



Project Name: Promoting Democracy and an Equitable Society

**Xenophobia, spaza shops and allegations
of food poisoning**

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Introduction

A series of devastating events has plagued South African society in recent months with reports across multiple media outlets of the hospitalisation and death of children in the country. Some of these deaths are confirmed to have occurred due to food poisoning. The allegations all appear to have one critical feature in common - a claim that the poisoning has been the result of food purchased from local spaza shops.

Spaza shops have been a key talking point in the online xenophobic conversation in South Africa for years as many of these local convenience stores are run by foreigners from countries like Somalia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, to name a few. Addressing the public through a national broadcast on Friday 15 November 2024 President Cyril Ramaphosa explained that the National Institute for Communicable Diseases established that the deaths of the six children in Naledi, Soweto can be directly attributed to a highly hazardous organophosphate chemical that is registered in South Africa for agricultural use called Terbufos. Taking samples from 84 spaza shops in Naledi revealed that three had evidence of Terbufos. Further, the investigation found that in many of the shops, perishable and non-perishable food items were being stored directly next to pesticides and other harmful chemicals, which presents a health risk. The measures that he announced included the immediate closure of the spaza shops that were implicated in the deaths of the children and that all spaza shops and other food handling facilities had 21 days from the day of the address to register their shop within their municipalities.

In light of the events that have unfolded and the measures implemented by the presidency, this report seeks to understand the conversation that took place between news media and social media on the topic over three distinct phases as the topic of spaza shops became a hotbed for xenophobic messaging. These phases will be from 01 January to 30 September 2024 - the period before the hospitalisation and deaths of the Sowetan children; 01 October to 15 November 2024 - when there was major media hype around the events, leading to the President addressing the public; and 16 to 22 November 2024 - when measures were being implemented as per the President's orders.

The report will unpack the conversation about spaza shops and poisoning on X (formerly Twitter) to understand how spaza shops were discussed prior to 01 October 2024 and to understand if information of any other poisonings circulated in the country before phase two and the kind of attention this information received. It will then dive into the content that was engaged with the most during the second phase to understand who was driving the conversation and what was

being said. Lastly, it will look at the responses to the President's address, which eventually led to a National State of Disaster being called on 21 November 2024.

Before analysing the content in phases, it is necessary to discuss spaza shops and the township economy in some detail to understand how the events that unfolded have led to a State of disaster. Due to the overt xenophobia present in the conversation of spaza shops, this report will explain how and in what instances media and vulnerability may be weaponized in order to exploit biases, particularly of global lower and middle income households.

Spaza Shops and the Township Economy

Apartheid era policies limited access to the country's majority on multiple fronts. Certain policies created barriers to entry into formal economies like transport and food. This led to a rise in the informal economy and in this sector, spaza shops are one of the most prevalent business forms¹. As anti-Apartheid boycotts intensified, spaza shops, which started in township homes, became a valuable alternative to white-owned businesses, representing a self-sufficiency amongst black South Africans².

Although exact figures are difficult to track, in 2013 a source estimated that the spaza sector was made up of roughly 100 000 enterprises that collectively reached an annual turnover of R7-billion³. A decade later it has been estimated that 30 to 40% of national food expenditure happens in this informal economy, representing a potential market value of R178 billion⁴. While this is a large figure that many are eager to sink their teeth into, it's important to understand this figure comparatively by turning to larger retailers in the formal sector.

Due to its global presence and the impact of hyperinflation in certain countries that they now operate in across Africa, the largest South African grocery retailer, Shoprite, recorded total sales of R240.7 billion in 2024⁵. In 2023, the other major food retailers, Pick n Pay, Spar and Woolworths generated a combined revenue of R267 billion⁶. In light of these much larger revenue

¹ Lamb, Kunele and Dyili (2019) - Lessons from foreign owned spaza shops in South African townships: DOI:[10.6000/1929-7092.2019.08.118](https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-7092.2019.08.118)

² Hornberger, Hodges, Chitukutuku (2023) Fake-talk and the Spaza Shop: A Fake Food Furore and the Spectre of Public Health Emergencies in South Africa: <https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.10.3.7136>

³ Liedeman et al. (2013) Why are foreign-run Spaza Shops more successful? [The rapidly changing spaza sector in South Africa](https://www.southafricanbusinessjournal.com/article/the-rapidly-changing-spaza-sector-in-south-africa).

⁴ Brand South Africa (November 2024) - [The Evolution of the Spaza Shop](https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/2024/11/07/the-evolution-of-the-spaza-shop/)

⁵ <https://www.cnbc africa.com/2024/south-african-grocery-retailer-shoprites-annual-sales-jump-12/>

⁶ <https://businesstech.co.za/news/trending/772654/the-biggest-retailers-in-south-africa-shoprite-vs-woolworths-vs-spar-vs-pick-n-pay/>

streams, one could argue that the formal sector should represent a far more lucrative option for South Africans to want to enter into, if not through ownership, then through employment opportunities. However, for approximately 20 years, the anger and frustration of the lack of access to opportunities has been directed at migrant-owned spaza shops, resulting in xenophobic hostility and violent crime⁷.

Using empirical findings and literature reviews from 16 studies conducted on the spaza shop industry between 2011 and 2017, Lamb, Kunene and Dyili explain that foreign run informal businesses perform better than locally owned businesses, which usually lead to failure or closure⁸. They were able to attribute the underperformance to five entrepreneurial conditions:

1. Networking and economies of scale (the foreign business owners create social networks that allow them to order in bulk and access discounts. South Africans are not a part of these networks.)
2. Entrepreneurial orientation and business practices (a severe lack of literacy and education was reported amongst local vendors coupled with a lack of prior practical experience and formal planning. Further, foreigners are often away from their families and have more time to focus on their businesses.)
3. Geographic location (Most locally owned informal businesses are run from a person's house while foreign shop owners entering the space rent spaces or use containers that are strategically positioned to serve the needs of the broader township community.)
4. Financial management (three studies confirmed that business acumen is a skill that is seriously lacking among local spaza shop owners. This involves things like record keeping, financial planning, appropriate use of financial information, efficient management of inventory and cash book maintenance.)
5. Socio-economic factors (Trade competition that leads to xenophobic violence affects all businesses in the township when they arise because of the nature of unrest.)

To address systemic issues in the spaza shop industry, the South African government implemented some initiatives like the Shared Economic Infrastructure Facility, the Traders Upliftment Project and the encouragement of non Africans to share their success stories with local owned businesses however, local spaza shops still struggle to grow hence studies are continually

⁷ Gastrow (2018) - Problematizing the Foreign Shop: Justifications for Restricting the Migrant Spaza Sector in South Africa: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh8qx9k>

⁸ Lamb, Kunele and Dyili (2019) - Lessons from foreign owned spaza shops in South African townships: DOI:[10.6000/1929-7092.2019.08.118](https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-7092.2019.08.118)

being conducted to understand the reason why there is constantly tension between local and foreign spaza shop owners⁹.

The role of the government and its historical handling of the tensions between foreign and local spaza shop owners is something that is worth noting because there are groups of South Africans who feel that not enough is being done for them and that their only option is to reclaim the township economy. In 2023 South Africa's total GDP, an indicator that is used to measure the size of economies globally, was \$377.8 billion or R6.7 trillion using current dollar/rand conversion rates¹⁰. Returning to the potential value of the spaza industry of R178 billion, that represents approximately 2.65% of the total GDP. On a simple usage of these numbers alone, questions should be raised about why is it that the township economy is being packaged as the solution to joblessness and improved wealth and not the other 97.35% of the economy? Essentially, limiting the scope of availability to black South Africans to spaza shops by presenting the township economy as their ticket to financial freedom seems a far more exclusionary practice than allowing foreigners to own spaza shops alongside local owners. Boosting growth in the informal sector gets cash flow circulating where it is needed most. Also, recognising the informal economy and sector as important in the developmental transition, particularly around small to medium sized entrepreneurship, is definitely necessary. However, presenting the informal sector as the silver bullet to our developmental problems locates the contestation for developmental outcomes in entirely the wrong place.

However, during times of xenophobic flare-ups in the country that concern spaza shops, government rhetoric has mirrored similar reactionary efforts to quell the frustrations of a small group of citizens that are represented through organisations like Operation Dudula to avoid further civil unrest. The events and actions that took place around August 2018 provide a perfect example of this. For about a month, social media was being flooded with allegations of potentially poisonous "fake food" to the point where this narrative spilled over into television news programming as people began protesting outside of foreign owned spaza shops¹¹. This led to the health minister, Aaron Motsoaledi, deploying a group of health inspectors who visited 454 spaza shops across South Africa to assess the veracity of these claims. Days after the deployment of the inspectors, Motsoaledi issued a public media statement explaining that no evidence was

⁹ Tengeh and Mukwarami (2017) The Growth Challenges of Native-owned Spaza Shops in Selected Townships in South Africa. ISSN : 0972-7302

¹⁰ A conversion of 1 USD = 18.1811 ZAR was used based on <https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=377800000000&From=USD&To=ZAR>

¹¹ Hornberger, Hodges, Chitukutuku (2023) Fake-talk and the Spaza Shop: A Fake Food Furore and the Spectre of Public Health Emergencies in South Africa: <https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.10.3.7136>

produced to back the allegations such as fake food that contained plastic being sold¹². The investigation however did lead to deportation of undocumented foreigners who were found during this process.

Comparing this to what took place during the last few weeks in light of the recent deaths, an environmental health practitioner appeared on eNCA on 22 October 2024 and stated that no toxic chemicals were found in the samples taken from the six children who died in Naledi¹³. During his speech on Friday 15 November 2024, the President said that it had been established that “the deaths of the six children in Naledi, Soweto can be directly attributed to a highly hazardous chemical used as a pesticide known as Terbufos...an organophosphate chemical that is registered in South Africa for agricultural use”¹⁴. Addressing the public, Aaron Motsoaledi who is still the health minister, spoke about why spaza shops shouldn't be closed. The reason behind this is that the deaths of the children, which is a very core fear for many, if not all citizens, is because the organophosphate that led to their deaths (Terbufos) is widespread in the communities and is not only found at spaza shops but is also sold at taxi ranks, old age pension payouts, street hawkers and on trains¹⁵.

Data Overview

Over the entirety of the periods that will be assessed, Figure one shows that there was a steady conversation about spaza shops and poison in South Africa from 01 January 2024 until the beginning of October, at which point major spikes began, the highest of which was on 21 November 2024.

¹²<https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/minister-aaron-motsoaledi-allegations-fake-and-expired-food-03-sep-2018>

¹³ Spaza shop snacks test negative for toxic chemicals - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvtFVV7ENCQ>

¹⁴<https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/address-president-cyril-ramaphosa-deaths-children-due-food-borne-illnesses-union-buildings-tshwane>

¹⁵ <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/health-minister-details-processes-tackle-foodborne-illnesses>

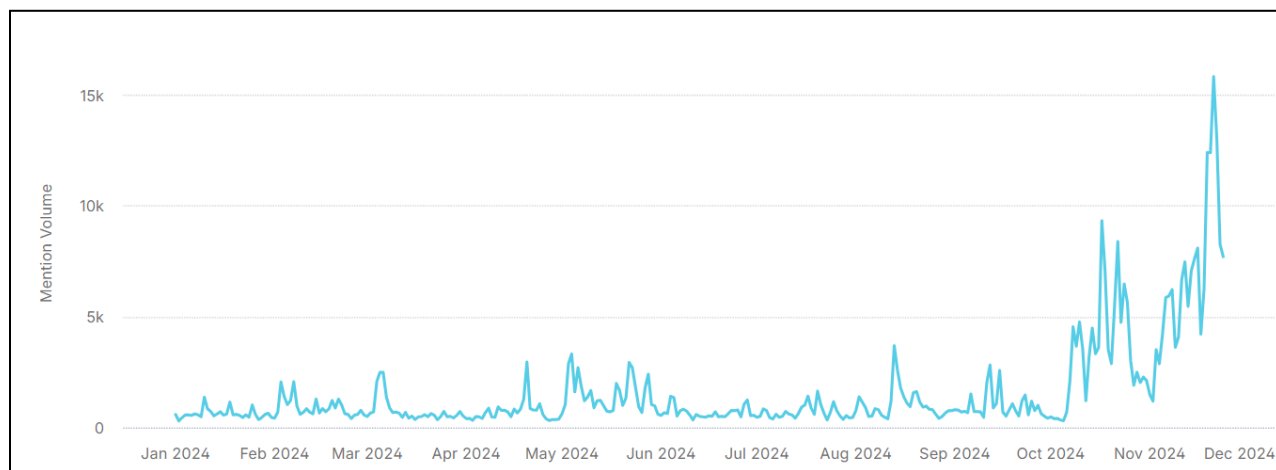


Figure 1: Volume of conversation including words like “spaza shop” and “poison” in online content

This spike will be examined in more detail in phase three below. In phase one, content is examined to understand how spaza shops were spoken of online, before the deaths in October.

Phase one: 01 January - 30 September 2024

The first notable date before October was on 12 August 2024. Conversation that included words like spaza returned traffic that was more than 1 400 times higher than normal. One of the posts (see Figure two below) that was retweeted more than 2 000 times contains the image of a man named Thulani Khumalo with a claim that he, a spaza shop owner, was killed by a Somalian syndicate operating in Vosloorus. Thulani Khumalo does appear to run a spaza shop in Vosloorus according to [this article](#) in the City Press from 23 June 2024, when Khumalo said that he lives in fear because he claims that attempts were made to kill him by foreign-owned spaza shop owners in his area.



Figure 2: A post that drove the highest peak in conversation before October 2024 with the unverified claim that the man in the image was killed.

In the comments to the post above, some people did question if this information was real. One of the accounts commenting on the post [asked](#) the question, “*How many times he died Kanti?*” possibly referring to a post with the same image and message from May 2024 (See Figure 3 below).



Figure 3: Post from May 2024 claiming that Thulani Khumalo was killed by a “Somalian Syndicate”.

No other official news source has written about Khumalo’s death, however, six days after this post, the Citizen reported that Khumalo expressed concerns to the City of Ekurhuleni, who issued a statement, saying that unidentified people were threatening him to close up shop or his life would be in danger¹⁶. The only other posts where information about his death was found outside of X.com, was on [Tik Tok](#) and [Instagram](#). Posts from both these sources contain the same wording about Khumalo being killed by a “Somalian syndicate” who believed the Spaza industry belonged to them. Furthermore, the man in the image appears to go by the name [Thulani Lani](#) on Facebook and an image of him was posted to his Facebook account as late as [24 November 2024](#). This means that both the posts on X.com shown above that received thousands of reposts and stoked a lot of anger (from a reading of the comments) contained misleading information and

¹⁶ Ekurhuleni MMC demands action after spaza shop owner receives death threats - <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/ekurhuleni-mmc-demands-action-after-spaza-shop-owner-receives-death-threats/>

should be removed from social media at the very least. Khumalo's role in the sharing of misleading information related to his death is not known. The Facebook account names Thulani Lani does appear to be linked to Thulani Khumalo as the cover photo of the account shows the name "Black Excellence Enterprise. According to bizportal, Black Excellence Enterprises was registered to Thulani Khumalo in February this year.

Within the comments, calls were made from anonymous accounts to shut down spaza shops with one account asking "*@CyrilRamaphosa, how many South Africans must die so you can act on this brutality?*" (See Figure 4 below).

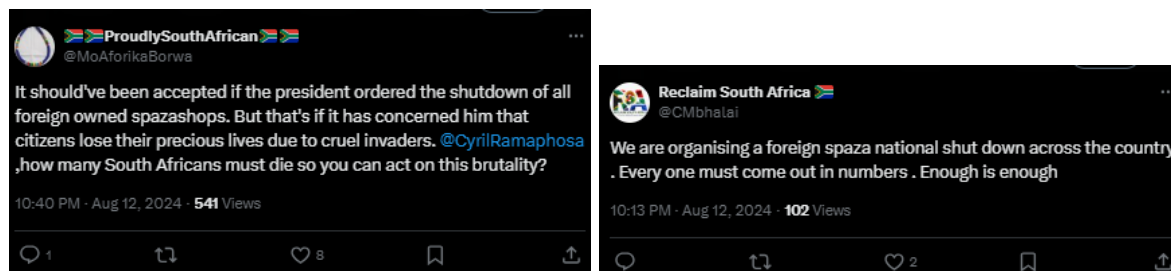


Figure 4: Comments to the August post about Thulani Khumalo that call for a national Spaza shut down.

These comments have been specifically mentioned because of the common themes that they represent through the phase one reporting period, i.e. calls on the president to act and that there should be a national shut down of foreign-owned Spaza shops. This is reflected in other popular posts that trended in the same peak as the post in Figure 2 as Operation Dudula posted to say "NO MORE FOREIGN SPAZA SHOPS IN SOWETO" (See Figure 5 below).

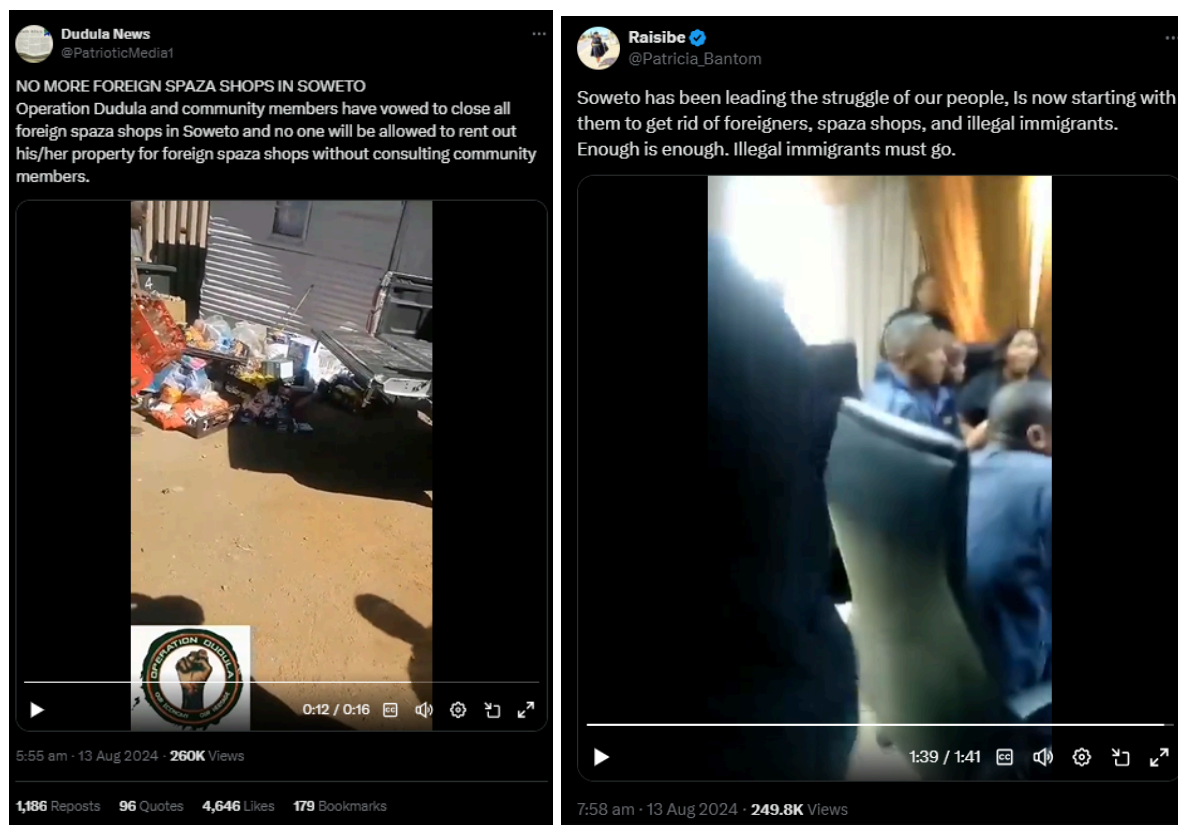


Figure 5: Other high-performing posts that trended in the peak between 12 and 13 August 2024

Much like the content that circulated prior to the 2018 unrest, a known problematic account in the South African political discourse which was incorrectly named by IOL earlier this year, @goolammv, [posted](#) in January 2024 urging South Africans to buy their bread from “national chains” because a Somali network they claimed had been manufacturing fake Blue Ribbon bread. Responding to the comments in this post, the account holder posts “*i shudder to think of all the poison they giving the people in the rural area via all the spaza shops they control.*” (see Figure 6 below).



Figure 6: @goolammv suggesting that Somalian run foreign shops poison basic food staples in township areas.

The only news source that used these images and posted about the manufacturing of fake bread was [@MDNnewss](#), which discloses on its X profile that it is an entertainment and recreation site asking for anyone to send them stories. The information was also reposted by the current Minister of Sports and Culture, Gayton McKenzie, who at the time of reposting the content was campaigning with his party, the Patriotic Alliance, on issues with foreigners in the build-up to South Africa's national elections. McKenzie's [post](#) reads "*They produce fake everything, what is so difficult to call a state of emergency and close all these health hazard's masquerading as shops.*" Both these posts were made a day after [@goolammv](#) used the images on their profile. A site called National Citizen [reported](#) on this information as being fake after explaining the news passed from public social media to WhatsApp groups and was then further distributed. Unfortunately the date of this article is not clear however, a story with the same claims as [@MDNnewss](#) was used by a site masquerading as a news platform, iReport South Africa, as recently as [September 2024](#).

Perhaps most interesting from before October is that there were reports of children dying after consuming snacks from foreign-owned shops. In February, social activist Yusuf Abramjee [posted](#) about a primary school learner who had died in Ekurhuleni apparently after buying biscuits from a foreign-owned store. [@EversonLuhanga](#) (BEAST OF NEWS) also [posted](#) that three primary school kids had fallen ill after eating snacks from a local spaza shop in February. Reposting this information, an account called "I'm Xenophobic" [claimed](#) "*Ramaphosa Spaza continue to poison South African kids*" suggesting that spaza shops poisoning children is a regular occurrence.

In April 2024, the Gauteng Health Department reported a surge in food poisoning cases after 41 children were hospitalised from apparently ingesting rat poison. Between October 2023 and April 2024 there were 863 reports of food poisoning which resulted in 11 deaths in the country¹⁷. From that time the health department claims to have increased its efforts to educate residents in townships and informal settlements of the dangers of food borne illnesses.

Deaths associated with food-borne illnesses continued and in September, national food retailer Spar recalled Top Score porridge after four children in East London died from suspected food poisoning¹⁸.

¹⁷<https://www.msn.com/en-za/health/other/what-is-food-poisoning-and-how-to-keep-your-family-safe/ar-AA1nsIXZ>

¹⁸ <https://www.enca.com/top-stories/mdantsane-children-die-suspected-food-poisoning>

It is unclear why the deaths and hospitalisations from suspected food poisoning along with warnings from the health department prior to October 2024 did not receive the same media attention as the more recent incidents. What is clear is that accusing spaza shops of selling poisonous or expired foods is a common narrative that is discussed regularly online and elicits a lot of anger in the comment threads, especially when children are involved. It is also clear that there has been a sustained call throughout the year to close down foreign-owned spaza shops and for the spaza sector to be returned to South Africans.

Phase two: 01 October - 15 November 2024

News about the children who died in Naledi, Soweto appears to have been the catalyst for the spikes in conversation that ensued from 07 October onwards. Accounts like the one who posted misleading content about the death of Thulani Khumalo in May 2024 immediately took to social media to rapidly escalate the issue they had been trying to prove as a problem in the township economy, with little to no evidence i.e. that foreign-owned spaza shop owners are killing South Africans.

On 08 October 2024 @ISephara, who claims to be an International Relations graduate from Umlazi in their profile, shared an image of Joseph Sebetwane, the father of six-year-old Monica Sebetwane who was among the children who we now know died due to exposure to Terbufos. The picture was likely taken from [this](#) Eyewitness News article that was published at 19:40 on 07 October 2024, which explains that *“Monica Sebetwane was one of five children from Naledi in Soweto, who died on Sunday after all displaying similar symptoms of diarrhoea, vomiting and frothing at the mouth after allegedly consuming chips from a nearby spaza shop.”* @ISephara instead reported this as *“5 children who bought biscuits at a Somalian Spaza and died due to food poisoning in Soweto”* (see Figure 7 below).

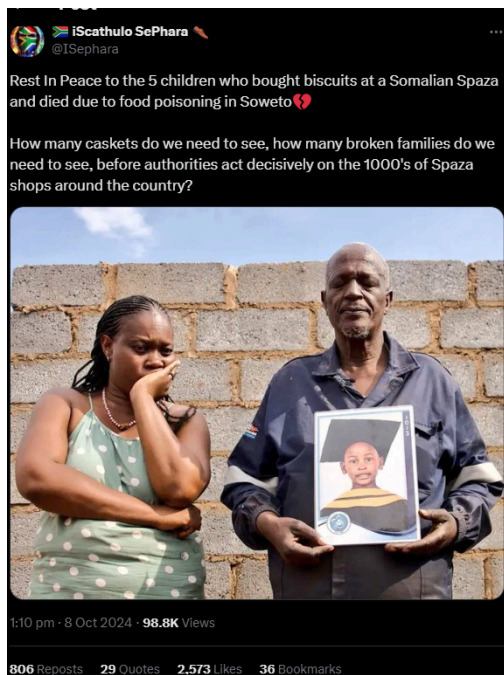


Figure 7: Within 24 hours of the story breaking, images of the bereaved family who were dealing with the death of their children were used alongside unsubstantiated claims about the nature of their deaths.

As South Africans were trying to make sense of the situation that was being reported on since the day before, @ISephara's post was being reposted more than 800 times and receiving thousands of likes. A person's content doesn't simply trend this quickly. @ISephara whose profile reads "Youth. Patriot💖 #PutSouthAfricansFirst #OperationDudula. Non Political🙏 Striving for a better SA🇿🇦" has been posting inflammatory content about foreigners for a while now. Their profile picture (See Figure 8 below) contains a strange mix of the South African and American flag (see star spangled banner where the South African flag ends). It could be that the original image was one that contained a person draped in an American flag that was poorly photoshopped to be repurposed for this South African presenting account.



Figure 8: Profile picture of a South African presenting, anonymised account that drives xenophobic sentiment in South Africa

Below (Figure 9) is another example where pictures of the children who tragically died are weaponised to strengthen the narrative that still has not been shown to be true i.e poisonous foods are being sold by foreign run Spaza shops.

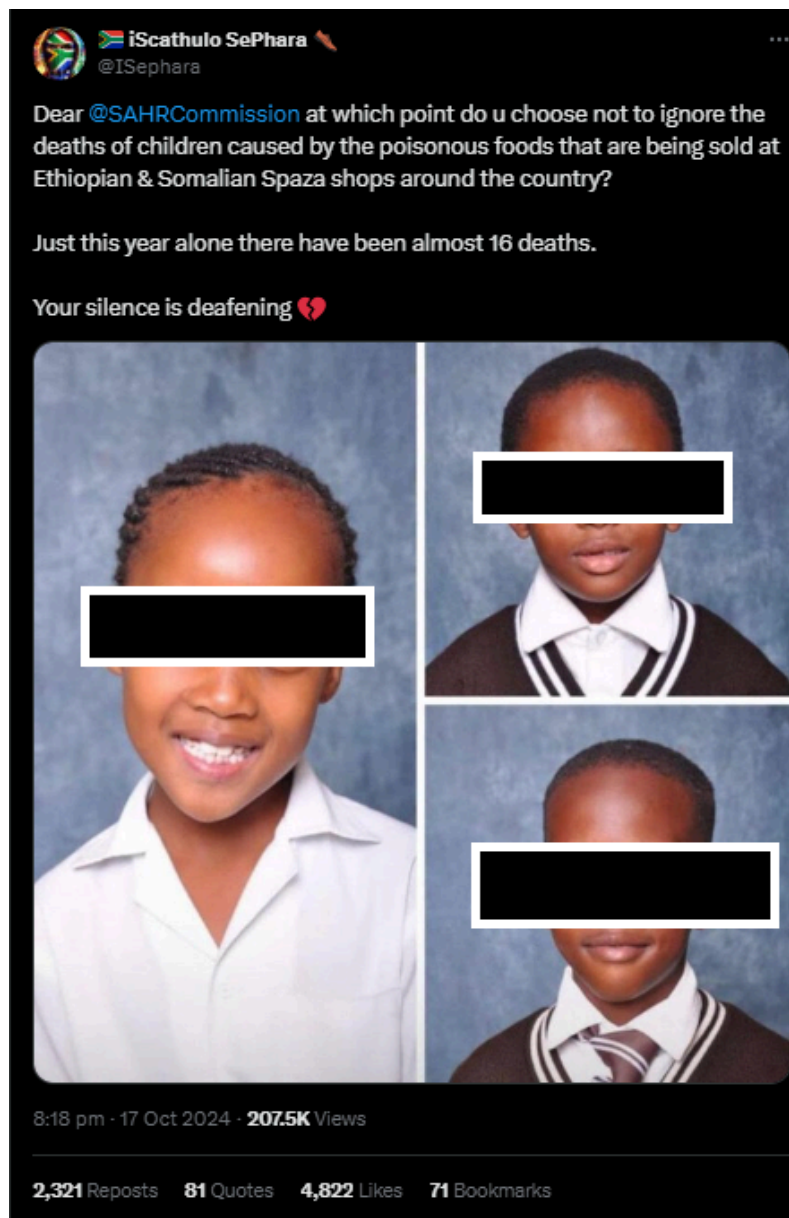


Figure 10: Images of children that have died are used to further misleading narratives that poisonous foods are being sold at spaza shops

There are two tactics at play in the posts by @iSephara. Firstly, the speed at which this information is circulated after news has just broken about an incident is critical for taking control of a narrative on social media¹⁹. This account didn't wait a day or more to use the deaths of the

¹⁹<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/11/17/fact-or-fiction-israel-needs-fake-nurses-to-justify-killing-gaza-babies>

children in Naledi to provide an evidentiary basis for the kind of information that they had already been circulating about foreigners. Within hours the image of grieving parents was used alongside spurious claims about the nature of the deaths of the children.

Secondly, when grieving parents who have lost their children are exploited in the coverage of these tragic events cognitive vulnerabilities are manipulated in turn. A cognitive vulnerability refers to a belief or an idea that an audience is predisposed to accept without too much critical thinking as it makes an emotional appeal to fears and anxieties that people already have²⁰. Confronting one's own mortality and that of your loved ones is a core fear that evokes strong emotional responses. Hence, there is a psychosocial element at play in these posts. The faces of the children are intended to elicit feelings of anger and sadness in people who then read false claims about how they died and associate those claims with the strong emotions they are feeling. If a person is already predisposed to see foreigners as the enemy through regular exposure to xenophobic content this represents a vulnerability for peddlers of mis-and disinformation to exploit. We know now that the deaths of the Sowetan children was not because poisonous food was being sold from spaza shops in South Africa but that a deadly organophosphate intended for agricultural use has been widely sold throughout townships in South Africa via multiple sources.

@PatrioticMedia1 (named Dudula News) used similar tactics. By 6 o' clock on the morning after the deaths were announced, Dudula News seized the opportunity to control the narrative by also sharing images of the children (see Figure 11 below) accompanied by the message *"On the 4th October 2023 Operation Dudula called for the closure of foreign spaza shops after children died from eating poisoned snacks. 7th October 2024 children die again in the same location under the same circumstances."*

²⁰ Waltzman (2015) [Weaponization of the Information Environment: The Need for Cognitive Security](#). The American Foreign Policy Council Defense Technology Program Brief.

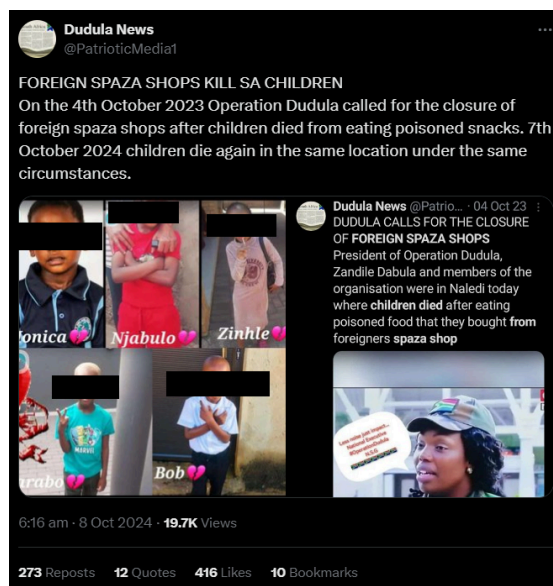


Figure 11: Dudula News using the images of the children who died to drive the narrative that foreign-owned spaza shops are killing people.

The Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change has reported on Operation Dudula many times in the past. In 2022 it was explained that “Operation Dudula, a xenophobic influence operation whose reach is growing, continues to dominate the conversation. More than being an online influence operation, Operation Dudula also engages in paramilitary activities. The campaign being driven by Operation Dudula continues to focus on actively influencing policy and implementation decisions, including with respect to labour legislation and Home Affairs positions and actions. This poses a threat to democratic stability and social cohesion in South Africa. It appears that right wing American campaign tactics such as those used in the ‘Make America Great Again’ campaign overlap with South African xenophobic campaigns. Future reports will explore this further”²¹.

Two days after the deaths were announced, @MDNnewss shared a [video](#) of people looting shops in Naledi. This appears to be part of a procedure that is developing where unverified allegations of fake or poisonous food being sold from spaza shops is amplified online, which leads to civil unrest in the form of looting and forces government institutions to take a stand. The irony that is always present when shops are looted after being accused of containing poisonous substances is not lost on many South Africans who also share this opinion on social media (see Figure 12 below).

²¹ Conversations about foreign national on South African social media (2022).
https://cabac.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Regular-report_ForeignNationals_18.7.22.docx.pdf

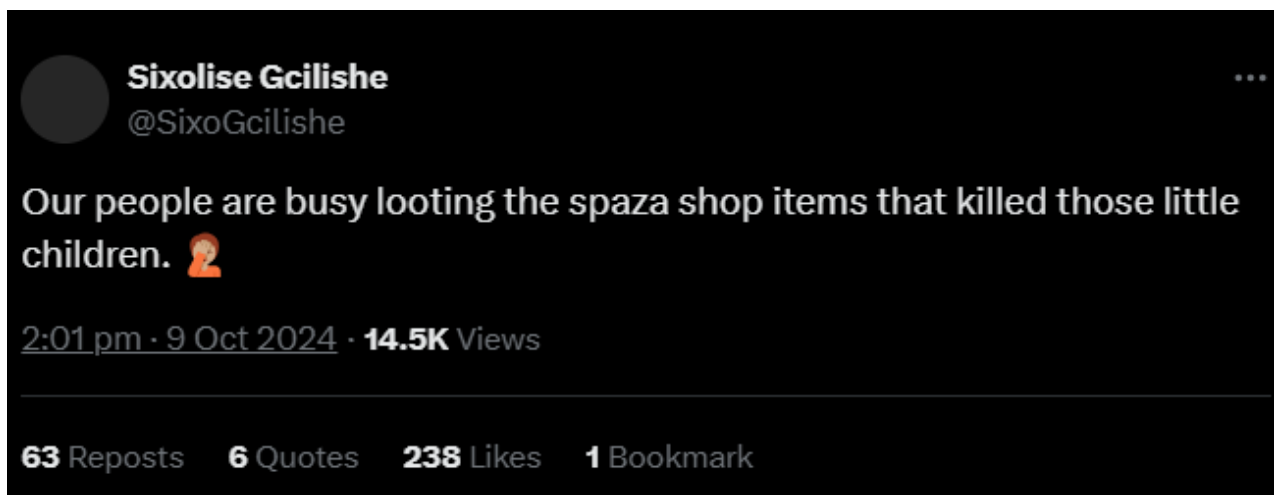


Figure 12: Example post of an account that points out the irony of looting a shop that is alleged to be carrying harmful substances.

ActionSA, a political party led by entrepreneur Herman Mashaba and which received only 1.2% of support during the national elections in 2024, appears to be highly reactive when allegations of spaza shops are concerned. In August, when it was alleged that a foreign national used an illegal firearm to shoot a South African man, they demanded an urgent audit and inspection of spaza shops across Soweto²². On 08 October after the deaths in Naledi were announced an article appeared in the Citizen [explaining](#) that on 30 September, ActionSA again applied to the legislature to recommend that all foreign-owned spaza shops be audited but that this recommendation was rejected. A party representative is quoted as saying "the party's main concern was the prevalence of illegal foreign ownership in township economies." The timing of the release of this information is noteworthy because even though the application was made on 30 September, media hype around this application only began the day after the deaths were announced and this information was quickly positioned as "the ANC rejects ActionSA's bid to audit foreign-owned spaza shops".

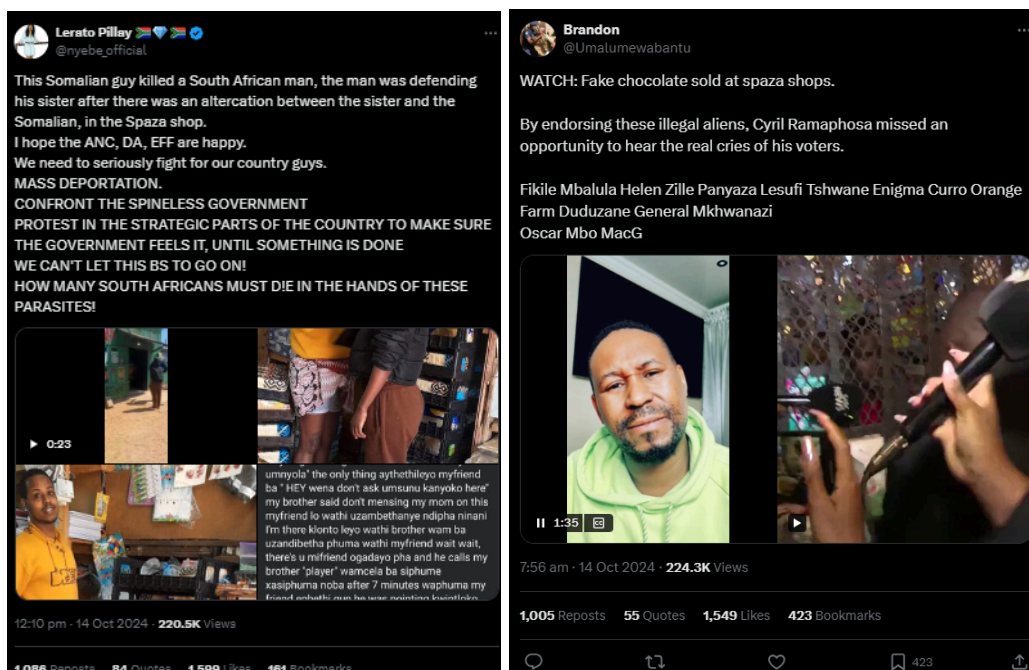
In Figure 13 below, an account that is frequently found in the xenophobia datasets that the CAB and others have reported on, @TheTruthPanther, posted an article to their news website with the title "ANC Rejects ActionSA's Proposed Audit of Foreign-Owned Spaza Shops in KZN" and positioned the decision as a "political standoff".

²²<https://www.actionsa.org.za/actionsa-condemns-criminality-involving-foreign-owned-spaza-shop-owner-and-demands-immediate-action/>



Figure 13: An account that frequently appears in the xenophobia datasets shares a link to an article on their own site that positions the ANC and ActionSA in a “political standoff”.

Examples of how information about spaza shops after the deaths of the children was politicised can be seen in Figure 14 below.



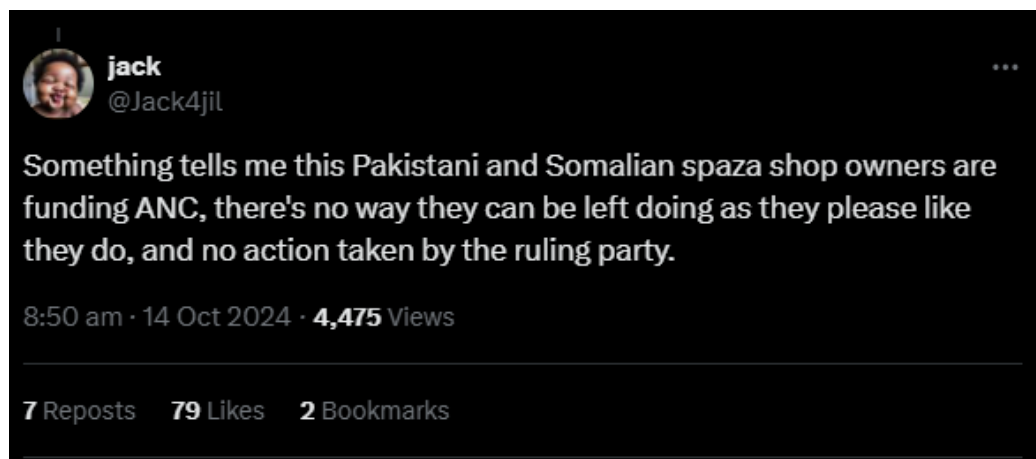


Figure 14: Posts showing how the foreign-owned spaza shop conversation is politicised.

This kind of content puts the ruling coalition in a precarious position as they have to navigate the allegations made against foreign spaza shop owners in the midst of an ongoing investigation on a contentious topic while upholding the constitution and the needs of South Africans. Fikile Mbalula, Secretary General of the ANC eventually [addressed](#) the public a month after the deaths saying that “As the ANC, we want spaza shops to be closed down and re-opened through a regulatory framework.” On the same day, leader of ActionSA, Herman Mashaba, posted to demand action from president Cyril Ramaphosa and to call a state of emergency (see Figure 15 below).



Figure 15: ActionSA leader, Herman Mashaba, calls for a State of Emergency.

ActionSA's Athol Trollip also [posted](#) about the party calling on the ANC to declare a state of emergency stating that they wanted this to “enable intensified raids on manufacturing facilities, spaza shops, and distribution networks linked to counterfeit, contaminated, and expired goods.” This message appeared along with the hashtag spaza4locals. This hashtag was used as early as

April 2024 by @NkuliMbundu. In May of 2024 @NkuliMbundu again used this hashtag while tagging Lerato Ngobeni (ActionSA's national spokesperson and Member of the National Assembly) and Herman Mashaba. The post (see Figure 16 below) contains what could be considered to be the objective of the #spaza4locals campaign i.e. using the buying power of the locals to move upstream into manufacturing and distribution because "That's where the power lies". This is worth noting because Mashaba has held business interests through the hair products that he has manufactured for decades called Black Like Me, a common product that one would find not only across national retailers but also in spaza shops. So, while the #spaza4locals campaign may appear to be an altruistic movement designed to uplift black South Africans in townships from poverty, one must consider the extent to which Mashaba and his business interests stand to benefit from a more formalised spaza shop sector and how the tragic deaths of the Sowetan children have been used as a point for this campaign to be [amplified](#).



Figure 16: @NkuliMbundu using ActionSA slogan #Spaza4Locals to explain how the buying power of locals can be used to move into manufacturing and distribution.

Judging by the merchandise that ActionSA have invested in, which is shown in Figure 17 below, #spaza4locals is a campaign that could have legs into the next municipal elections, especially in light of [Mashaba's announcement](#) a few days ago that ActionSA now wants power in Johannesburg.



Figure 17: ActionSA showcases #Spaza4Locals merchandise.

On 15 November 2024, as the Government of National Unity (GNU) [announced](#) their plan to immediately close the spaza shops that were implicated in the deaths of the children and for all spaza shops and food handling facilities to register in their municipalities, accounts on X.com shared their concerns that locals would register the shops under their names to assist the foreigners (see Figure 17). This kind of accusation is specifically aimed at landlords who are positioned in the narrative about foreign-owned spaza shops as being a part of the problem. It suggests that not all black South Africans living in townships are unhappy about the spaza shops as the online messaging suggests. While much effort has been made to understand the differences between foreign-owned and local spaza shops, field work should be conducted by a reputable, objective party to understand how big the issue really is in the everyday lives of the people around these shops.



Figure 17: Immediately after the President addressed the public, concerns about South Africans registering spaza shops on behalf of foreigners began to circulate.

Phase three: 16 - 24 November 2024

The purpose behind including this time period to the report is to understand what the conversation on X.com looked like after the GNU announced the measures that would be implemented to remove hazardous pesticides off the street.

Conversation about the registration of businesses featured prominently within the top 50 keywords for this phase. In Figure 18 below, the mentions that were reposted the most from the largest keyword “spaza shops” are all about the registration process and are made by accounts that feature regularly in the xenophobia discourse online, @PSAFLIVE and @TheTruthPanther.

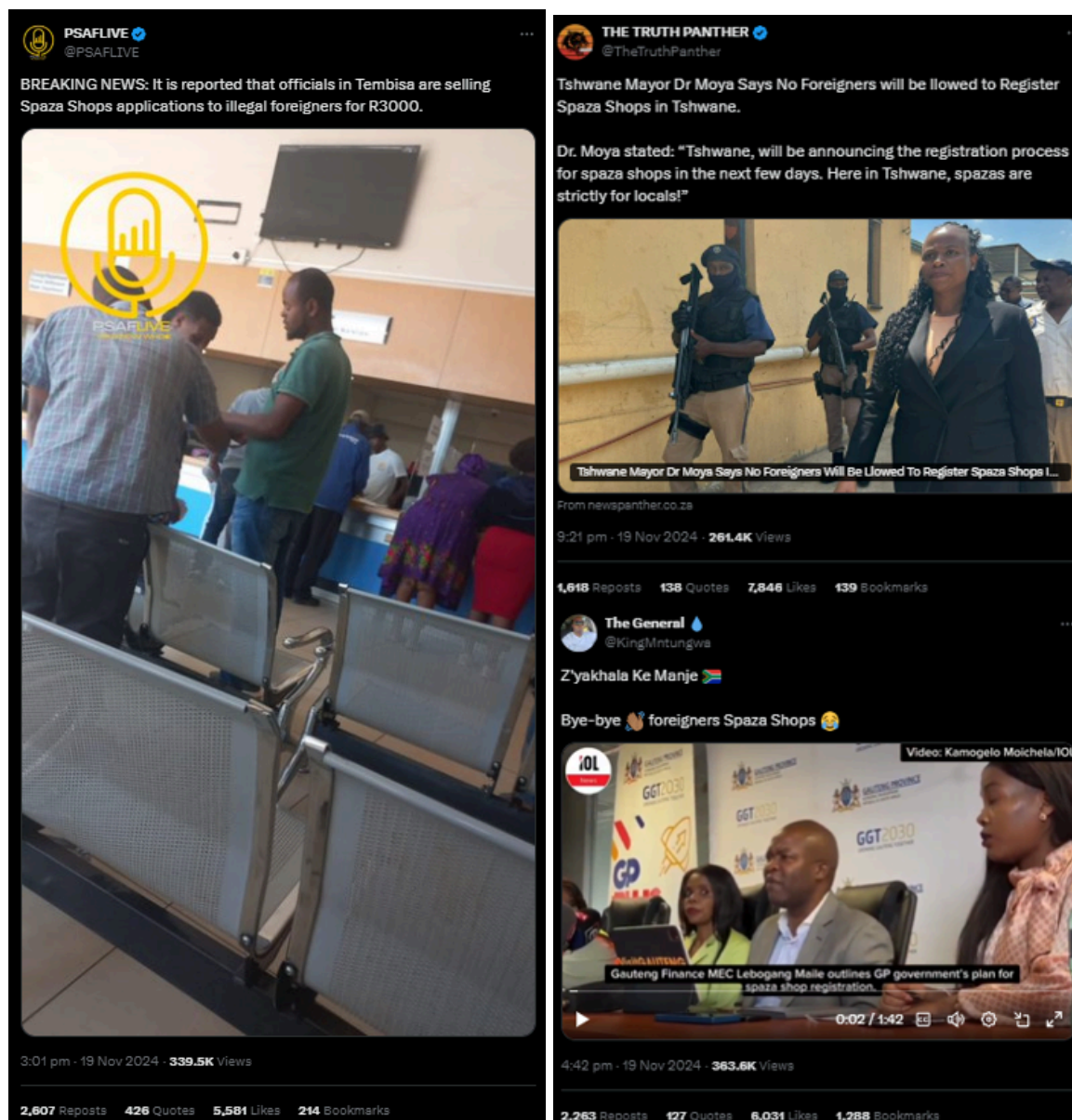


Figure 18: Posts about the registrations that trended in phase three.

The post about the officials in Tembisa provides another example of the kind of information that is shared to support a claim that is made that may or may not be true. All that is seen in the image is a man standing in what appears to be a South African government building, it could be a branch of home affairs, it could be a driver's licensing centre - it is impossible to tell where and when this picture was taken just by looking at the image. However, @PSAFLive uses it with the alert "BREAKING NEWS" and says "It is reported that...". The word choice here is very important to note. News outlets that can be held accountable use terms like "breaking news" to express important developments in an ongoing story²³. Purveyors of disinformation use the same format to

²³ Track the trends: Disinformation disguised as 'breaking news' -

<https://newslit.org/updates/misinformation-dashboard-updates-disinformation-disguised-as-breaking-news/>

create a fake sense of urgency. Using the term “it is reported that...” is a way of avoiding liability on a news story that is still ongoing or where the facts are not completely clear. If @PSAFLive is pushed to reveal how they came about this image and information and it’s not authentically related to the story they are driving, they could claim that someone else gave them the information or that it was a mistake and remove the post. But, in situations like this, the damage would already have been done as the post appears to have achieved the desired effect in that it reached a large audience with more than 2 600 reposts and 5 581 likes. In the comments, people returned to another narrative that commonly circulates when allegations of bribery surface, namely that the ANC are corrupt (see examples of comments to this post [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

From the dataset that was analysed for this report, the highest peak in conversation took place during this phase. On 21 November, the day that Aaron Motsoaledi held a further press briefing to clarify, among other things, why all spaza shops were not being closed, anger and frustration was directed at a new victim - Ordinary South Africans who appear to be assisting foreigners to register the spaza shops. The post shown in Figure 19 below was the most reposted in this peak and it contains the video of a man confronting a woman (believed to be South African) queuing to allegedly register a spaza shop on behalf of two immigrant men. The man appears to intimidate the woman asking her how she could help the foreigners as a South African. The video on this post received more than 2 million views.

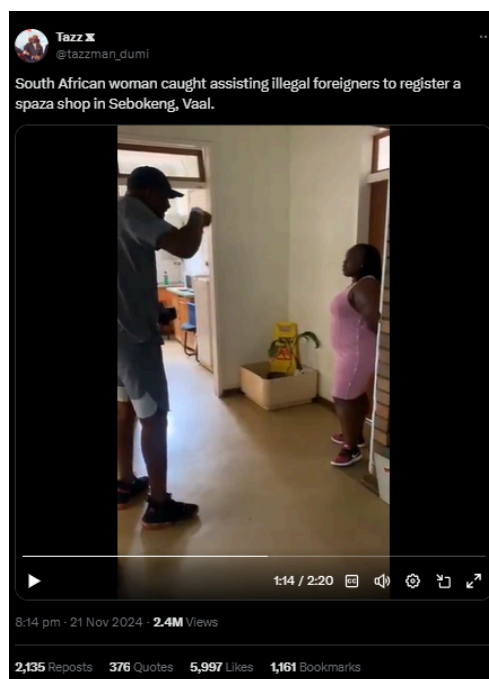


Figure 19: Most reposted mention in the highest peak of conversation from the dataset.

Conclusion

Calls for the spaza shop industry to be South African owned and claims that the foreign-owned spaza shops have been selling poisonous food to South Africans have continued for years and are not likely to go away anytime soon unless the systemic issues that South Africans are truly frustrated about, unemployment and inequality, are addressed. Until such time, scapegoating foreigners and manipulating cognitive vulnerabilities of South Africans is easily achieved through online platforms like X.com and Tik Tok due to the speed and proliferation through which information is able to spread using these tools.

Moreover, government institutions need to recognise that by now, any issue involving spaza shops presents an opportunity for troublemakers to substantiate narratives that they have been driving online for years and that once the news media starts reporting on these stories before investigations are complete, they must ensure that efforts to control the narrative to drive a broader agenda must be quelled and the public informed of any information threats so that civil unrest can be avoided. After all these years of dealing with accusations against foreigners, it is clear that there is a method to agitate the public and drive them to loot the very same shops that are being accused of poisoning people. Misleading narratives about unscrupulous business practices of foreign-owned spaza shops, especially against Somalians and Pakistanis, are regularly circulating online. So, even when accountable media houses are using terms like “allegedly” during a pending investigation, their stories are being amplified through social media as though it provides an evidentiary basis for all the other claims with which the electorate are bombarded.