@action4sa	70	145	215	464638

Figure 8: Most mentioned tweeters (by tweets)

Continuing to look at the list of handles in figure 8, @sapoliceservice and @homeaffairssa are being accused of [corruption](#) - with the latter being especially criticised for numerous ZEP extensions. Accounts such as @onsbaizanie, @gaytonmck, @hermanmashaba and @action4sa on the other hand are viewed in a positive light - as a result of their anti-immigrant stance.

@GaytonMcK, for example, is mentioned in tweets [promoting](#) his participation in #PatrioticSpace, an audio-based discussion based forum shared on PSAFLive's Youtube, Twitter Spaces and TikTok channels. In that particular discussion, McKenzie [reiterated](#) his call for mass deportation of “illegal” immigrants, as well as legal immigrants who were not providing a special skill in South Africa. McKenzie’s policy positioning is reminiscent of xenophobic rhetoric under the former US former president, Donald Trump¹⁷.

The @TheAttorneyG account tagged @GaytonMcKenzie and @Action4SA in a post alleging that the [death penalty](#) would solve “load shedding” and the “influx of illegal immigrants”, among others. Among the authors showing positive sentiment towards @GaytonMcK and @HermanMashaba are @KeaGqi, @PSAFLive, and @Ancisacurse, among others.

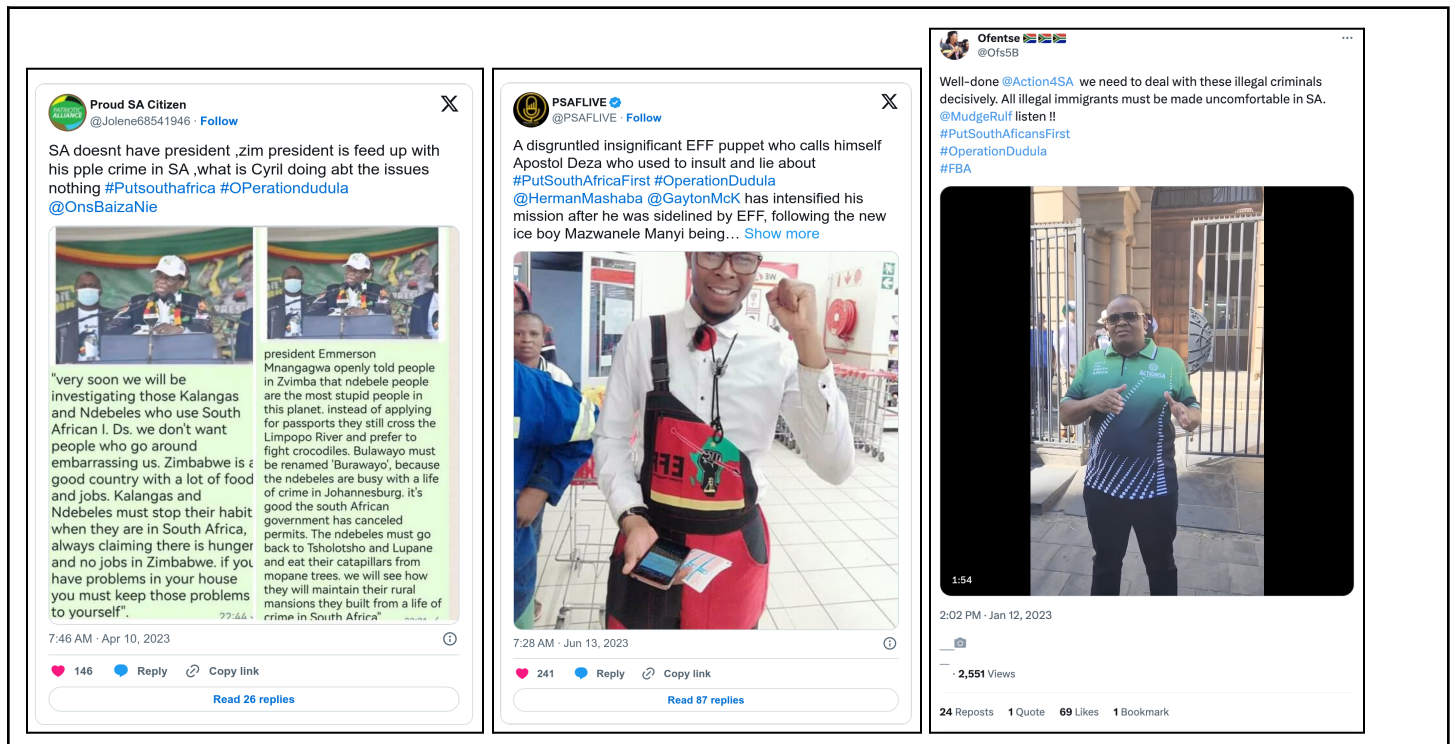


Figure 9 : Examples of posts mentioning @onsbaizanie, @gaytonmck, @hermanmashaba and @action4sa

Observing figure 10 below, The @Ancisacurse account contributed the most to the conversation within the dataset, with 1 519 mentions between 1 January and 30 June 2023.

¹⁷ Ibid at 1

Top posts include accusing “all” African countries of being a “burden” to South Africa and alleging that Home Affairs officials are “selling our country to foreigners”.

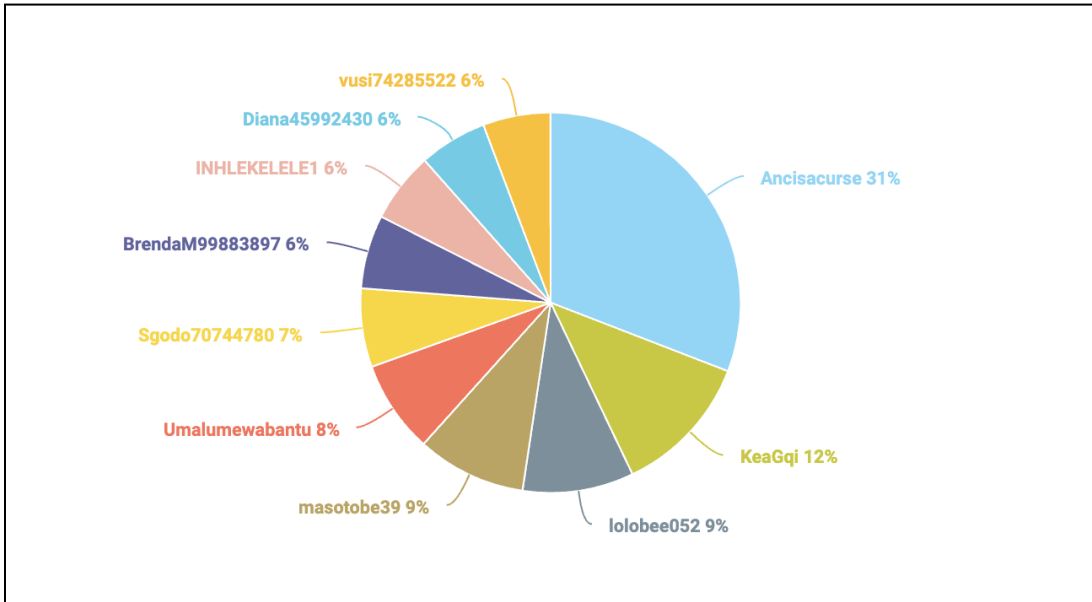


Figure 10: Top authors within the #OperationDudula conversation

A review of the posts from @Ancisacurse account reveal that their posts received a low traction. For example, when arranged by retweets, the most engaged post from this account received 21 retweets and 20 likes.

The @Ancisacurse account was created in 2013 and had 2 230 followers at the time of this report. An advanced Twitter search reveals that the account used to post low-traction tweets, mostly about ‘God and the Holy Spirit’. It was only in 2020 that the account started to post [anti-ANC](#) content, with some posts containing hashtags used within the anti-immigrant conversation. Despite the apparent shift in content, the account’s tweets continue to receive relatively low-traction when compared to the posts made by other accounts in figure 10. The account is also followed by other popular voices in the anti-immigrant conversation, including @GaytonMcK, @PSAFLive, @Ruraltarain_2, @PatriciaMasha3 and @TheTruthPanther.

The @KeaGqi account (responsible for a majority of the content generation in #PatrioticSpace), @Lolobee052, and @masotobe contributed to the second, third and fourth-highest mentions, respectively.

Summary:

- The conversation about #OperationDudula is events-based. This is evidenced by the spikes in the conversation, which are related to reports in the media or the activities of the members of #OperationDudula.

- The @PSAFLive account shares close ties to #OperationDudula, with eight of the top 10 most retweeted posts containing #OperationDudula coming from the @PSAFLive account. It is unclear how @PSAFLive concludes, in its online reports, that the perpetrators of the alleged crimes are “illegal foreigners”.
- The CABC detected confusion on Operation Dudula’s official Twitter account, with some saying the group does not have an account to begin with.
- Only 3% of all mentions in the conversation are original content.
- The use of #OperationDudula has also been detected in posts that are unrelated to the conversation about immigrants

4.2 #PutSouthAfricansFirst

Based on an advanced Twitter search #PutSouthAfricansFirst has been a constant in the xenophobic discourse on social media, having emerged in 2019, and now in use by an individual associated with a South African nationalist party¹⁸. The hashtag has seen increased use and amplification under the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁹. Our search of its use over the past 6 months returned 32 636 mentions, of which 89% of all mentions were retweets.

This version of the hashtag is less commonly used than the misspelt variant #PutSouthAfricansFirst (No r), explored further in the report. The most popular post in our dataset relayed the story of the murder of John Makola, the chairperson of the local community policing forum in Diepsloot²⁰.

In mainstream media, the nationality of Makola’s murderers has not been exposed. However, a post on the Opera News platform, which is not actively moderated and has raised concerns of news quality and veracity published an unverified allegation that Makola’s murderers were overheard speaking Shona, a language spoken predominantly in Zimbabwe²¹. The post alleged that Makola had been murdered by immigrants in Diepsloot. A search on the incident across news media platforms held no mention of his murderer’s nationality.

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/SirLetshela/status/1186815392146214913> ; https://twitter.com/NSA_Party

¹⁹ [Dratwa \(2023\)](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-02-20-putting-xenophobia-first-analysing-the-hashtags-behind-the-twitter-campaigns/) ; See More:

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-02-20-putting-xenophobia-first-analysing-the-hashtags-behind-the-twitter-campaigns/>

²⁰

<https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/weve-lost-our-bulletproof-diepsloot-residents-mourn-cpf-crime-fighter-killed-on-duty-20230627>

²¹ <https://opera.news/za/en/society/879fbd7eeee8dc8d3f4bddf15cd85ec5> ; see more: <https://plc.sas.upenn.edu/shona>

An eNCA report indicated that Makola provided an informal security service to an Ethiopian shopkeeper as well as other immigrant business owners in the area²². Makola's familiarity with the immigrant community in Diepsloot and a lack of verifiable evidence on the nationality of his murderer(s) suggests that this claim may be conjecture or disinformation.

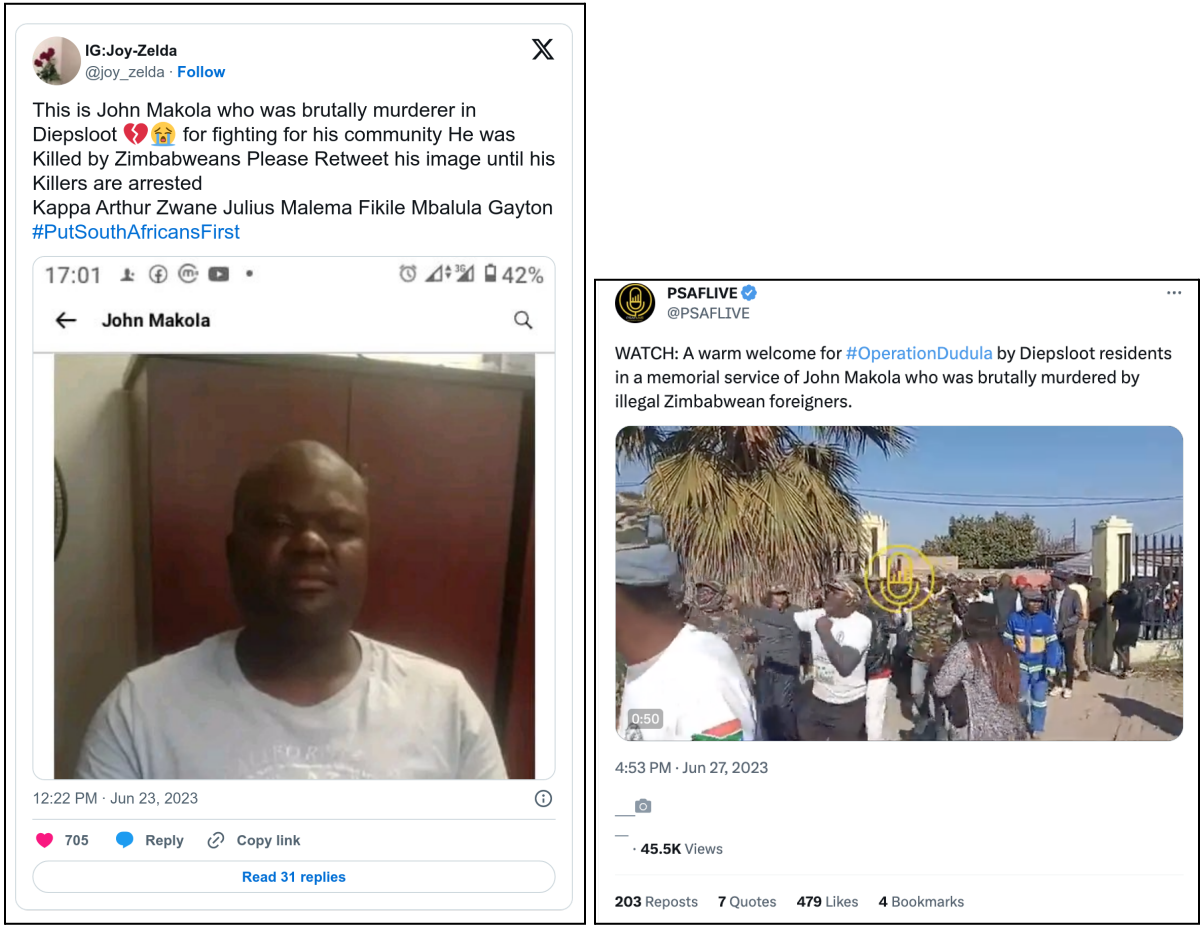


Figure 11: Posts using #PutSouthAfricansFirst and indicating that Makola had been allegedly murdered by Zimbabweans

Another popular post by @Umalumewabantu lambasted NGOs for supposedly delaying Johannesburg MMC for transport Kenny Kunene's campaign to level allegedly illegally occupied buildings. According to the post which contained a video of a burning building, "when Kenny Kunene wanted to close down these hijacked buildings, NGOs threatened court action Yesterday two kids burnt to death. Where were the NGOs?" [sic].

[News24](#) identified the scene as the Florence Nightingale building. This building has previously been alleged, by the Gauteng department of community safety to be owned by the Helen Suzman Foundation (HSF), who

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ayet5NG8bKY>

have been targeted recently due to their litigation in the ZEP case against the DHA²³. The HSF has debunked their ownership of the building.²⁴

Other uses of #PutSouthAfricansFirst have been related to on-the-ground operations of anti-immigrant groups Operation Dudula and PutSouthAfricansFirst. These groups marched in Johannesburg amid the backdrop of Dudula entering the political sphere (see Figure 12). The source of the post @DudulaMedia has previously been identified as an opposition account in Report 3 of this project.²⁵



Figure 12: Anti-migrant groups march in Johannesburg CBD

The @JusticeMEB account which predominantly leads content under #WeWantOurCountryBack (see Section 4.7) has used #PutSouthAfricansFirst alongside the account's personal brand of content - focused on uncovering supposed corruption at Home Affairs.

²³ [An example story from an unrestricted blogging/news website amplifies this rumour](#)

²⁴ <https://www.real411.org/complaints-view/dn2wyo36> ; see more: <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2022-08-31-nicole-fritz-sticks-and-stones-may-break-your-bones-and-so-can-social-media/>

²⁵ https://cab.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/EU_Xenophobia_Report_3-1.pdf



Figure 13: @JusticeMEB predominantly posts on alleged corruption within Home Affairs

#PutSouthAfricansFirst has seen use as a rallying call to drive xenophobic actors online toward real world action. This is most notable in a set of posts by @Ruraltarain_2, who used the hashtag alongside #VoetsekANC and #VoetsekEFF to draw attention to a planned national shutdown by the EFF in March 2023 (see Figure 14).

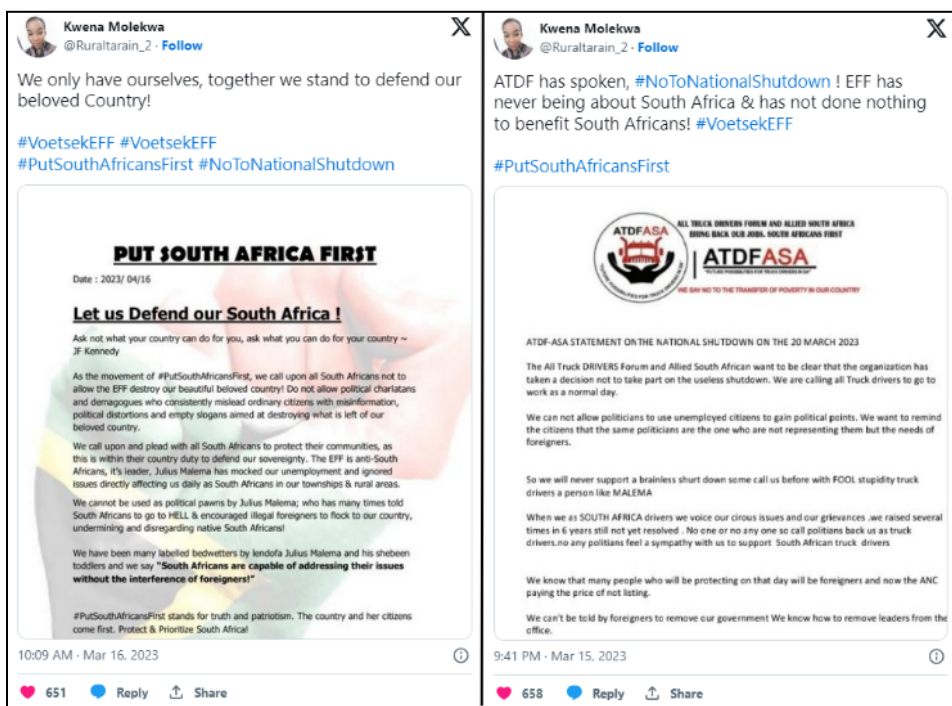


Figure 14: A set of posts by @Ruraltarain_2 calling for supporters of anti-immigrant groups to desist from joining the EFF’s planned national shutdown.

Various other uses have been identified under #PutSouthAfricansFirst, most notably, posts containing mis- and disinformation or identifying social ills which could be redirected toward immigrants (see Figure 15).



Figure 15: #PutSouthAfricansFirst is used in relation to social ills such as education placement and unemployment.

Summary

- The CABC detected some disconnection between news media and social media in the details surrounding John Makola’s death. While the nationalities of Makola’s attackers are unknown, accounts

such as @PSAFLive and @joy_zelda concluded that Makola was murdered by “illegal Zimbabweans”. It is unclear how these accounts reached this conclusion.

- Instances of mis- and disinformation have also been detected in this conversation. Examples of these include posts exaggerating the number of immigrants in South Africa.
- #PutSouthAfricansFirst has been used concurrently with other hashtags within the anti-immigrant conversation to amplify messaging. This is a common tactic among other hashtags in the conversation.

4.3 #PutSouthAfricansFirst (No R)

This hashtag can be traced as far back as [2020](#). It garnered almost 50 000 mentions from 9 885 unique authors between 1 January and 30 June 2023.

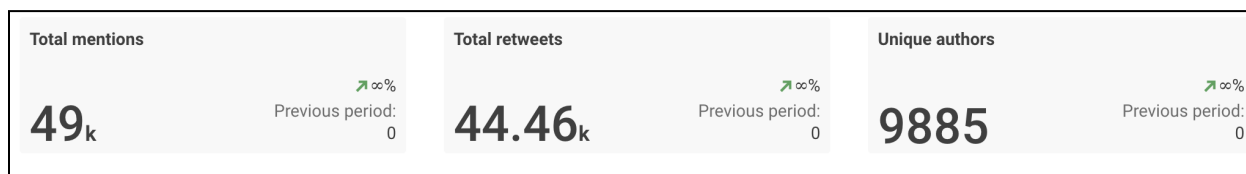


Figure 16: Total mentions within the #PutSouthAfricansFirst conversation.

Four peaks were recorded in the online conversation about #PutSouthAfricansFirst during the research period. The highest peak - with 1 988 mentions - was recorded on January 10 and was driven by the @Umalumwabantu account, which shared a tweet captioned: “High court rules that the employer should have proven beyond reasonable doubt that they couldn't find South Africans who could do the job. Zimbabweans & their fellow travellers are finally going home.”

The tweet contained a link to a [Business Live](#) article titled “Hiring foreign workers in South Africa – the new case you should know about”.

The employment of immigrants remains a hot topic within the anti-immigrant narrative. Some proponents arguing that immigrants should only be employed on a scarce skills' basis, while others argue that they should not be employed in SA at all.

Another post that received high engagement on this day was that by the @ThaboKhumal account. The account posted that immigrants were responsible for “91% of all cash-in-transit heists, 71% of all farm killings, 60% of all brutal crimes and 70% of all car-jackings.

The source of these stats is unknown, however, the Institute for Security Studies recently released a report on why immigrants cannot be blamed for social and economic problems in South Africa. It found that there was no evidence that most immigrants commit crime or are responsible for most crime in SA. “Criminal justice data show that immigrants are less likely to commit crime than South Africans, only about 2.3% of inmates incarcerated per year are undocumented foreigners,” read the report.

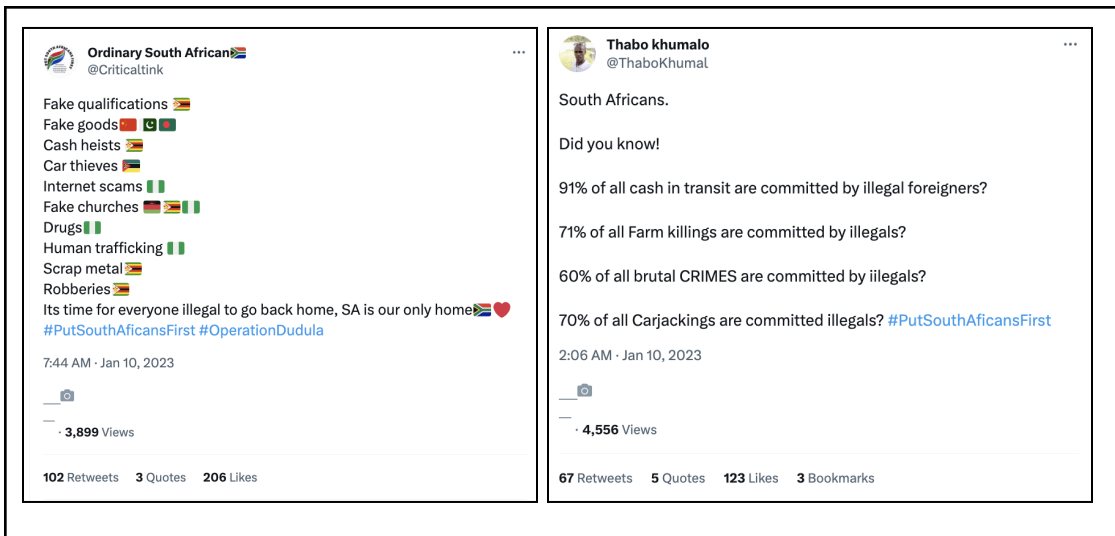


Figure 17: Examples of the most retweeted posts during the January 10 peak.

The CABC has highlighted how proponents of the anti-immigrants narrative have relied on mis- and disinformation (often in the form of exaggerated and unverified stats and claims) to drive their narrative.

These tactics date as far back as the @uLerato_Pillay²⁶ era, between 2019 and 2020, where immigrants were placed at the centre of South Africa’s social ills - including crime and unemployment.

26

https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-18-ulerato_pillay-how-the-xenophobic-network-around-putsouthafricafirst-was-born-and-then-metastased/

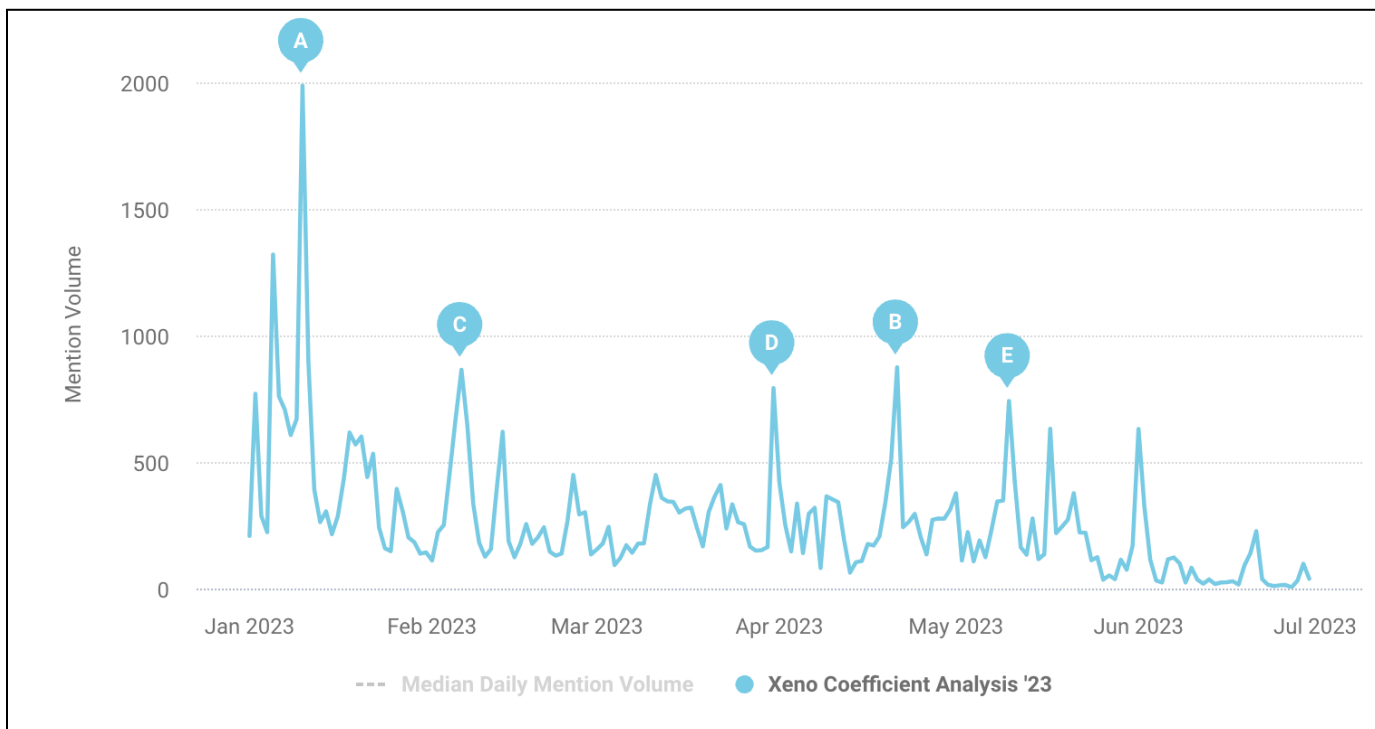


Figure 18: Volume of the #PutSouthAfricans conversation between 1 January and 30 June

Peak B was driven by the removal of refugees outside the UN premises in Pretoria in April. They had [reportedly](#) been camped outside the offices since 2019, after fleeing xenophobic attacks across the country.

Peak C, recorded on February 6, was related to a demonstration by Operation Dudula outside the Pretoria High Court - in opposition to the Zimbabwe Exemption Permit (ZEP) extension.

According to a Business Live [report](#), the group wanted to “join a court application by the Helen Suzman Foundation that seeks a review of the lawfulness of the decision by home affairs minister Aaron Motsoaledi to terminate the ZEP”.



Figure 19: Examples of the most retweeted posts during peak C.

Peak D, recorded on 31 March was driven by a post by the @TheAttorneyG account, which shared a post stating that Zimbabwean refugees in South Africa would be going home for the Easter holidays and coming back to seek asylum in SA thereafter. “Granting Zimbabweans Asylum is the Biggest Gaslight Ever,” the [post](#) read.

The second most retweeted post in this peak came from the [@Patriot S A](#) account. The post shared images of food being kept in seemingly unsanitary conditions - with the caption “These people want to kill us #PutSouthAfricansFirst”.

Four posts, by the @TheAttorneyG account, were among the driving forces behind peak E, recorded on May 10 (see figure 20 below). Collectively, these posts had been retweeted more than 600 times, receiving more than 2 000 likes by the time of this report. The posts ranged from criticising the NHI to sharing posts about a march against immigrants on 1 June.

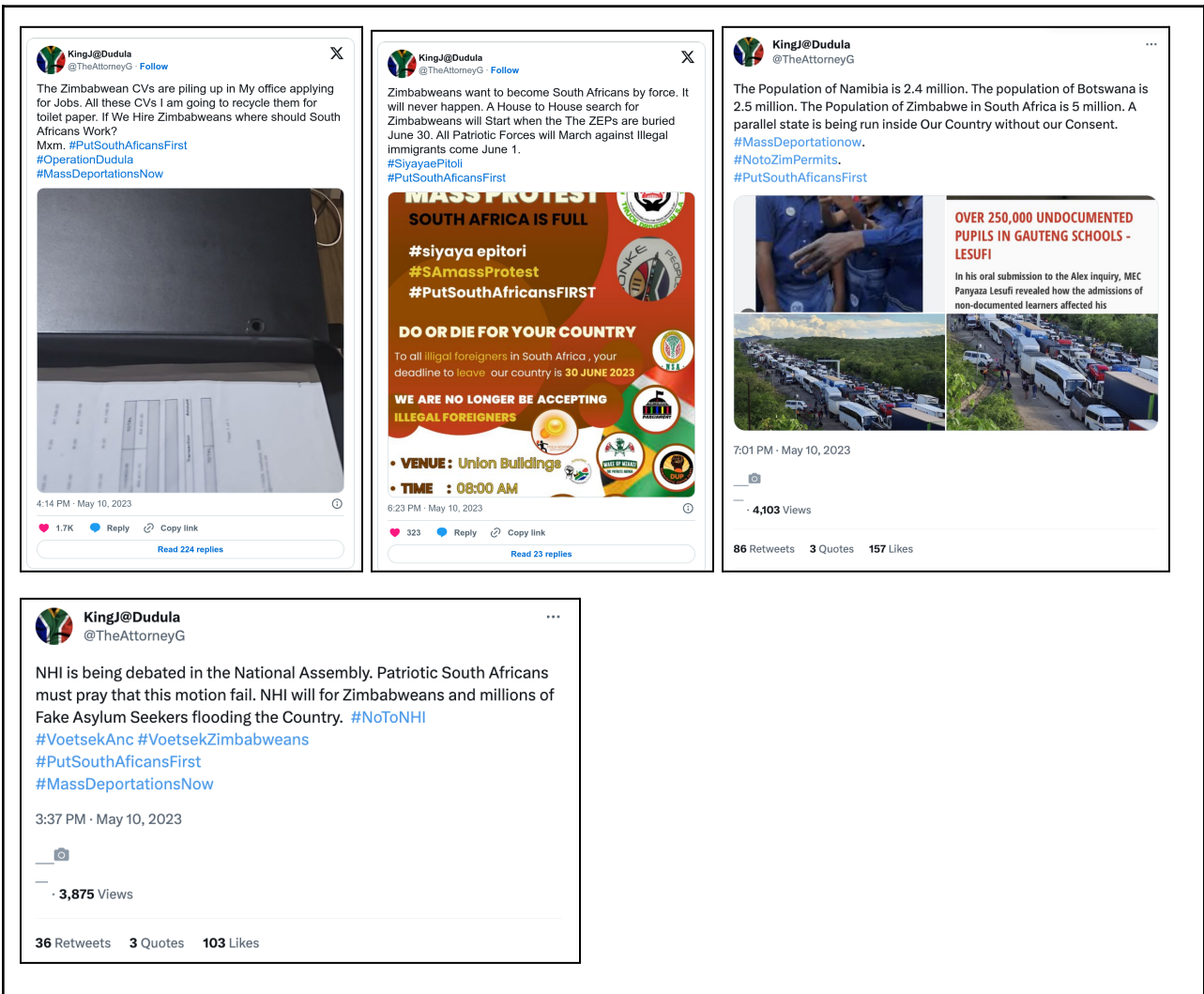


Figure 20: Examples of the most retweeted posts during Peak E.

A deeply concerning post that the account put out - sharing a poster of a march against immigrants in Pretoria - stated that a “house to house search for Zimbabweans will start when the ZEPs are buried 30 June”.

The notion of “house to house searches” presents two key problems. Firstly, how do the “searchers” differentiate between South Africans and Zimbabweans, especially given the common narrative that corrupt Home Affairs officials are working with immigrants?

Secondly, what happens when the “searchers” find Zimbabwean immigrants during the “house to house” searches? South Africa has witnessed a number of violent incidents against immigrants over the years. The May 2008 [attacks](#), which initially broke out in Alexandra, Johannesburg, resulted in 62 deaths. A total of 21 South Africans, 11 Mozambicans, five Zimbabweans and three Somalis were killed.

Operation Dudula has been named in a number of attacks on immigrants. Among these are attacks on immigrants in [Jeppe](#) clinic and the removal of immigrant [learners](#) in Diepsloot. Members of the group were also accused of forcefully removing [disabled](#) immigrants from Msibi House in New Doornfontein last year.

According to [Xenowatch](#) - an open source system for information collection and visualisation of data on xenophobic discrimination incidents in South Africa - the country has witnessed 1,024 xenophobia-related incidents between 1994 and 1 August 2023 (see figure 21). The highest peak in incidents and deaths were recorded in 2008. The second-highest peak was recorded last year. A majority of these incidents, 398, have been recorded in Gauteng.

The third-highest number of incidents were recorded in 2019, the same year when hashtags such as #PutSouthAfricansFirst started circulating online (see Section [4.2](#))

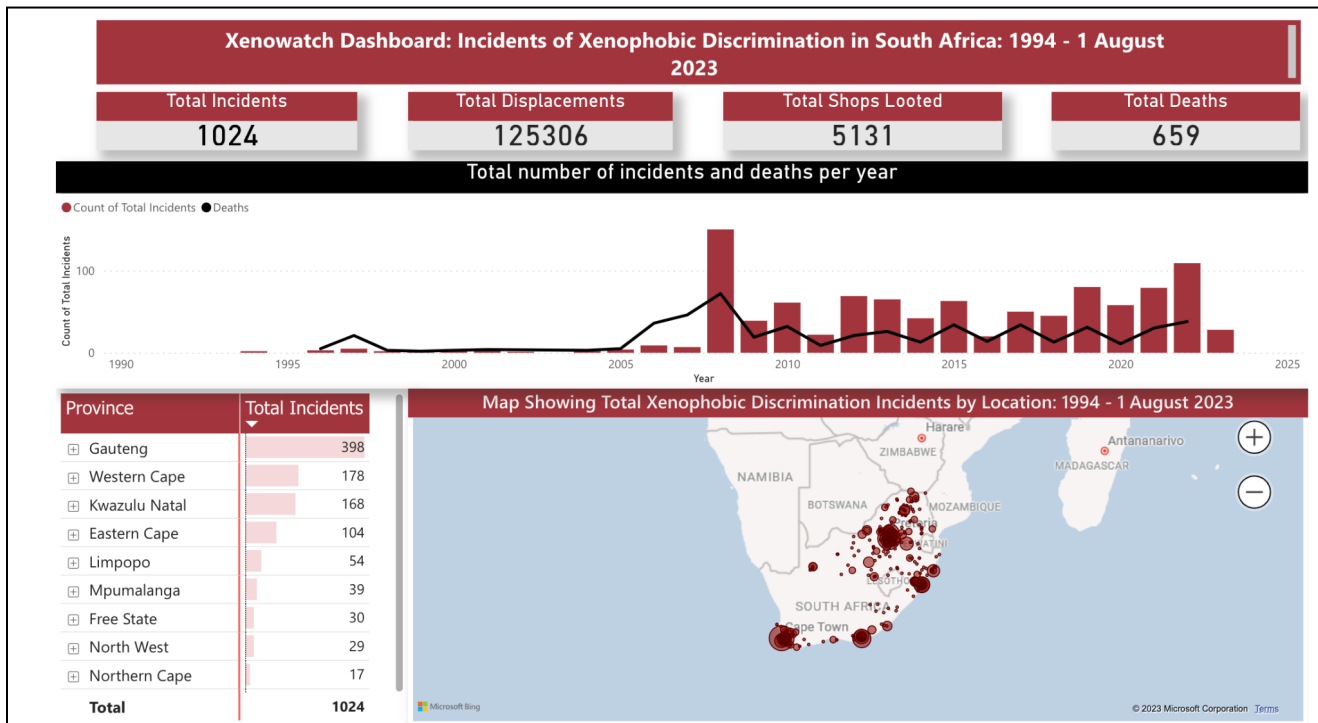


Figure 21: Xeno-related incidents data between 1994 and 2023

Posts such as those by the @TheAttorneyG account, which suggest “house to house” searches for immigrants - made on more than one occasion (see figure 22 below), increase the occurrence of xenophobia-related incidents by threatening the safety of both immigrants and South Africans.



Figure 22: Post from the @TheAttorneyG account stating that the minister “urged” locals to conduct “house-to-house” searches for Zimbabweans after 30 June

Summary:

- About 91% of all mentions within this conversation are retweets.
- Mis- and disinformation about the crimes committed by immigrants continues in this conversation.
- A post about conducting “house-to-house searches” for Zimbabweans could incite acts of lawlessness. Even more concerning, the post was among the most highly retweeted in one of the peaks in the conversation.

4.4 #PutSouthAfricaFirst

#PutSouthAfricaFirst is used less often than its related hashtags #PutSouthAfricansFirst and #PutSouthAfricansFirst (No r) at about a third and fourth of those mention volumes respectively (see Figure 23). Notably, an account, @Alima1000, described under #VoetsekANC, accounts for 9.4% of the mention volume for #PutSouthAfricaFirst.

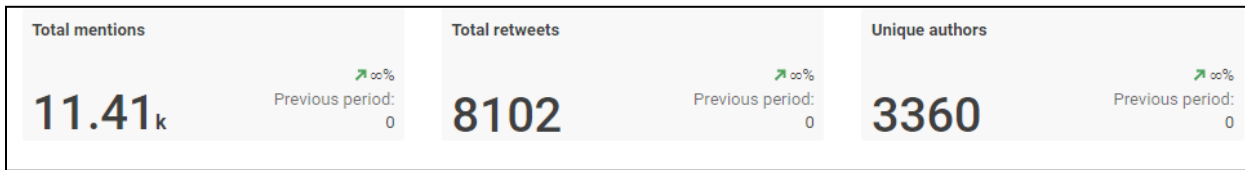


Figure 23: Mention Volume for #PutSouthAfricaFirst.

The hashtag has seen use in “official” communications by individuals aligned with Operation Dudula. Alongside hashtags such as #RoadToParliament, communication by accounts claiming to represent Operation Dudula, some who have purchased Twitter Blue subscription, release multi-media posts, highlighting action on the ground by the organisation (see Figure 24)



Figure 24: Put South Africa First is used by a Twitter Blue Verified Account which claims to represent Operation Dudula.

Another account has been noted as trying to assert authority over the space, albeit without Twitter Blue. @realodofficial used the same #RoadToParliament and released a video voiced by “Deputy Chairperson” Dan Radebe (see Figure 25). An account @1DUDULA indicates that an individual named Zandile Dabula was the founder of the movement. Articles from Al-Jazeera, the BBC and the Daily Maverick indicate that former leader, Nhlanhla Lux, of the Soweto Parliament founded the movement as a splinter faction of “Put South Africans First” after the July Unrest of 2021²⁷.

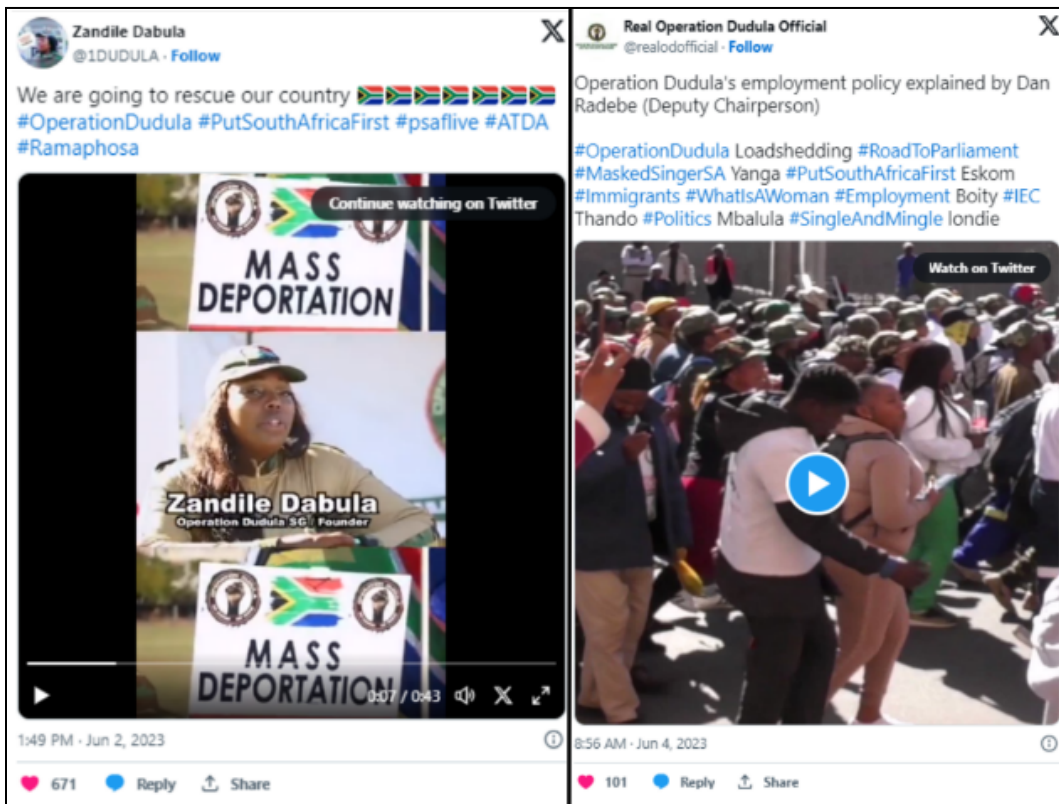


Figure 25: #PutSouthAfricaFirst is used in two posts which allude to an organisational structure

Further investigation into these claims led us to a web page containing Operation Dudula’s manifesto and contact details of the claimed leadership and provincial coordinators²⁸ (see Figure 26).

²⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/8/what-is-operation-dudula-s-africas-anti-immigration-vigilante>;
<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-04-16-nhlanhla-lux-exposed-the-disturbing-picture-behind-the-masks-of-the-man-heading-operation-dudula/>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60698374>
²⁸ <https://operationdudula.net/>

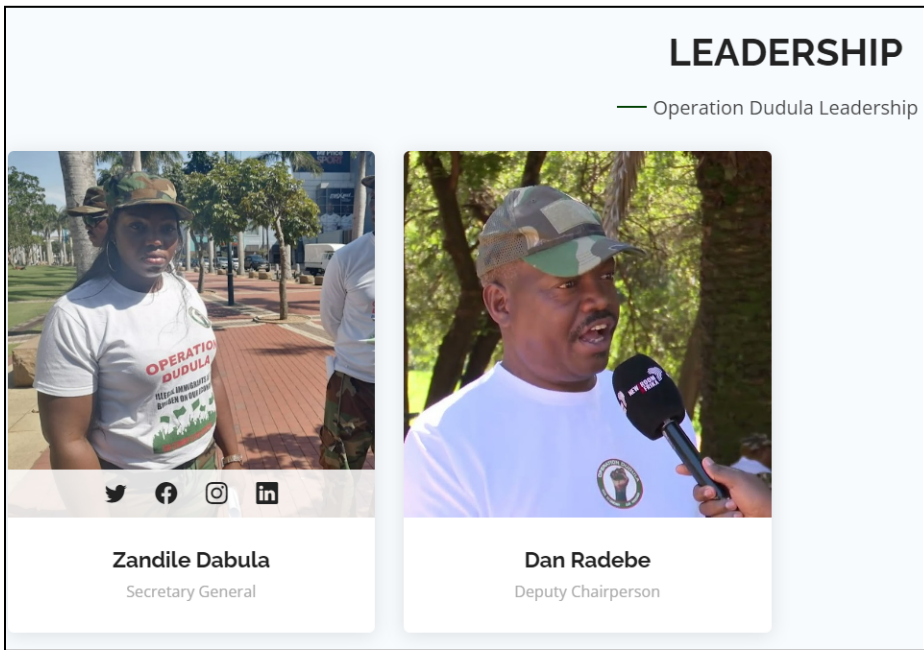



Figure 26: Dabula and Radebe are indicated as leaders of OD on an organisational website.

An attached organisational address further led us to a site which held the non-profit registration of Operation Dudula. The site further confirmed that Daniel Kadebe [sic] and Zandile Dabula engage with the registered arm of the organisation, O P Dudula²⁹ (see Figure 27). It's unclear at this time if the name Daniel Radebe is an oversight or intentional on Operation Dudula's website.

Related companies by officers	
 Daniel Kadebe Director	
ODR INVESTMENTS Deregistered CROSS COUNTRY TRUCKING Indicated as undergoing liquidation DANIELX-2 INVESTMENTS Deregistered OPS DUDULA KADEBE AND CHEOU TRADING Deregistered NCDM TRADING Indicated as undergoing liquidation DANIELX88	
05 Jun 2022	E-Mail sent to ZANDILE DABULA for 2022
05 Jun 2022	E-Mail sent to PETER DIMBA for 2022
05 Jun 2022	E-Mail sent to PERCY TSEPISO MALEBANA for 2022

²⁹ <https://b2bhint.com/en/company/za/o-p-dudula--K2021703162>

Figure 27: Registration information for Operation Dudula NPC indicates that Kadebe and Dabula hold a leadership role. Red text indicates additional status updates on other organisations Daniel Kadebe is involved in.

The presence of a trucking company that is undergoing liquidation and directed by Kadebe is interesting as Operation Dudula has at times aligned itself with xenophobic rhetoric espoused by the All Truck Drivers Forum and Allied South Africa (ATDF-ASA). A recent *Citizen* article which reported on the spate of truck attacks indicated the alleged involvement of Operation Dudula and ATDF-ASA. These allegations were derived from a leaked crime intelligence document³⁰. No substantial evidence is available, to our knowledge, to link the leadership behind Operation Dudula, Cross Country Trucking and ATDF-ASA to these attacks.

A search conducted through the CIPC's BizPortal application (see Figure 28) confirmed that Kadebe and Dabula are registered as directors of Operation Dudula.

Director / Member details for: K2021703162 [O P DUDULA]

ID Number	Name(s)	Surname	Type	Status
7410 XXXX 08 X	SIPHIWE	TSHABALALA	Director	Active
7205 XXXX 08 X	DANIEL	KADEBE	Director	Active
8908 XXXX 08 X	ZANDILE	DABULA	Director	Active
7011 XXXX 08 X	SOLOMON LEBOGANG	KEKANA	Director	Active
7206 XXXX 08 X	PETER	DIMBA	Director	Active
7005 XXXX 08 X	PERCY TSEPISO	MALEBANA	Director	Active

Figure 28: A CIPC search indicates Kadebe and Dabula as directors of Operation Dudula

A recent article by ScrollAfrica³¹ indicates that Kadebe has split with the organisation as of 14 July 2023, with BizPortal indicating a final communication to Kadebe on the 6th of June 2023 (see Figure 29)

2023-06-06	E-Mail sent to DANIEL KADEBE for 2023
2023-06-06	E-Mail sent to PETER DIMBA for 2023
2023-06-06	E-Mail sent to ZANDILE DABULA for 2023

Figure 29: The most recent communication confirming Kadebe's link to Dudula from June

³⁰ <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/foreign-drivers-trucks-targeted-leaked-report/>

³¹ <https://allafrica.com/stories/202307140049.html>

Other uses of #PutSouthAfricaFirst follow common xenophobic themes. Expressing harmful stereotypes directed toward immigrants (see Figure 30).



Figure 30: Posts using #PutSouthAfricaFirst play on tropes of immigrants’ involvement in drug dealing

Summary

- @Alima1000 accounted for nearly 9.6% of all mentions under #PutSouthAfricaFirst.
- #PutSouthAfricaFirst is used diversely, but most interestingly, has been used by individuals behind the registered arm of Operation Dudula.

4.5 #PatrioticSpace

The online conversation around #PatrioticSpace garnered 9 057 mentions between 1 January and 30 June 2023.

#PatrioticSpace appears to be an audio-based discussion based forum, available on various platforms including PSAFLive’s Youtube, Twitter Spaces and TikTok channels, as well as on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

Guests who have been invited onto the forum include Patriotic Alliance leader Gayton McKenzie and ActionSA’s Nkuli Mbundu.

Total mentions	Total retweets	Unique authors
9057	8916	2684
Previous period: 0 ↑ ∞%	Previous period: 0 ↑ ∞%	Previous period: 0 ↑ ∞%

Figure 31: Volume of mentions within the #PatrioticSpace conversation

In 32 of the 9 057 mentions, #PatrioticSpace was used by some users to promote a platform hosting “online conversations about #Ghana” - completely unrelated to the anti-immigrant conversation in South Africa.

While the platform is called Patriotic Spaces and uses #PatrioticSpaces in its online posters, some accounts use #PatrioticSpace to refer to the online conversation hosted on @PatrioticSpaces, which may cause confusion.

Among the biggest contributors to this hashtag is the @KeaGqi account. The top 10 most retweeted tweets in this conversation came from this account. The account was created in February last year, and had more than 13k followers at the time of this report.

Collectively, these tweets generated about 1 844 retweets, 15 587 likes and more than 400 000 views at the time of this report.



Figure 32: Examples of the most retweeted content from the @KeaGqi account

Peak A was recorded on 21 April and was driven by content from the @KeaGqi account. Posts ranged from reports that “two ladies were captured by the community for the alleged kidnapping and murder of the 2 boys that were found with their body mutilated in Soweto yesterday” to garnering support for #VoetsekEFF Friday’s, a common day for community-based posting in the series of #Voetsek (Political Party) hashtags. This is explored further in the report.

The second peak was recorded on 14 March. The most retweeted posts within this peak garnered support for Gayton McKenzie’s interview on #PatrioticSpace.

Reactions to [reports](#) that the Health Professions Council reprimanded Limpopo Health MEC Phophi Ramathuba for shouting at a Zimbabwean patient in a Limpopo hospital last year, contributed to Peak C, which was recorded on 13 February.

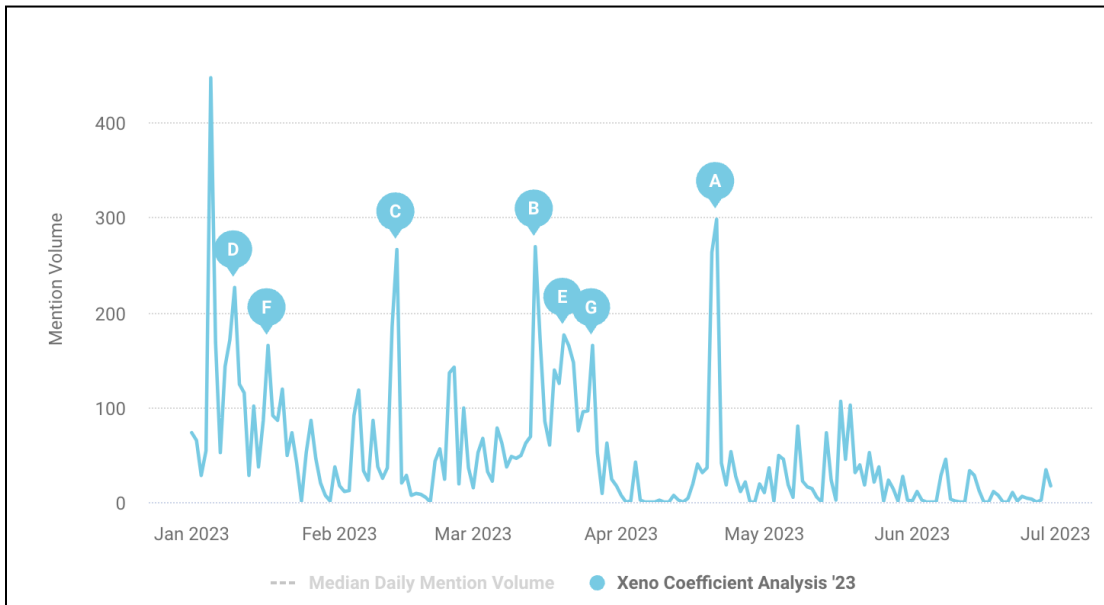


Figure 33: Peaks of conversation within the #PatrioticSpace dataset

The @KeaGqi account continues to generate the most retweeted content during peaks [D](#), [E](#), [F](#) and [G](#).

Furthermore, @KeaGqi accounted for 38% of the total 1 251 mentions from the top 10 authors in the conversation. The account's posts are frequently retweeted by the remaining nine authors. On the other hand, accounts such as @masotobe39 have been previously flagged by the CABC. The account was found to be the top tweeter in the CABC’s periodic report 2 last year³².

³² [CABC Period Report 2 - Foreign Nationals](#)

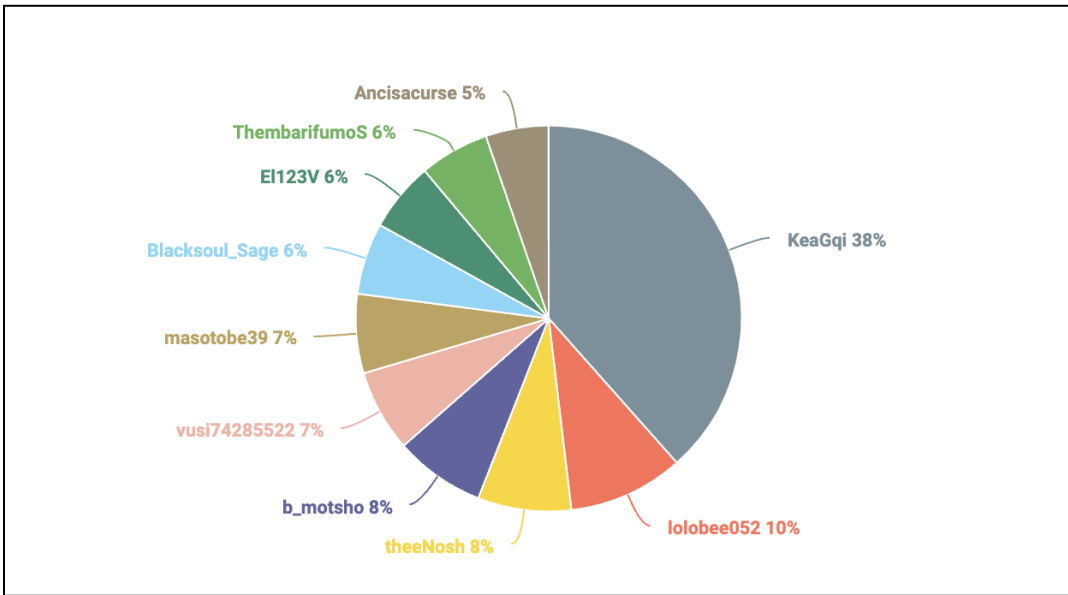


Figure 34: Top 10 authors using #PatrioticSpace

Summary

- Posts from the @KeaGqi account are the most active user of #PatrioticSpace, accounting for 481 mentions within the conversation. Posts from the account are frequently retweeted by other users.
- Accounts previously identified by the CABC continue to contribute to the anti-immigrant narrative. An example of this is the #masotobe39 account, which the CABC flagged in the past.
- About 98% of mentions in this conversation are retweets.
- #PatrioticSpace has the second-highest coefficient of traffic manipulation, preceded only the #Xenophobia.

4.6 #Xenophobia

With the highest traffic manipulation coefficient of all hashtags, #Xenophobia received 1 804 mentions between 1 January and 30 June 2023. As shown in figure 35 below, the volume of retweets (2 103) exceeds the total mentions. This usually happens when users share quote tweets, i.e. where an account Tweets another account's Tweet with an added comment.



Figure 35: Volume of mentions for #Xenophobia

The highest peak was recorded on 16 January, as a result of a post by the [@TeeYanca](#) account, which alleged that illegal immigrants were protesting in the Johannesburg CBD, because “the police allegedly shot a Tanzanian drug dealer”. The post, which was accompanied by a video of the alleged events, was retweeted more than 200 times (see figure 36 below).

According to news reports³³, “police alleged the Tanzanian man collapsed and died at his apartment on Monday after they searched his home for drugs and other substances. Scores of people took to the streets on Monday demanding answers from the police regarding the man's death”.

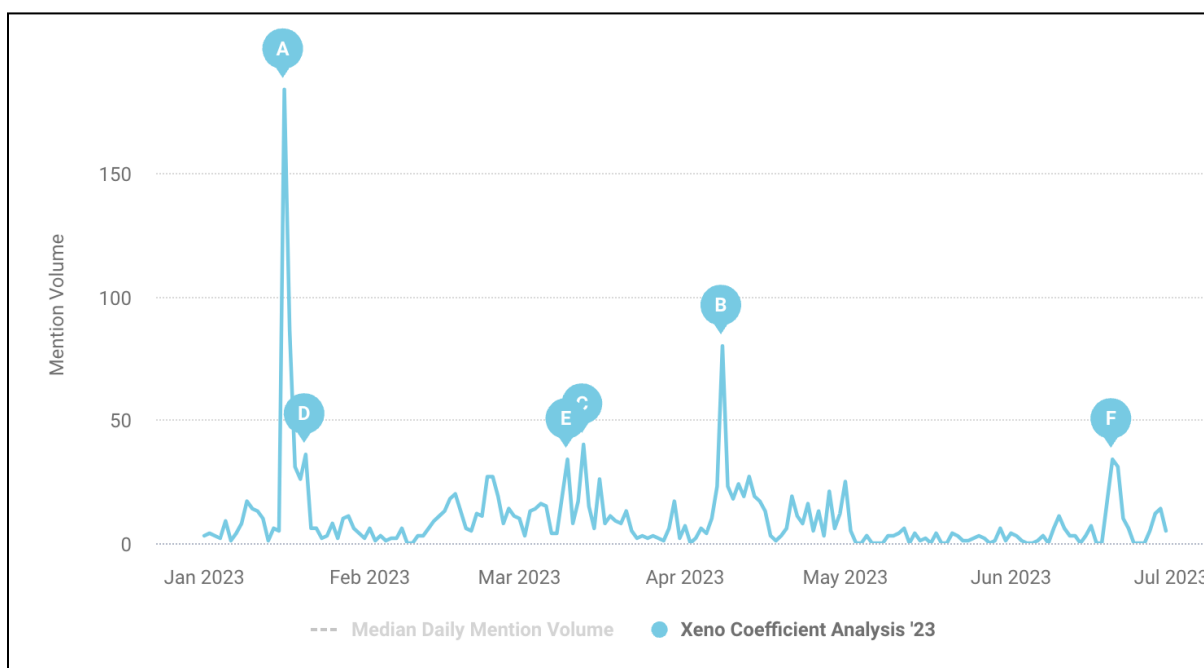


Figure 36: Mentions of #Xenophobia over time

The second-highest peak was recorded on 8 April. It was driven by a post from the [@ProudlyMsTee](#) account, which shared a tweet from the [@PSAFLive](#) account - alleging that “hundreds of illegal Zimbabwean foreigners smuggling illicit cigarettes into the Republic of South Africa. Tuesday 11 April 2023 Helen Suzman Foundation will be in court (to) for the government of South Africa to legalize lawlessness.” [sic] (see post in figure 37 below).

³³ <https://ewn.co.za/2023/01/17/police-monitoring-joburg-cbd-after-destructive-protest>



Figure 37: Most retweeted post in the 8 April peak within the #Xenophobia conversation

An analysis of the top 10 most retweeted posts containing this hashtag reveals an overarching anti-immigrant sentiment, with some users expressing that South Africa is the only country where patriotism is confused with or mislabelled as xenophobia. Examples of the most retweeted posts can be found in figure 38 below.

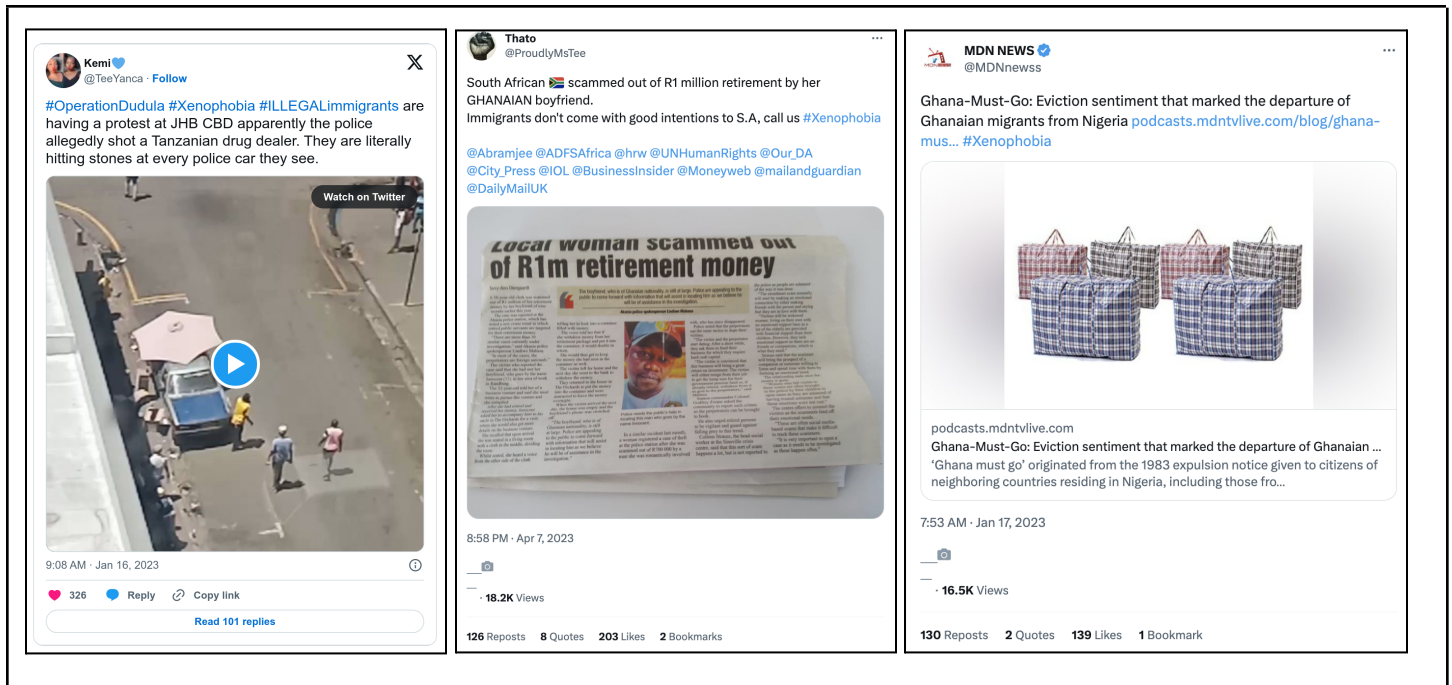


Figure 38: Top three most retweeted content in the #Xenophobia conversation.

Others, such as those from the [@Issafrica](#) and the [@CrimeHub](#) accounts used the hashtag to share a report by the Institute for Security Studies (see figure 39 below). The report³⁴ titled “*Scapegoating in South Africa: Busting the myths about immigrants*”, found that South African socio-economic problems were not caused by immigrants but by poor governance and corruption, among others.

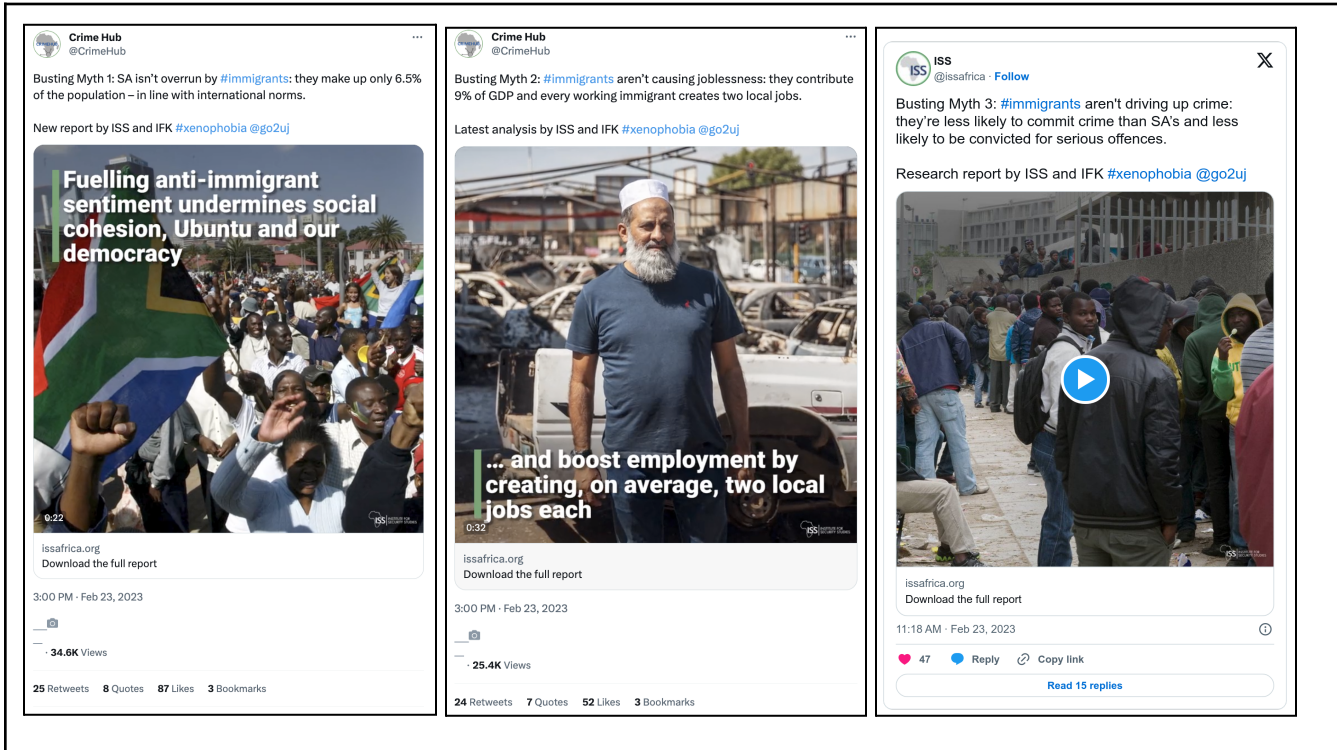


Figure 39: Examples of the posts under #Xenophobia

A post from the [@Issafrica](#) account, which stated that: “New report shows that #xenophobia isn’t what drives conflict between South Africa’s locals and foreign migrants,” was among the top 10 most retweeted in the conversation, with 32 likes and 25 retweets (see figure 40 below).

³⁴ <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/sar-53.pdf>

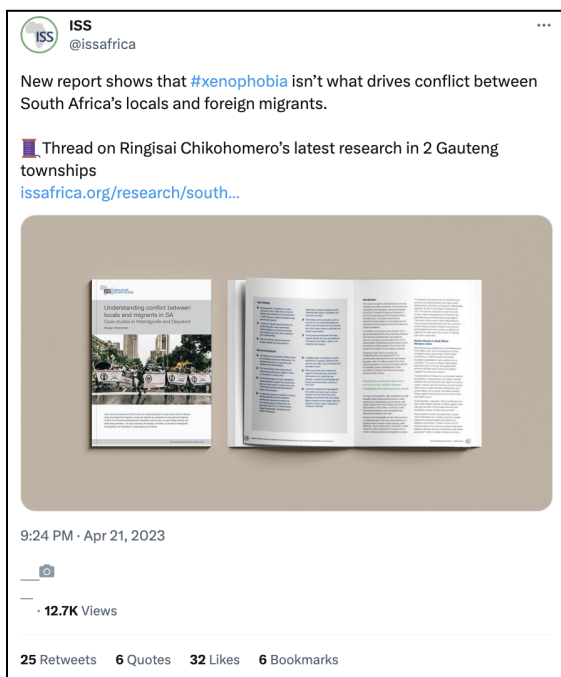


Figure 40: Tenth most retweeted post in the conversation

Summary

- #Xenophobia received the highest traffic manipulation coefficient of all other hashtags.
- Some proponents of the anti-immigrant narrative use this hashtag, to define their calls for immigrants to return home as patriotic, not xenophobic.
- @Issafrica also used this hashtag online to bring awareness to their new report, which busted myths about immigrants
- The @ProudlyMsTee account is the most active in this conversation, accounting for 297 mentions between 1 January - 30 June 2023.

4.7 #WeWantOurCountryBack

#WeWantOurCountryBack holds the second-smallest mention volume overall. Over a 6-month period the hashtag was used 5 221 times. The conversation was mainly made up of retweets (91%) and predominantly used by a small cohort of authors. The @JusticeMEB account authored 94 posts (see Figure 41).

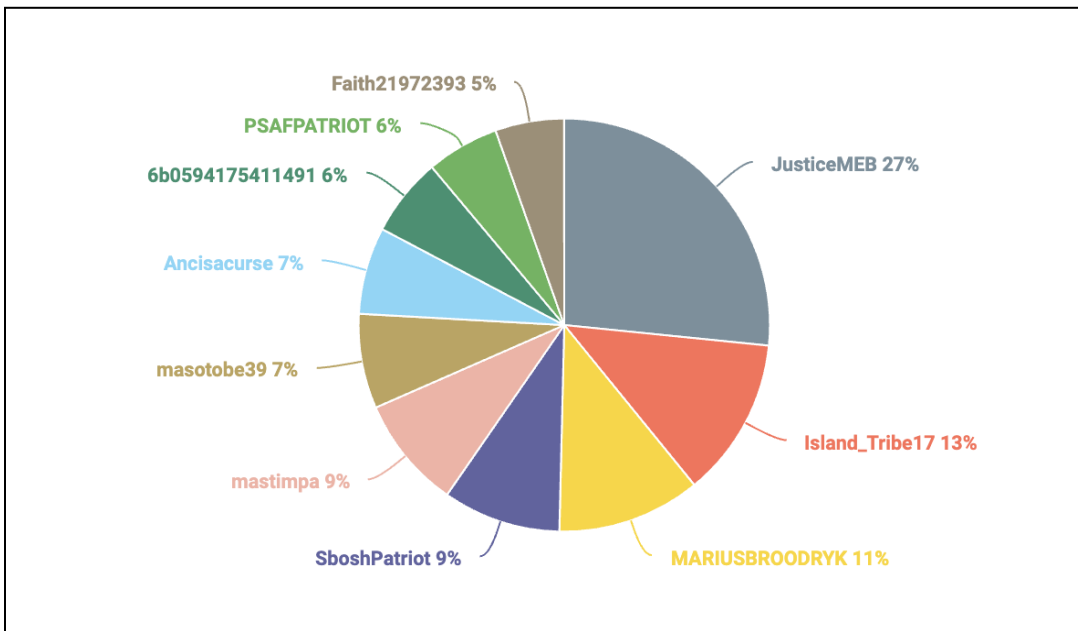


Figure 41: Top 10 Authors of Original Posts containing #WeWantOurCountryBack.

The account most commonly focuses on alleged corruption within the department of home affairs. These posts often feature images of residence documents, passports and identification documents among others (See Figure 42). It is unclear how the individual behind this account is able to access or receive images of physical documents so regularly. The account further comments on alleged immigration irregularities country wide.

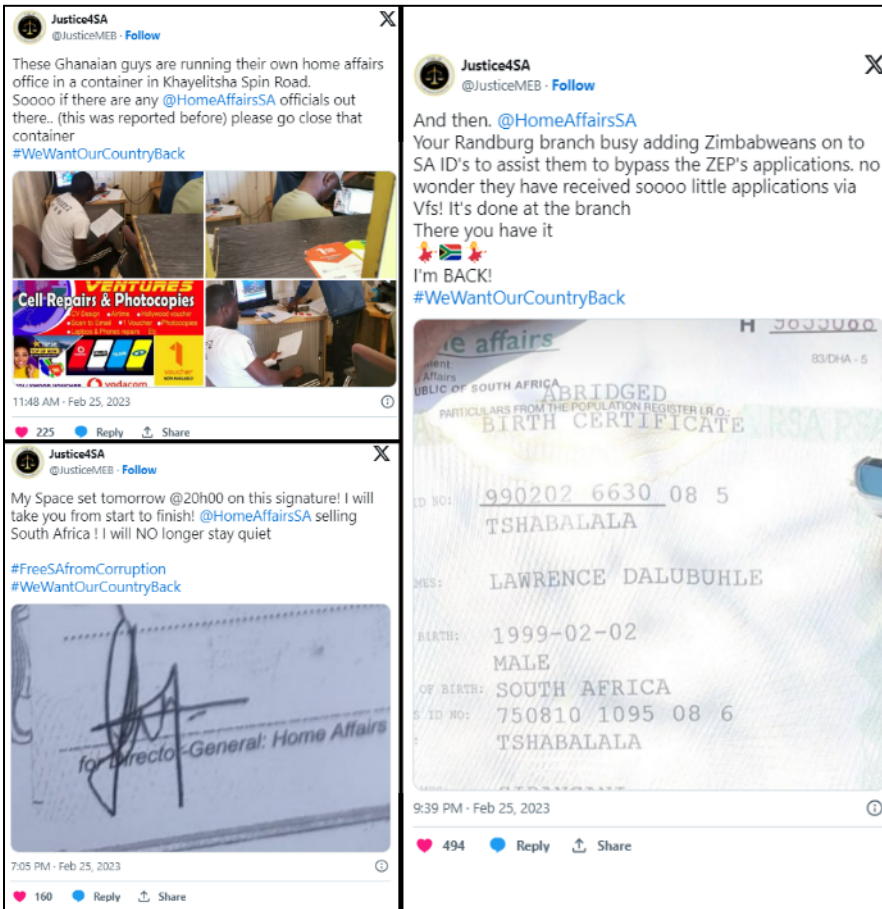


Figure 42: Posts by @JusticeMEB featured predominantly under #WeWantOurCountryBack.

Interestingly, the account creates easy-to-understand images explaining immigration legislation, lending an air of professionalism to xenophobic rhetoric (See Figure 43).

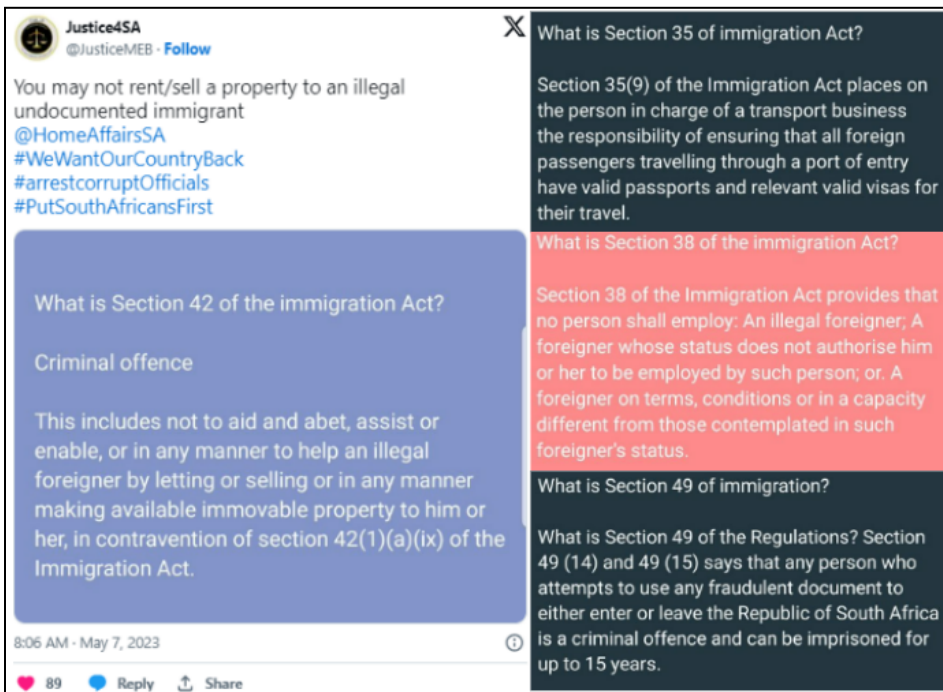


Figure 43: Posts by @JusticeMEB on legal prescripts around immigration.

Other posts that used the hashtag focused on general xenophobic sentiment. These posts were generally used in conjunction with other prominent hashtags such as #PutSouthAfricansFirst indicating that individuals who came across @JusticeMEB's posts may have assumed it was another identifier they could use to draw engagement to their posts (see Figure 44).



Figure 44: A post which used #WeWantOurCountryBack in conjunction with other hashtags.

Overall, #WeWantOurCountryBack is used for the purpose of expressing xenophobic sentiment. While this hashtag holds a high coefficient (39.04), no explicit evidence indicates that this may be a manipulated hashtag, whether due to volume or distinct peaks of activity, with the exception of peak A, on the 25th of Feb (See Figure 45), where @JusticeMEB posted multiple high-traction posts (see Figure 42 above).

#WeWantOurCountryBack is most likely used by a small subset of individuals engaging with the broader xenophobia conversation, either explicitly for the purposes of differentiating their content, as is the case with @JusticeMEB, or having been noticed and picked up by other actors as an additional hashtag to express their views.

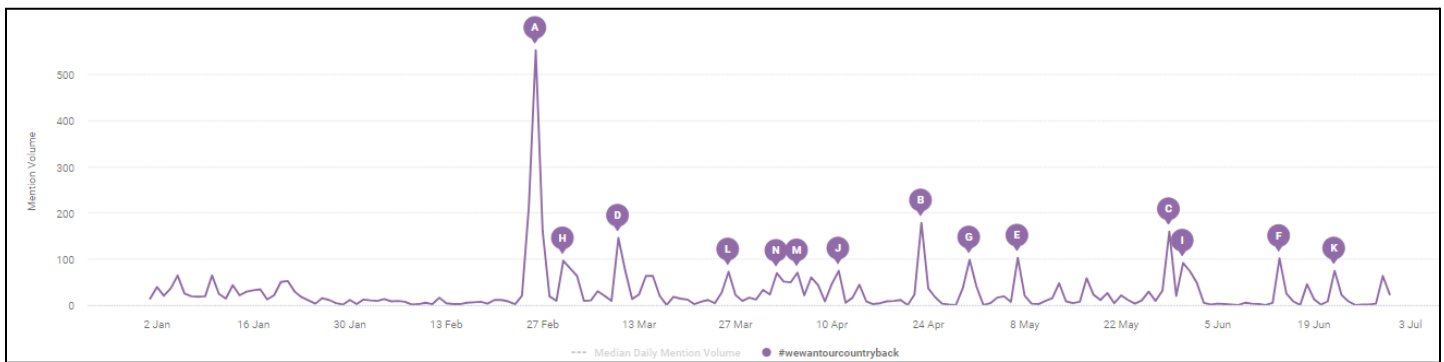


Figure 45: Volume over time for #WeWantOurCountryBack indicates a relatively sparse conversation.

Summary

- #WeWantOurCountryBack is predominantly used by the account @JusticeMEB.
- @JusticeMEB, as the name implies, focuses on the legal aspect of immigration - the account creates content which speaks to legislation and produces “exposés” on alleged corruption within home affairs.

4.8 #VoetsekEFF

Mentions of #VoetsekEFF amounted to 25 538 between 1 January and 30 June. About 64% of all mentions within the conversation about #VoetsekEFF are retweets.

The majority of users engaging with this hashtag express a negative sentiment towards the EFF. Proponents of the anti-immigrant narrative criticised the party for its pan-Africanist stance.

An advanced Twitter search of #VoetsekEFF reveals that the hashtag has been used as early as [2014](#), a year after the party was launched. By 2020, the hashtag was being [used](#) within the anti-immigrant narrative, alongside other hashtags such as #VoetsekANC, #VoetsekDA and #PutSouthAfricaFirst.

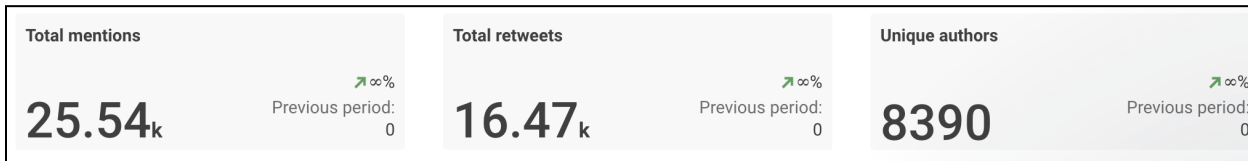


Figure 46: Volume of the #VoetsekEFF conversation.

The highest peak in the conversation, with more than 3000 mentions was recorded on March 20 (see Figure 47 below). Users engaging with the hashtag criticised the party’s planned “national shutdown”, a day before South Africa commemorated Human Rights Day.

The march was aimed at mobilising South Africans against the ongoing load shedding crisis, while calling for the resignation of President Cyril Ramaphosa. A detailed report of the party’s ‘shutdown’ can be found [here](#).

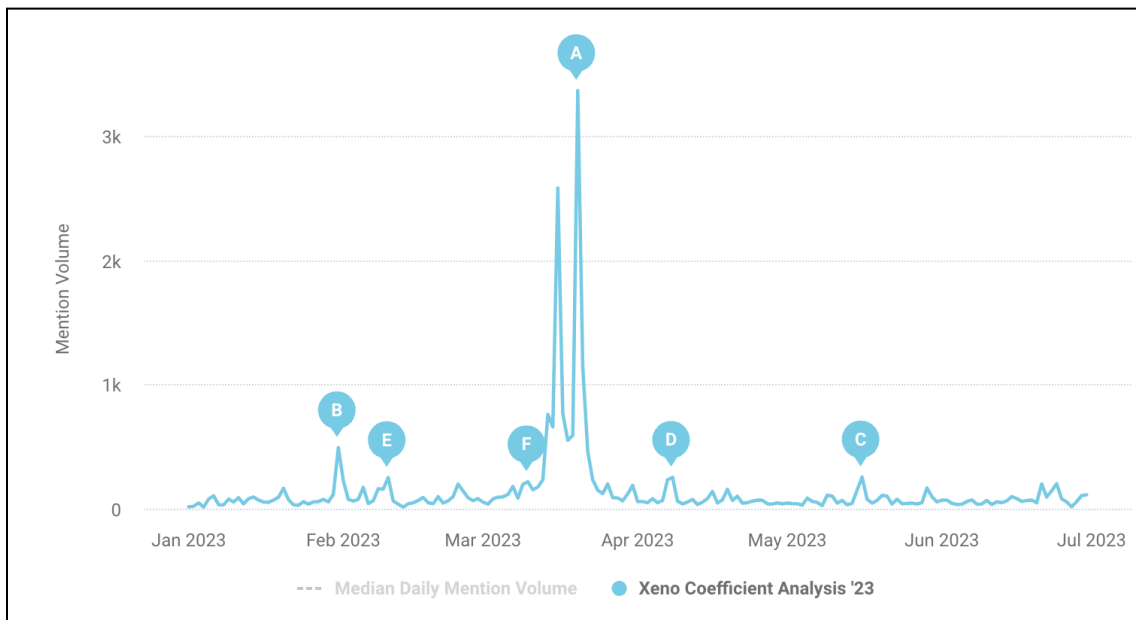


Figure 47: mentions of #VoetsekEFF over time

Among the most retweeted posts during this peak are those criticising the EFF’s shutdown. The party deemed it a success. However, this was viewed as a joke by some users of this hashtag.

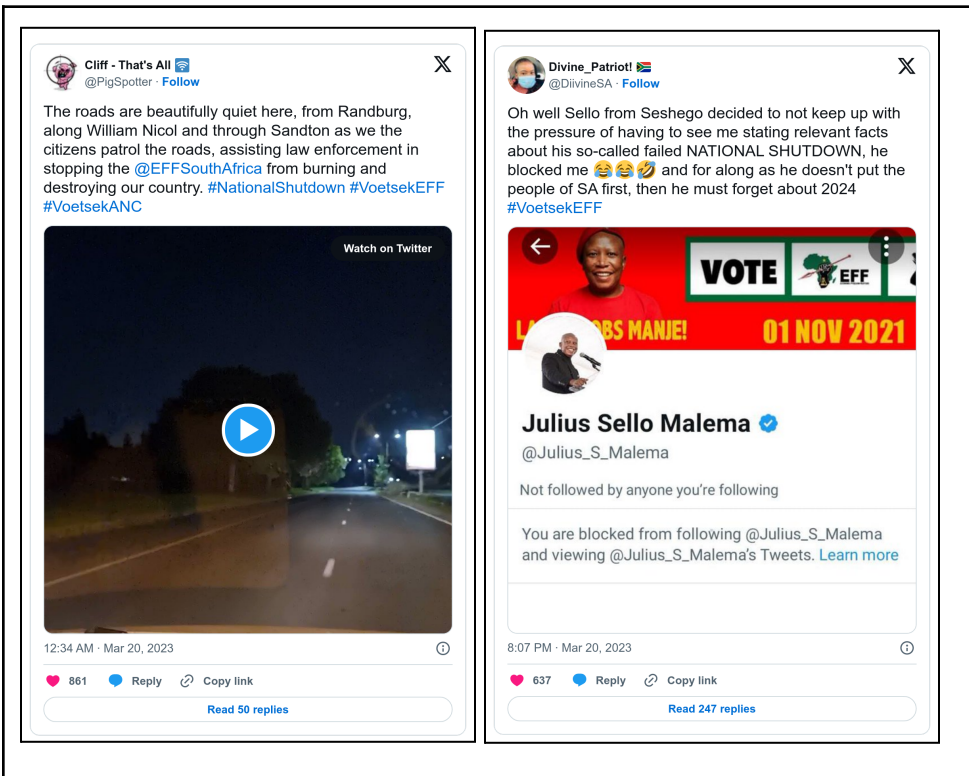


Figure 48: Examples of the most retweeted posts using #VoetsekEFF during the 20 March peak.

The CABC also detected anti-EFF sentiment that was not related to the conversation about immigrants in South Africa (see Figure 49 below).

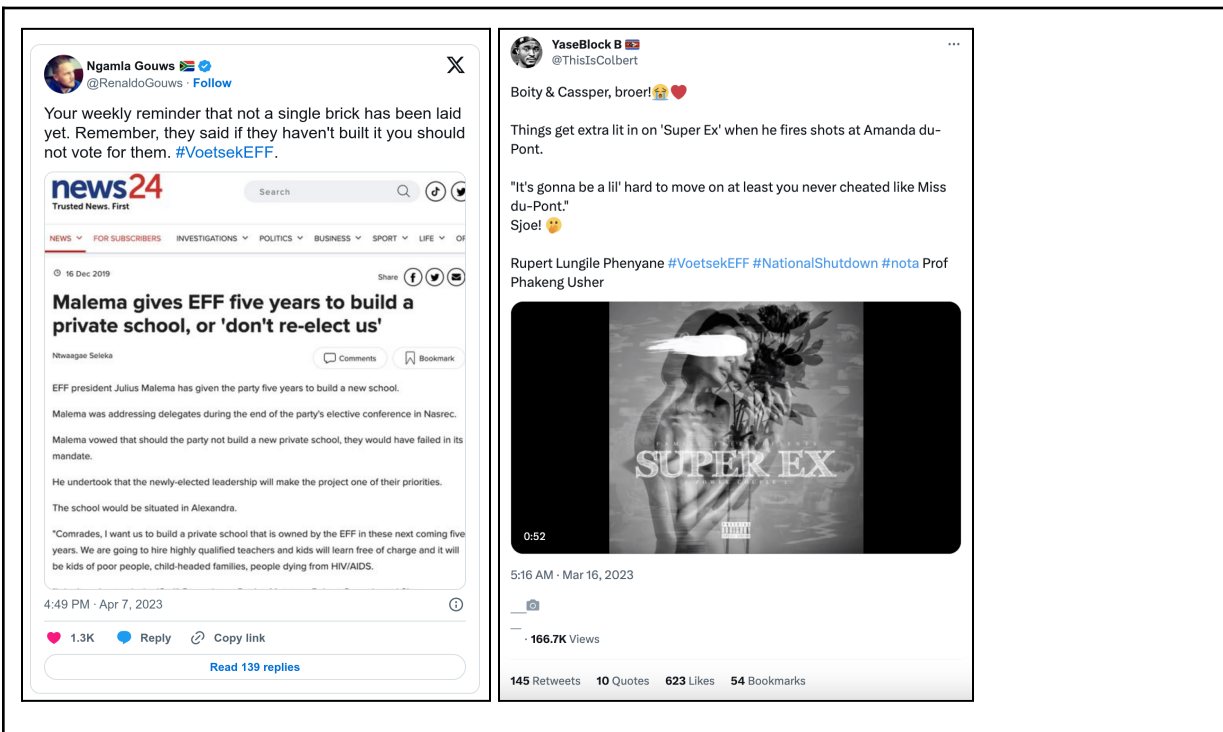


Figure 49: Examples of posts mentioning #VoetsekEFF, but unrelated to the conversation about foreign nationals in South Africa.

This content came from users arguing that the party would not receive more than [15% of votes](#) in the upcoming 2024 national elections - and that the party had [recruited](#) politicians such as Mzwanele Manyi to lure more voters.

Instances of hashjacking were also detected with the use of #VoetsekEFF. The term [refers](#) to a practice of using a hashtag which diverts attention away from the conversation with which it was originally associated - in some cases to draw attention to their post.

Summary

- Within the anti-immigrant conversation, #VoetsekEFF is being used to criticise the party and its members for their pan-Africanist stance.
- The use of the hashtag peaked as the party prepared and conducted a “national shutdown” to call for President Cyril Ramaphosa’s resignation.
- The CABC detected the use of #VoetsekEFF in posts unrelated to the anti-immigrant narrative. The posts criticised the party for its political decisions. Others, completely unrelated to the party, used #VoetsekEFF to draw attention to separate issues.

4.9 #VoetsekANC

#VoetsekANC is the most popular hashtag in our selected searches, accounting for 26% of the overall conversation. It also has the third-highest coefficient of traffic manipulation.

The hashtag is used to express disagreement and frustration with the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC) both within the anti-immigrant narrative and outside.

#VoetsekANC has been circulating on Twitter since 2020 and the advent of COVID-19³⁵. An investigation by the DFRLab has previously identified that the hashtag is driven [organically](#). Originally mobilised on [Friday’s](#)

³⁵<https://www.goodthingsguy.com/opinion/voetsekanc-has-been-trending-for-over-a-week-now-and-this-response-is-pretty-funny/>

(See Figure 50). #VoetsekANC has been suggested to be used communally by accounts which rally around influencers³⁶.



Figure 50: A high traction tweet indicative of rallying behaviour on #VoetsekANC Friday.

The past 6 months have seen the hashtag continue to be used in the same fashion (see Figure 51).

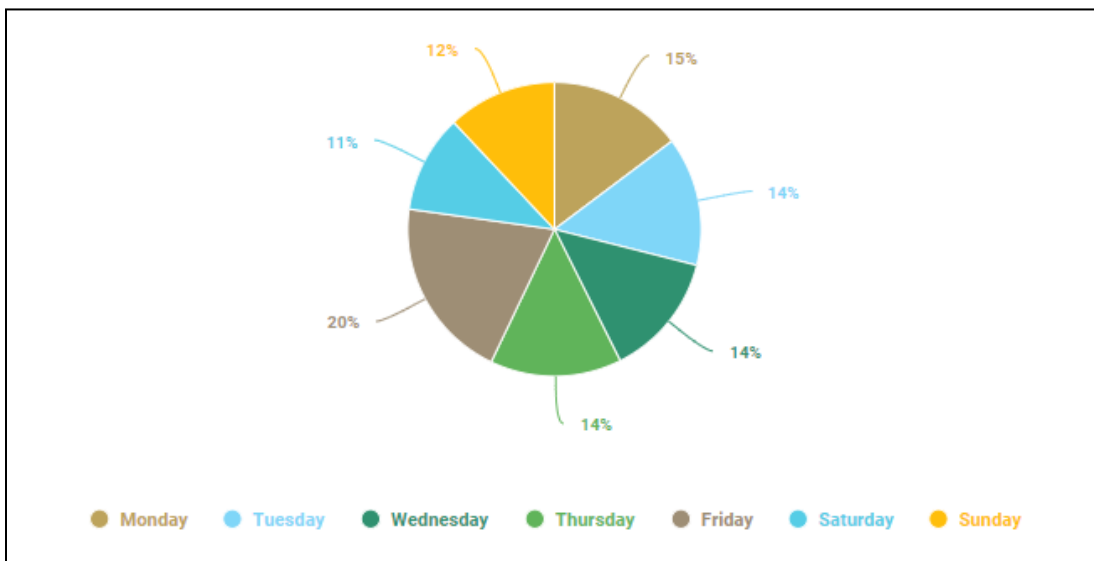


Figure 51: Use of #VoetsekANC from Jan 1 - June 30 by day of the week.

³⁶ [The Detection of Conversation Patterns in South African Political Tweets through Social Network Analysis \(Gerber, 2021\)](#)

Incoherent account behaviour was employed by @Alima1000. The accounts output represented 9.4% of all mentions. This is inconsistent with the aforementioned verification of organic conversation in #VoetsekANC. The account posts low traction content alleging that the Government Employee Medical Scheme (GEMS) is discriminatory (see Figure 52).

Alongside these claims, @Alima1000 engages in hashjacking and tags accounts affiliated with the South African government. At the time of investigation the link to the accounts dropbox, a file sharing site, contained no documents. Prior to data collection for this report, the account had been identified and the contents within a previous dropbox link noted as an affidavit on a court matter between GEMS as the applicant and Newzroom Afrika and Alfred Mokoditso as respondents.

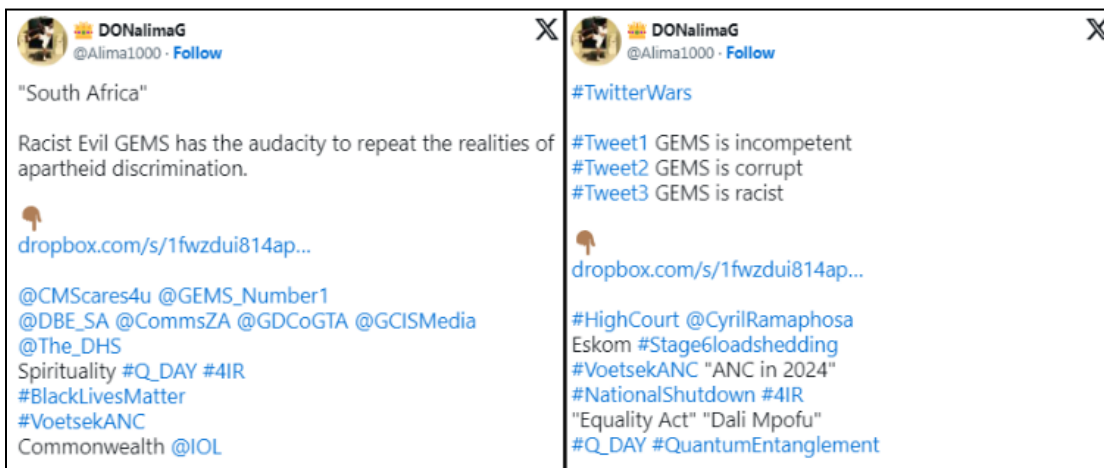
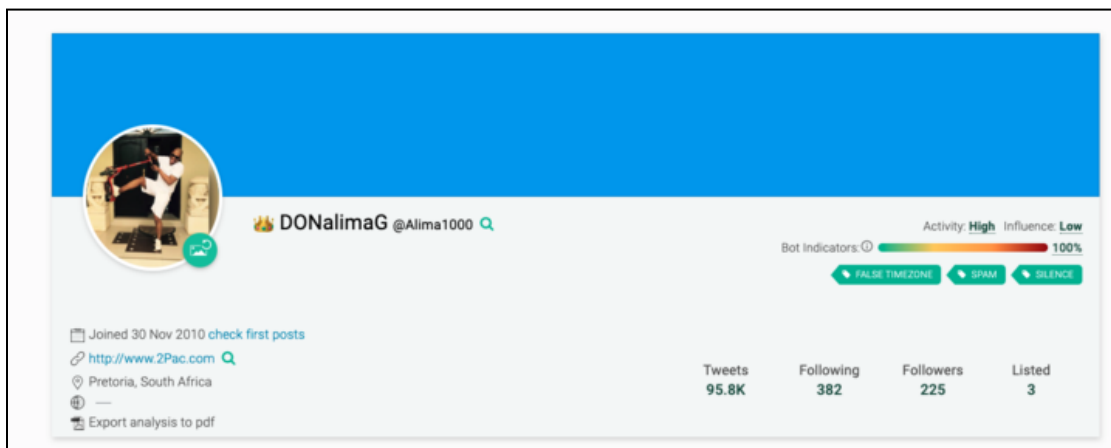


Figure 52: Examples of @Alima1000's standardised messaging.

The account has previously been noted by researchers at the CABC as exhibiting bot-like tendencies³⁷. Prior to the restriction of the Twitter API, an analysis through the TruthNest OSINT app graded the account at 100% potential for bot-like behaviour (see Figure 53).



³⁷ [CABC - Democracy Periodic Report 5](#)

Figure 53: @Alima1000 returned a 100% “bot score” when analysed through TruthNest in May 2022

Another account, @commenter6, adopted the same tactic, posting low traction standardised messaging in the form of quote tweets and original posts, on political content which referenced corruption and governance challenges in South Africa (see Figure 54). Content from this profile accounted for 3.5% of all mentions in the #VoetsekANC conversation.

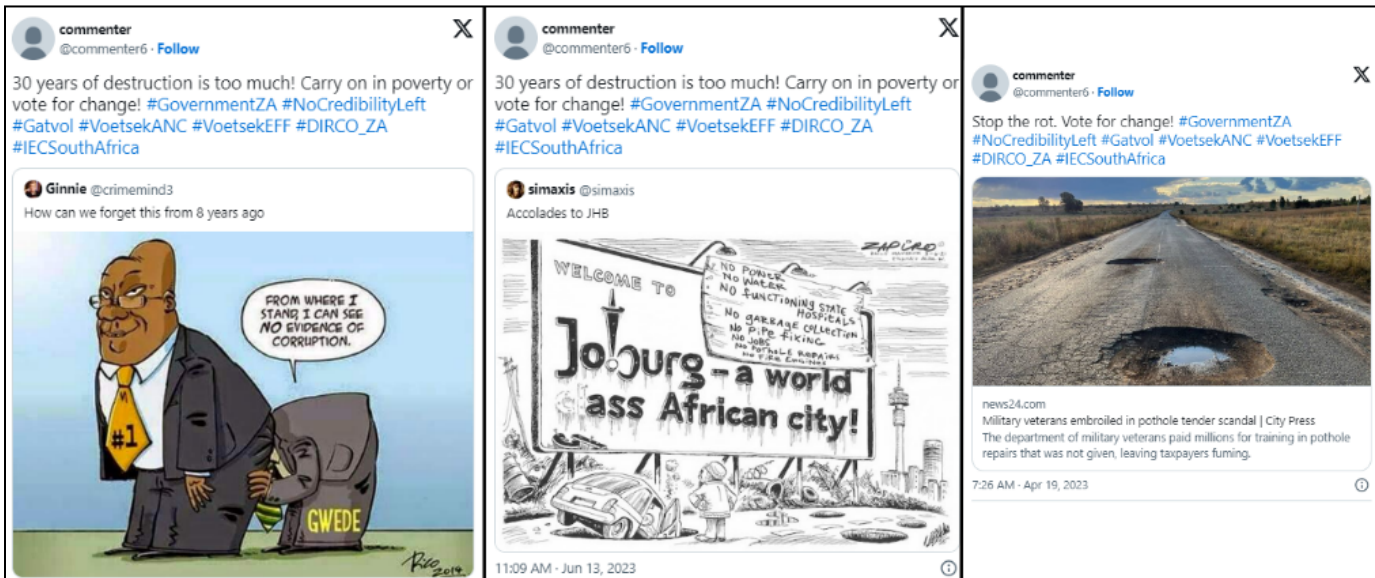


Figure 54: Examples of @commenter6’s standardised messaging

Distinct from its origins as a form of protest, the hashtag has been used in relation to divisive and xenophobic rhetoric (see Figure 55). Most notably, the image on the right invokes historical trauma, that of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the death of Hector Pieterse³⁸, alongside xenophobic stereotypes to drive anger toward immigrants.

³⁸ <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/hector-pieterse>



Figure 55: #VoetsekANC is used alongside xenophobic sentiment

The diversity of uses in the #VoetsekANC conversation, as well as previous analyses done on the hashtag, suggests that this conversation may remain organic. The potential for hashjacking, as seen in figure 55, to drive communities toward xenophobic content is a cause for concern. This may serve as an early warning indicator for future manipulation. Mass posting, as seen by @Alima1000 and @commenter6, may have unduly influenced the coefficient of 43.66, the third-highest indicator in our analysis overall.

Summary

- #VoetsekANC has previously been verified as an organic conversation, the diversity of uses present in our search supports this analysis.
- #VoetsekANC is driven with outsized influence by @Alima1000 and @commenter6, who engage in suspicious tweeting behaviour.
- #VoetsekANC has seen instances of hashjacking by authors expressing xenophobic viewpoints.

4.10 #GoldMafia

#GoldMafia was primarily used in relation to the release of a documentary series and various articles by Al-Jazeera, who investigated corruption within the gold industry in Zimbabwe³⁹. The conversation was centralised around the release date of this material (see Figure 56).

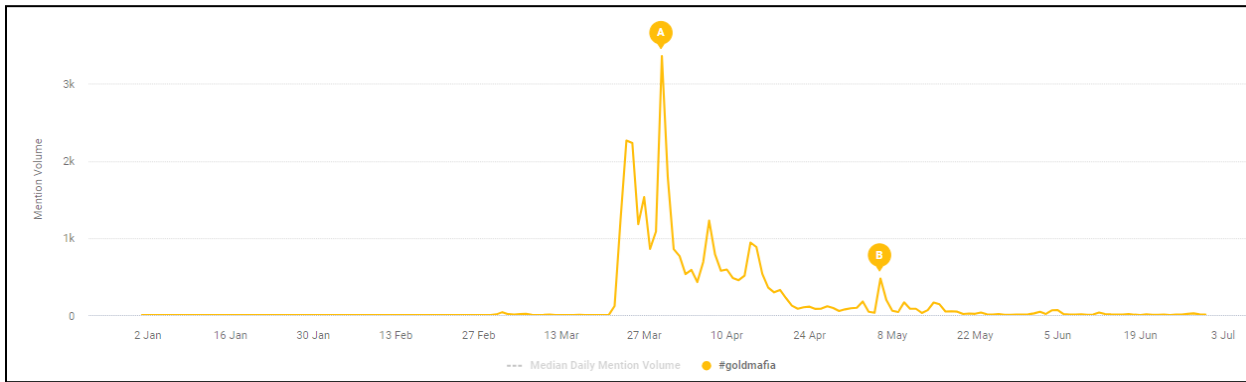


Figure 56: Volume over time for #GoldMafia.

Content fell within three broad themes: journalistic and civil society responses, hashjacking, and political activism. Journalistic and civil society posts predominantly engaged with the facts of the issue at hand and garnered high engagement by calling attention to the need for justice (see Figure 57).



Figure 57: Journalistic and Civil Society uses of #GoldMafia

Hashjacking was used to draw attention to social media content, such as memes and travels hacks, as seen in Figure 58 below.

³⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/23/gold-mafia-looting-southern-africa>



Figure 58: Examples of hashjacking used under #GoldMafia to drive engagement toward posts.

Political activism was primarily used to support the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), an opposition party in Zimbabwe, led by Nelson Chamisa (see Figure 59).



Figure 59: Political sentiment expressed under the #GoldMafia.

The context of #GoldMafia, and the timing of its use around the release of content explicitly related to investigative journalism on the “Gold Mafia” indicates that this hashtag may not be artificially manipulated.

Summary

- #GoldMafia is an organic conversation, centralised around the release of media relating to the “Gold Mafia”.
- The hashtag has seen use as a call to justice, to drive awareness and to support the CCC political party in Zimbabwe.

5. Authorship Commonalities

The diagram below (see Figure 60), depicts the correlation between the number of authors associated with a particular hashtag. Data was sourced from our social media listening tool. The top 50 authors in each search term's individual conversation were exported to a spreadsheet. Thereafter, accounts were sorted manually to isolate those which engaged in a selected hashtag more than once. In the diagram, green nodes symbolise hashtags, whereas the pink nodes signify authors. The diagram's arrangement takes the form of a spiral, where nodes situated closer to the central point exhibit a greater degree of interconnectedness with other nodes. Conversely, nodes positioned farther away from the central point possess fewer connections with other nodes.

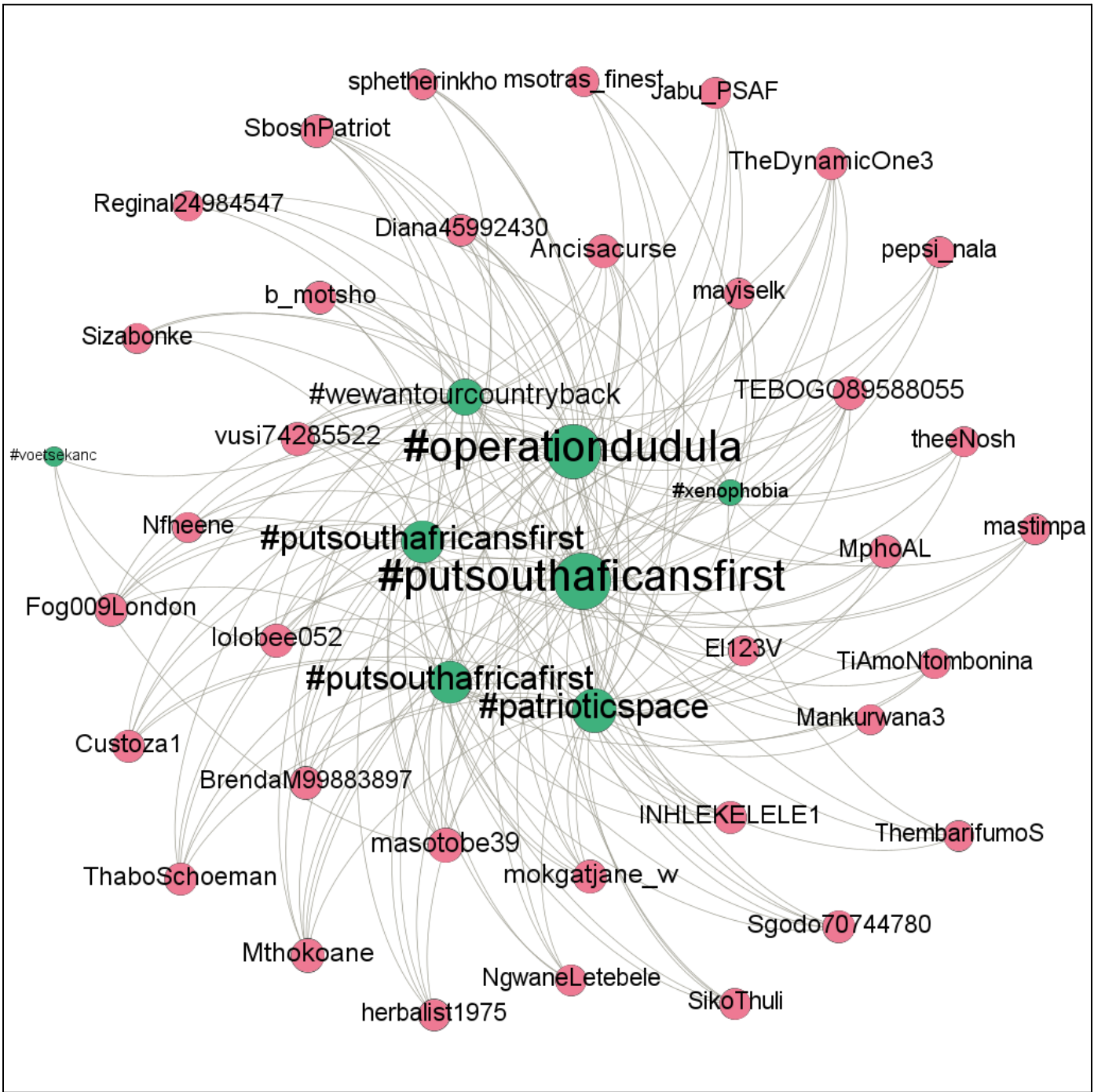


Figure 60: A network diagram which indicates accounts that have been found to be within the Top 50 Authors across multiple hashtags.

Accounts in the mapping above interacted with multiple hashtags within the anti-immigrant conversation. They also play an amplification role within some hashtags and a content creation role in others. For example, accounts such as @Lolobee052 and @masotobe39 have found to mostly retweet content within hashtags such as #OperationDudula, #PutSouthAfricansFirst, while creating original content within #PutSouthAfricansFirst.

The @SboshPatriot account is among those whose content is made up of retweets, replies and some original content. Others, such as @INHLEKELELE1, @TheDynamicOne3 and @vusi74285522 predominantly retweeted content with #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #OperationDudula and #PutSouthAfricaFirst, with little original content.

The chart of the top 50 authors overall (see Figure 61), indicates that - @Masotobe39, @ancisacurse, @vusi74285522, @sgodo70744780, @Jabu_PSAF, @b_motsho, @BrendaM99883897, @Custoza1, @Diana45992430, @Fog009London, @herbalist1975, @INHLEKELELE1, @lolobee052, @mayiselk, @mokatjane_w, @MphoAL, @Mthokoane, @NgwaneLetebele, @SboshPatriot, @SikoThuli, @Sizabonke, @TEBOGO89588055, @ThaboSchoeman, @TheDynamicOne3 and @ThembarifumoS are common to the top authors and commonality graph (see Appendix B).

In conjunction with the TMC analysis and thematic analysis conducted above, we suggest that these accounts form the core content creation and dissemination structure for xenophobic content used alongside hashtags analysed in this report. Accounts such as @JusticeMEB, @Ruraltarain_2, @KeaGqi, @1DUDULA, @realodofficial, @OperationDudula and @PSAFLive may potentially form the “legitimate” face of online xenophobia through organisations, “media” accounts and legal expertise.

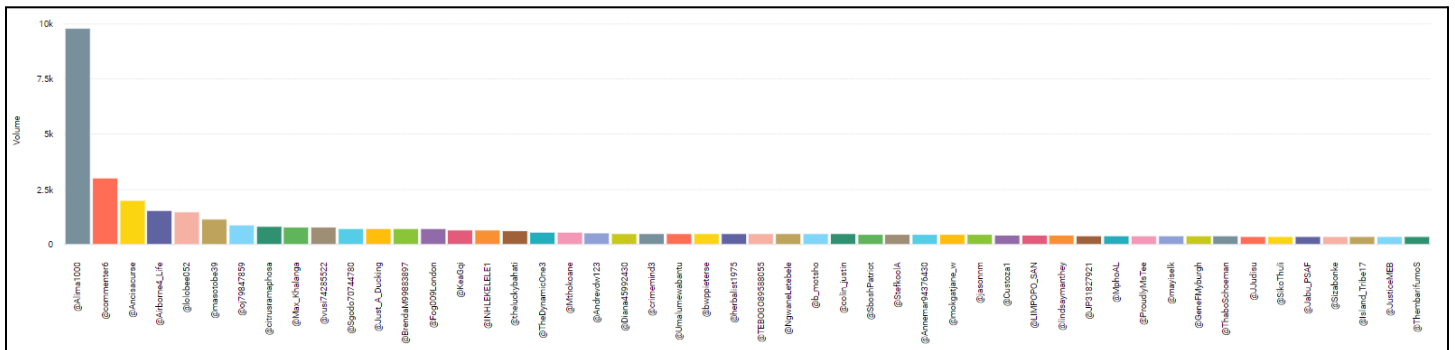


Figure 61: Top 50 authors within the overall conversation.

6. Conclusion

In this section, we summarise the key insights that surfaced from our analysis and discuss the results. We also identify areas for potential anti-immigrant interventions.

6.1 Key Insights

Big picture: The online conversation around the 10 hashtags consists mainly of retweets. The conversation about the hashtags ranges from both organic to event-based. For example, the conversation about #OperationDudula appears to be events-based, with spikes feeding off the content posted by the @PSAFLive account. Meanwhile, conversations within other hashtags, such as #VoetsekANC are found to be organic, with some users dedicating specific days of the week to make the hashtag trend.

ANC and EFF: Our analysis of the top 10 hashtags reveals the dominant of anti-immigrant, anti-ANC and anti-EFF sentiment. The EFF is mostly critiqued for its pan-Africanist stance in the conversation around immigrants in South Africa. The failure of the EFF's 'national shutdown' earlier this year is also attributed to the party advocating for a borderless Africa while immigrants are viewed as 'destroying' and 'overpopulating' South Africa.

The ANC, on the other hand, is criticised for its perceived lax approach to the issue of immigration in South Africa. The party is criticised for allegedly failing to strengthen border security. The Department of Home Affairs and the SA Police Service are also among the most critiqued in the conversation. The two are accused of accepting bribes from immigrants to obtain documentation and to remain in South Africa. Home Affairs faces further criticism over its multiple extensions of the Zimbabwean Exemption Permit. #VoetsekANC received the highest mentions of all ten hashtags.

Operation Dudula: The @PSAFLive account has been very instrumental in the use of #OperationDudula. The self-proclaimed news source constantly updates its followers on the activities of members of Operation Dudula in its posts. The account also focuses predominantly on "illegal foreigners". It is unclear how @PSAFLive - in some of its posts uncorroborated by other sources - concludes that immigrants are indeed "illegal". There also appears to be confusion on Operation Dudula's 'official' Twitter account - if it even exists. One user accused the @OperationDudula account of being fake, encouraging supporters to follow the @ODudula account instead. Meanwhile, @OperationDudula has also [accused](#) the @ODudula account of being fake.

Coefficient of Traffic Manipulation: #Xenophobia and #PatrioticSpace has the highest coefficient of traffic manipulation, the former with a coefficient of 63.32 and the latter with 44.32. Interestingly, these two hashtags are each driven by a single author. @ProudlyMsTee is the most retweeted account in the #Xenophobia conversation, which is mainly focused on spreading the message that South Africans fighting for their country are mislabelled as xenophobic. @KeaGqi is the most retweeted account in the #PatrioticSpace. Its posts range from responses to reports about crimes committed by immigrants, to announcing guests on the #PatrioticSpace platform. The @Alima1000 account contributed the most mentions to the #VoetsekANC and #PutSouthAfricaFirst conversations, which displayed the third and fourth-highest coefficients for traffic

manipulation. @JusticeMEB accounted for the highest mentions within the #WeWantOurCountryBack conversation. #WeWantOurCountryBack had the fifth-highest coefficient of traffic manipulation.

Narrative manipulation: The @Alima100 account has the most mentions in the #VoetsekANC and #PutSouthAfricaFirst conversation. The account's hyperfocus on the Government Employee Medical Aid Scheme (GEMS) and the proliferation of this focus through the use of hashtags popular in negatively valenced conversation i.e. anti-immigrant and anti-government, is interesting. While this occurrence can perhaps be considered a form of manipulation, the absence of mass-based dissemination and conversation on GEMS indicates that @Alima1000 may have an individual agenda.

Mis- and disinformation: Posts containing mis- and disinformation in this report are mostly focused on unverified and inflated stats, either about the crimes alleged to have been committed by immigrants, or about the concentration of immigrants in South Africa. Myths, which have been spread to centralise immigrants at the heart of a number of social ills, have been busted by various organisations over the years. However, proponents of the anti-immigrant narrative continue to draw on these online to drum up support. Unfortunately, some of these myths have been detected in the peaks, which implies that they still receive some traction online.

Opportunities for intervention

Mis- and disinformation: Proponents of the online anti-immigrant often rely on unverified and exaggerated stats, either about the alleged crimes committed by immigrants or the population of immigrants in South Africa. In countering this with available stats from trusted sources, it could also be worthwhile to address exaggerated stats and share factual information about xenophobia-motivated attacks in South Africa. Using information from sources such as Xenowatch or ISS could be useful in this form of intervention⁴⁰.

Coefficient of Traffic Manipulation: The Coefficient of Traffic Manipulation assisted in focusing our analyses on artificially manipulated content. Further use of this tool in social media analysis conducted by the CABG and other CSO organisations may prove to support its use for uncovering similarly manipulated conversations online in South Africa. Furthermore, use of the coefficient may serve as a monitoring tool, when applied comparatively, to indicate whether certain narratives online may be increasingly manipulated. While not all xenophobic mentions reported on formed part of inorganic conversation, the prevalence of anti-immigrant content spread through hashjacking, opportunism and the espousing of individual anti-immigrant rhetoric requires intervention.

⁴⁰[Scapegoating in SA: Busting Myths About Immigrants](#)

Inclusive Impact: Developing a guide or material in collaboration with civil society organisations. These guides should contain information that the public can use to differentiate between fact and fiction online. For example, informing the public of platforms such as Real411, which can be used to verify claims made online. This may take the form of physical distribution of brochures and posters in schools or through other publicly accessible channels and spaces in a variety of languages. A civil society-private partnership may be advantageous. Telecom companies could assist by zero-rating access to socially conscious material designed to support harmony and bridge the digital divide across South Africa.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Coefficient Metrics

Scan (#)	Total Tweets	Total Retweets	Total Tweets (Top 50)	Unique Authors	R (RT %)	R / 10	F (%)	U (Num)	Traffic Manipulation Coefficient
#operationdudula	75921	72260	12550	13826	95.18	9.52	16.53	5.49	31.54
#putsouthafricansfirst	32636	28966	7891	7219	88.75	8.88	24.18	4.52	37.58
#putsouthafricansfirst	49266	44652	9238	9936	90.63	9.06	18.75	4.96	32.77
#voetsekanc	87333	50460	27382	13369	57.78	5.78	31.35	6.53	43.66
#goldmafia	31368	37058	5992	9746	118.14	11.81	19.10	3.22	34.13
#putsouthafricafirst	11423	8101	3540	3378	70.92	7.09	30.99	3.38	41.46
#patrioticspace	9090	8935	2829	2695	98.29	9.83	31.12	3.37	44.32
#voetsekeff	25607	16466	7123	8429	64.30	6.43	27.82	3.04	37.28
#xenophobia	1808	2104	895	828	116.37	11.64	49.50	2.18	63.32
#wewantourcountryback	5254	4758	1440	2036	90.56	9.06	27.41	2.58	39.04
Tuesday (Control)	309563	178917	15426	63738	57.80	5.78	4.98	4.86	15.62
Friday (Control)	574394	341498	28715	108289	59.45	5.95	5.00	5.30	16.25
South Africans (Control)	582071	501929	34434	93324	86.23	8.62	5.92	6.24	20.78
<i>Note: mean & median calculated prior on conversation comprising all selected hashtags</i>								Mean TMC	29.83
								Median TMC	29.09

Appendix B: Common Authors

Account	Present in (No.) #
masotobe39	8
Ancisacurse	7
lolobee052	7
mokgatjane_w	7
Mthokoane	7
TEBOGO89588055	7
vusi74285522	7
b_motsho	6
BrendaM99883897	6
Custoza1	6
Fog009London	6
INHLEKELELE1	6
MphoAL	6
SboshPatriot	6
Sgodo70744780	6
ThaboSchoeman	6
TheDynamicOne3	6
Diana45992430	5
herbalist1975	5
Jabu_PSAF	5
NgwaneLetebele	5
SikoThuli	5
EI123V	4
Mankurwana3	4
mastimpa	4
mayiselk	4
msotras_finet	4
Nfheene	4
pepsi_nala	4
Reginal24984547	4
Sizabonke	4
sphetherinkho	4
theeNosh	4
ThembarifumoS	4
TiAmoNtombonina	4