

Project: Promoting Democracy and an Equitable Society

Project Series: Xenophobia

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1. Findings Summary

- Between 01 April 2024 and 15 July 2024, there were 1.32 million online mentions of immigrants in South Africa. This is a conversation of a considerable size (Section <u>5.1</u>)
- A total of 193 902 individual users contributed to the conversation, averaging 6.8 mentions each. (Section <u>5.1</u>)
- With 1.26 million reposts, the 95% repost rate is high, suggesting the conversation might be artificially inflated or that the sentiment may be gaining ground and popularised enough for a large enough group of people to find the content useful and be willing to share it from their own accounts. (Section <u>5.1</u>)
- The highest daily mention volume peaked on 29 May 2024, the day of the elections. At this point the volume reached 25 900, 123% above normal. Following the ANC's loss of majority, discussions on government formation began on June 3, leading to a slight increase. (Section <u>5.1</u>)
- At the second-highest point in the conversation, the volume reached 12,639, 84% above usual, spurred by cabinet position talks. (Section <u>5.1</u>)
- The five main topics are: Zimbabwe, Nigeria, OnsBaizaNie, South Africans and Zimbabwean. The presence of nationals from Zimbabwe and Nigeria in South Africa is behaviour in South Africa. (Section <u>5.2</u>)
- The most prominent hashtags are: #putsouthafricansfirst, #abahambe, #onsbaizanie and #operationdudula. (Section <u>5.3</u>)
- The top phrases were: illegal foreigners, illegal immigrants and Home Affairs. (Section <u>5.3</u>)
- Dominant themes include: border control and immigration policy, economic competition, crime and safety, national identity and political exploitation (Section <u>5.4</u>)
- The most mentioned X accounts are political leaders or party handles, highlighting a politicised conversation. (Section <u>5.5</u>)
- Half of the Top X accounts conceal their identity, likely because they are aware that they
 are violating X rules and national rules associated with hate speech and incitement to
 violence and therefore prefer to operate in anonymity. There are a number of sock
 puppet accounts who are contributing the highest volume of content to the conversation.
 (Section <u>5.5</u>)
- The Put South Africans First Movement, the Patriotic Alliance and Operation Dudula leverage social media for xenophobic messaging through targeted campaigning, hashtag strategies, disinformation, and creating echo chambers that reinforce anti-immigrant sentiments. (Section <u>5.5</u>)

2. Introduction

The "Promoting Democracy and an Equitable Society" report series is funded by the European Union (EU), with this particular part of the Centre for Analytics & Behavioural Change (CABC)

programme focusing on xenophobia. It offers regular analysis of troubling narratives and divisive content relating to xenophobia on South African social media, specifically Twitter/X. This report, the ninth in the series, focuses on discourse about immigrants in South Africa during the elections period.

3. Background

The Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) has been monitoring online xenophobic content and disinformation campaigns since 2020. In 2020, CABC identified, exposed and intervened upon a coordinated xenophobic network. CABC has subsequently published a series of reports, including the <u>Lay of the Land</u> Report in June 2022, providing an overview of xenophobic micro-narratives in South Africa. In the first quarter of 2023, CABC initiated the "Promoting Democracy and an Equitable Society" report series to combat hate speech and discrimination. <u>Report 1</u>, released in March 2023, analysed xenophobia on social media, finding over 80% negativity towards immigrants. Subsequent reports (<u>Report 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7</u> and <u>8</u>) focused on political mobilisation, key individuals, coordinated campaigns, social media trends, micro-narratives, discourse involving political leaders and the governance of immigration. The <u>Beyond Borders</u> Report in October 2023 revealed tactics used by anti-immigrant proponents, including mis- and disinformation, exaggerated statistics, and political parties leveraging these tactics for upcoming elections.

4. Research Methodology

The date range of 01 April 2024 to 15 July 2024 was selected for the analysis period of this report to cover the elections period and formation of the 7th post- Apartheid democratic administration. Data was collected using a social media analytics tool capable of segmenting and analysing large online content datasets. Initial keywords were selected through a qualitative process, combining existing knowledge, desk research, a literature review, and social media analysis. These keywords were further refined through manual checks.

The following research questions were posed:

- What are the dominant themes and narratives related to xenophobia on social media during election campaigns?
- How do political actors and parties utilise social media to mobilise support and disseminate xenophobic messages?

5. Social media analysis

5.1. Conversation volume

From 01 April 2024 to 15 July 2024, there were a total of 1.32 million online mentions discussing immigrants in South Africa (see Figure 1). These mentions were made by 193 902 unique

authors. This equates to between 6 and 7 mentions per unique user in the three and a half month period. There were a total of 1.26 million X reposts. This is a repost percentage of 95% and can be considered high. This extent of reposts may indicate that the conversation is being manipulated to make it appear larger than it actually is. Another idea that is currently being explored is whether xenophobic rhetoric is becoming normalised within the South African political discourse. If this is the case, it could suggest that some of the content may even be authentically amplified should the belief of the Zimbabwean or Nigerian foreigner as an enemy of the republic and a threat to the economy become internalised by the citizenry.

Total mentions		Unique authors		Total X reposts	
1.32m	⊅ 10% Previous period: 1.21m	193.9 _⊾	79% Previous period: 177.82k	1.26m	7% Previous period: 1.18m

Figure 1: Volume metrics for 01 April 2024 to 15 July 2024

The daily mention volume over time is shown in Figure 2 below. The highest volume of mentions occurred between 29 and 31 May (see point A) and 11 June (see point B). The mention volume at point A was 25 900, which was 123% higher than usual. This was driven by the South African national and provincial elections. The peak at A was on 29 May 2024 which was the day on which the elections were held. The election results were announced on Sunday, 2 June and this is reflected as part of the declining peak after A. On 3 June there was a slight uptick as talks commenced about how the government would be constituted after the ANC lost its outright majority for the first time. This included whether it would be a coalition arrangement or a Government of National Unity (GNU). At point B, the mention volume was 12 639. The conversation volume was 84% higher than usual. This was driven by content about positions in the cabinet.

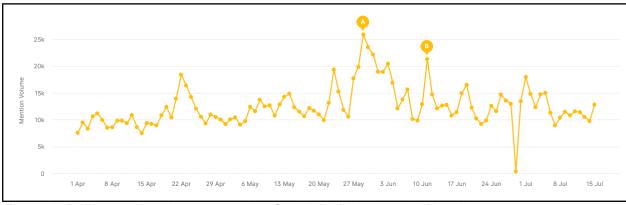


Figure 2: Daily mention volume over time for 01 April 2024 to 15 July 2024

At point A, the mention volume was driven mostly by:

- 1691 mentions using the hashtag #electionresults
- 1328 reposts of this Post: "My brother misplaced his ID, went to the voting station with his passport. He was told a passport is not sufficient. Went to Home Affairs to get a temp ID. Got back and went to vote. This is all under an hour. So it means this country is capable of actually functioning".
- 1264 reposts of this Post:

Dear @Julius_S_Malema i come to you as a supporter and believer of the EFF Not putting South Africans first has cost us

Telling South Africans to go to hell cost us

South Africans are starving they needed you to make them feel important but you made foreigners feel more important

Your arrogance has cost us

Put open borders on hold on work on South Africans first, fix things at home before inviting foreigners

I hope you do change and self reflect You have come so far to let arrogance be your downfall.

At point B, the mention volume was driven mostly by:

797 reposts of this <u>Post</u> by @GaytonMcK: "You must pray very hard that @OnsBaizaNie doesn't receive Home Affairs Ministry, we will chase you from day one till you are back home. Ons speel nie, we know our mandate, we will clean Hillbrow, Sunnyside, Belville, Yeovil's etc".

5.2. Topics

The topics wheel in Figure 3 below shows the main topics (in the inner ring) and subtopics (in the outer ring). The five main topics are:

- 1. Zimbabwe
- 2. Nigeria
- 3. OnsBaizaNie
- 4. South Africans
- 5. Zimbabwean

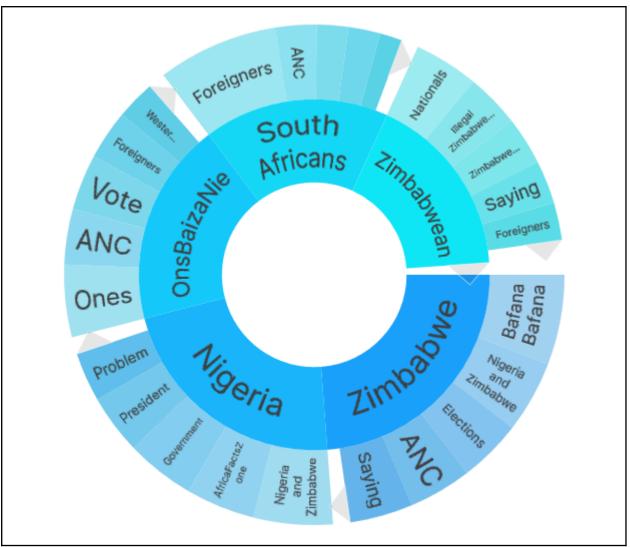


Figure 3: Topics wheel

The main topic according to the topic wheel is Zimbabwe. This is based on the number of times the word is found in the dataset. The intersection of South African and Zimbabwean affairs is a topic of interest, with debates on immigration, leadership comparisons, and the impact of Zimbabwean expats in South Africa. A sample of this content is contained in Figure 4 below.

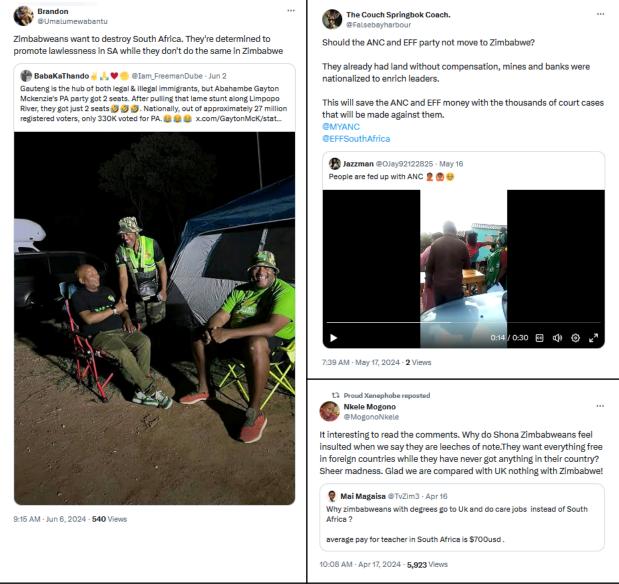


Figure 4: Mentions within 'Zimbabwe' theme

In the Nigeria topic, the performance of Bafana Bafana, South Africa's national football team, against Nigeria in the World Cup qualifiers sparked xenophobic discussions. There is a narrative that Nigerians are destroying South Africa through criminal acts. This is similar to the narrative about Zimbabweans doing the same.

Another narrative is that immigrants are trying to take over South Africa. Examples of these mentions are contained in Figure 5 below.

A trend that has arisen with the key accounts in the conversation is to make use of any topical event and to tack on a xenophobic angle. For example, the Nigeria/Bafana Bafana qualifier game and a range of crimes which are often attributed to immigrants before the perpetrators are even identified.



Figure 5: Mentions within 'Nigeria' theme

'OnsBaizaNie' is the strapline of the Patriotic Alliance. The Patriotic Alliance's focus on law and order, particularly in addressing issues like gangsterism, drug abuse, and illegal immigration, resonates with supporters seeking effective solutions. Gayton McKenzie's strong stance on these matters entailed a campaign that has a strong resemblance to Trump's US presidential 'Make America Great Again' campaign which scapegoats non-US nationals, particularly Mexicans, for a variety of social ills. In a similar manner, the Patriotic Alliance blames immigrants who are in South Africa for a range of social ills including crime, bringing in drugs and overburdening public services like hospitals and schools.

The Patriotic Alliance's vision for the future, encapsulated in #Vision2026, emphasises unity, diversity, and community engagement. However, this unity is encompassed in a nationalist vision in which immigrants are the unwanted 'other' who threaten community welfare.

Figure 6 shows a selection of these topics. In one X post, Gayton McKenzie refers to immigrants as a 'cancer' in our country. In another he states "We don't want illegal foreigners in SA period. @OnsBaizaNie will intensify our fight against this cancer". In the post contained in Figure 6 on the right, the poster says: "Julius Malema flip flopped again. On Wednesday, we have no choice but to vote for @GaytonMcK - he has stood by his word from day 1!". This post indicates that for some voters his strong stance on immigrants is an appeal that worked. Refer to Annexure A for further examples.

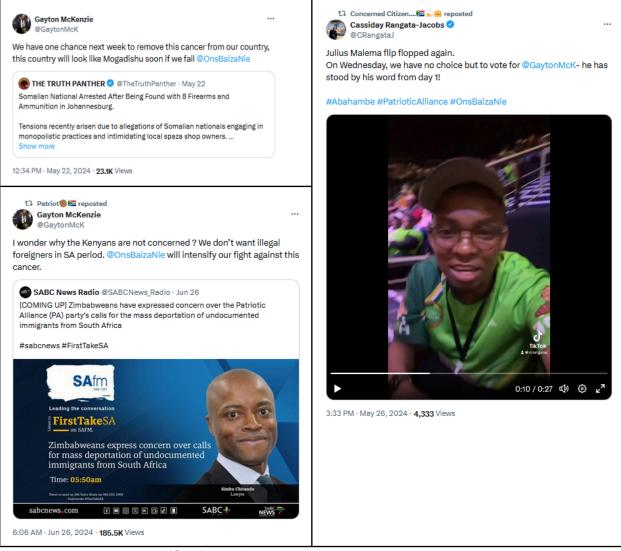


Figure 6: Mentions within 'OnsBaizaNie' theme

Ahead of the elections, Operation Dudula endorsed the Patriotic Alliance, encouraging its members to vote PA on the national and regional ballot. See <u>here</u> and <u>here</u>. This was after Operation Dudula had registered as a political party but only for three provinces; Gauteng, Limpopo, and the Western Cape.

After the election results were in, the Patriotic Alliance, under the leadership of party leader Gayton McKenzie, was actively involved in discussions regarding positions in the Government of National Unity, emphasising its preference to lead any of the following ministries: Home Affairs, Police, and Sport. The party made it clear that their top preference would be Home Affairs. The PA's focus on youth engagement in sports to deter criminal activities had been a key theme in their messaging. Gayton McKenzie was appointed the Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture while the Democratic Alliance's (DA's) Leon Schreiber was appointed to the position of Minister of Home Affairs.

5.3. Trends

This section focuses on the trends in the conversation by looking at the top hashtags, phrases and keywords during the reporting period. Figure 7 below shows the top hashtags. The larger the word size, the more times that hashtag was mentioned in the conversation. The most prominent hashtags are:

- 1. #putsouthafricansfirst
- 2. #abahambe
- 3. #onsbaizanie
- 4. #operationdudula

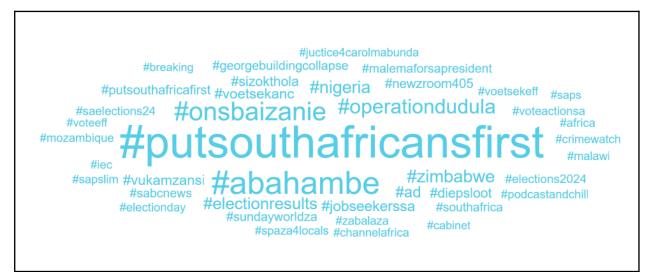


Figure 7: Top hashtags

The top phrases (see Figure 8) were:

- 1. illegal foreigners
- 2. illegal immigrants
- 3. Home Affairs



Figure 8: Top phrases

The extent to which the top three phrases dominate the conversation more than other phrases stands out.

5.4. Themes

To answer the research question, 'What are the dominant themes and narratives related to xenophobia on social media during election campaigns?' the dominant themes include:

- **Border Control and Immigration Policy**: The conversation often centres on calls for stricter border control and enforcement of immigration laws, framing immigrants as threats to national security.
- Economic Competition: Narratives frequently depict immigrants as competitors for jobs and resources, fueling concerns over unemployment and economic strain on South Africans.
- **Crime and Safety**: There is a prevalent narrative linking immigrants to crime, often amplifying fears and justifying calls for deportation and increased policing.
- **National Identity**: Themes of nationalism emerge, with calls to prioritise South African citizens over immigrants, reflecting a broader societal anxiety about identity and belonging.
- **Political Exploitation**: The use of xenophobic rhetoric by political parties to rally support and distract from other issues illustrates the instrumentalisation of these sentiments for electoral gain.

5.5. Authors

With the exception of one handle (@africafactszone), the most mentioned X accounts who post on the topic are all political leaders or party handles. See Figure 9. The most mentioned are handles which users are tagging. This indicates how politicised the conversation is.

Most Mentioned X Posters	POSTS 🔻	REPOSTS	ALL POSTS	IMPRESSIONS
1 @onsbaizanie	43560	60606	104167	421373252
1 @gaytonmck	34494	25124	59618	188919274
L @our_da	4366	5716	10083	36728740
1 @effsouthafrica	4336	4394	8731	33897414
1 @myanc	3438	4319	7758	27940818
1 @africafactszone	3142	3479	6623	35659202
1 @action4sa	2899	2705	5605	26998680
L @kenny_t_kunene	2542	2001	4544	16548765
1 @leon_schreib	2496	3190	5687	24210481
Qjulius_s_malema	2381	3753	6134	25983724

Figure 9: Most mentioned accounts

The top X posters contain no political leaders or party handles. See Figure 10. Notably, there are a number of handles in which the posters do not reveal their identity or appear to deliberately conceal their identity, presumably because they are aware that they are frequently contravening the X <u>rules</u>. These accounts can be considered sock puppet accounts. A sock puppet is an online fictitious identity used to hide a person's true identity. This tactic is deployed by both problematic accounts and by researchers and investigators.

X POSTER		SENTIMENT (2)			IMPACT ⑦	X ③
	MATCHING POSTS -	POS	NEG	NEU	AVERAGE	FOLLOWERS
🗟 @masotobe39	3 710	85	1968	1656	28.4	7 344
🗟 @Samuel33861829	2 487	79	942	1465	0.3	1004
🗟 @sirpeey	2 4 6 6	42	932	1491	0.1	90
DgDen	2 364	9	1656	698	1	68
MYKAPTENI	2 117	51	1083	982	24.6	564
@connoisseur_jr	2 100	0	0	2100	0	5
🗟 @vusi74285522	1 919	50	1020	848	0.6	123
Barton Ba	1865	60	793	1 011	0	135
🗟 @lolobee052	1759	92	703	963	9.8	3 39
🔤 @neduxpensive	1700	47	473	1178	0	74

Figure 10: Top X Posters

In Figure 11 below, a selection of anonymous accounts is shown. Apart from @lolobee052, there are certain identifiers on the anonymous accounts that stand out. The use of the South African flag in the name and bio for example or the use of a common hashtag like #PutSouthAfrcansFirst. These identifiers are frequently used to allow accounts within these networks to track each other and to create a shared group identity that fosters a sense of belonging among unknowing participants who may find themselves in the midst of an echo chamber.

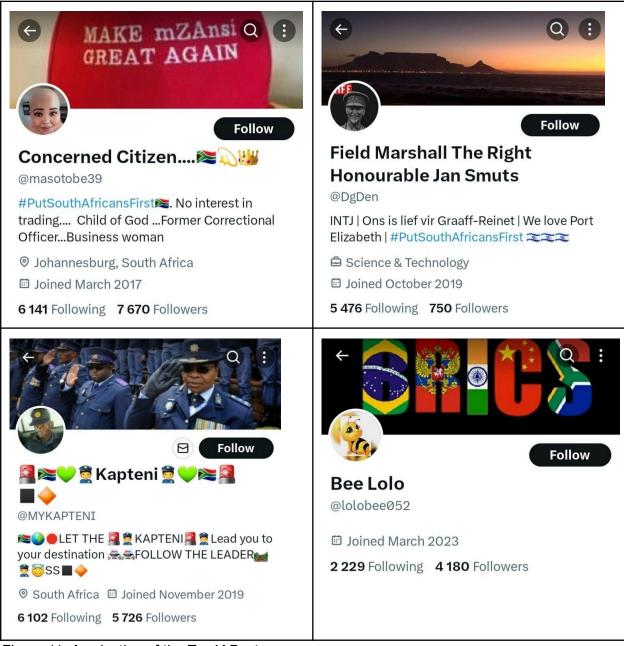


Figure 11: A selection of the Top X Posters

The discourse online is predominantly driven by a significant number of sock puppets (anonymous users). Refer to Annexure B for examples of content posted by these accounts. Discussions about immigrants appear to be exploited by politicians for electoral gain. Prominent X mentions reveal the political instrumentalisation of anti-immigrant sentiments.

5.6. Dissemination of xenophobic messages

The main political parties that stood out in this conversation as mobilising around xenophobic messaging are the Patriotic Alliance and Operation Dudula. These two political parties utilise social media to spread xenophobic messages in several ways:

- Targeted Messaging: They craft specific messages that resonate with voter anxieties, using language and imagery that evoke strong emotional responses related to immigration and national security.
- **Hashtag Campaigns**: The strategic use of hashtags (e.g., #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #Abahambe and #OperationDudula) creates a unifying theme that simplifies complex issues and mobilises support around anti-immigrant sentiments.
- **Disinformation and Propaganda**: Some of the top accounts in the conversation engage in spreading disinformation regarding immigrants, portraying them in a negative light to stir public sentiment against them.
- Engagement and Echo Chambers: Social media platforms facilitate engagement with like-minded individuals, reinforcing xenophobic beliefs and creating echo chambers that validate and amplify these narratives.

These strategies highlight the critical role of social media in shaping public discourse and influencing electoral outcomes, often at the expense of social cohesion and inclusivity.

6. Timeline of events

This timeline offers insights into the online discourse surrounding immigrants in South Africa during the elections period, which is divided into pre-elections, elections and post-elections.

Pre-election period

In April, key issues included border control, job opportunities, and crime linked to immigrants. In May, there were heated political debates over deportation versus immigrant rights, alongside competition for resources and concerns about crime associated with illegal immigration. The conversation also intersected with discussions on health insurance and land policy. The online conversation prior to the elections was charged, fueled by ongoing political campaigns and socio-economic anxieties. The online climate of xenophobia appears to be compounded by the manipulation of online conversations and the spread of mis- and disinformation.

Elections

The National and Provincial Elections on 29 May highlighted politicians' exploitation of xenophobia, necessitating responsible dialogue. The top hashtags for May—#PutSouthAfricansFirst, #Abahambe, and #OperationDudula—reflect this trend. Criticism of the EFF's immigration stance was prevalent in high-reach content.

Post-elections results

In June, the Patriotic Alliance's rhetoric dominated the conversation, leveraging hashtags to prioritise South African interests over those of immigrants. Prominent issues included backlash against the Home Affairs Minister.

In July, key hashtags—#PutSouthAfricansFirst, #OperationDudula, and #OnsBaizanie—focused on prioritising South Africans in employment and expelling illegal immigrants. Micro-narratives emphasised law and order while downplaying xenophobia, despite Operation Dudula's vigilante actions.

7. Discussion

The analysis of online discourse surrounding immigrants in South Africa during the election period reveals an interplay of political manoeuvring and societal anxieties. The pre-election phase was characterised by a heightened focus on border control, job scarcity, and crime, all of which set the stage for the exploitation of xenophobic sentiments during the elections. Politicians effectively leveraged these fears, as evidenced by the dominant hashtags that emphasised prioritising South Africans at the expense of immigrants.

The post-election environment further underscores the persistence of these narratives, with the Patriotic Alliance capitalising on the popularity they gained by making use of anti-immigrant rhetoric to solidify its political standing and attain a Ministerial position in the Government of National Unity cabinet. This sustained discourse indicates that online conversations about immigration are not merely reflections of public sentiment but are actively shaped and manipulated by political actors for electoral advantage.

Gayton McKenzie's approach to leveraging xenophobic sentiments for political gain raises significant ethical concerns regarding the manipulation of public discourse. By strategically positioning himself as a champion of South African interests at the expense of immigrant communities, McKenzie not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also undermines social cohesion. His rhetoric appears to exploit societal anxieties surrounding economic competition and crime, effectively using these fears to galvanise support for his political ambitions.

This instrumentalisation of xenophobia serves dual purposes: it distracts from broader systemic issues affecting the nation, such as unemployment and inequality, while simultaneously consolidating a voter base that finds resonance in nationalist and exclusionary narratives. Such tactics illustrate a troubling trend where political actors prioritise short-term electoral gains over the long-term health of democratic discourse and social unity.

Although there are additional political parties that have included addressing illegal immigration in their campaigns, these parties are not appearing as prominently in the conversation as to suggest that they have instrumentalised xenophobia online as a voter issue to the extent that the Patriotic Alliance and Operation Dudula have.

A research question that would be beneficial to explore in future research is what role the Independent Electoral Commission, governments and social media platforms play in regulating online hate speech and xenophobic discourse during elections.

8. Conclusion

From 1 April to 15 July 2024, there were 1.32 million online mentions of immigrants in South Africa, involving 193 902 individual users who averaged 6.8 mentions each. A striking 95% repost rate, with 1.26 million reposts, suggests the conversation may be artificially amplified.

Key topics included concerns about immigrants from Zimbabwe and Nigeria, reflecting a narrative of South African frustration. Prominent hashtags such as #putsouthafricansfirst and #operationdudula reveal the political undercurrents, largely driven by Put South Africans First Patriotic Alliance and Operation Dudula. These political parties/movements effectively utilised social media to disseminate xenophobic messages and reinforce anti-immigrant sentiments. Dominant themes encompass border control, economic competition, crime, and national identity, indicating a highly politicised discourse. Additionally, many top contributors operated anonymously, suggesting the presence of sock puppet accounts.

The utilisation of xenophobia as a political tool not only jeopardises the integrity of electoral processes but also poses a substantial threat to the principles of equality and human dignity in society. This behaviour raises critical questions about the responsibilities of political leaders to foster inclusive dialogues.

Gayton McKenzie's rhetoric, far from being an isolated phenomenon, reflects a wider pattern globally in which political figures exploit xenophobic sentiments to secure power, thereby reinforcing a cycle of division and intolerance that can have lasting ramifications on social fabric and public policy.

The findings underscore the urgent need for further research into the responsibilities of governments and social media platforms in moderating hate speech and xenophobic rhetoric, particularly during critical electoral periods. As South Africa continues to grapple with these issues, understanding the dynamics of online discourse will be essential in fostering a more inclusive dialogue around immigration and societal cohesion.

Annexure A: Example X Posts by Gayton McKenzie

