



Factsheet on anti-immigrant social media conversation in South Africa

Introduction

Social media has become a significant arena for discussions about migration, nationality and belonging in South Africa. While online platforms can facilitate public debate, they can also amplify hostile narratives, misinformation, stereotyping and calls for exclusion directed at migrants and foreign nationals. Monitoring these conversations is important because online discourse can shape public attitudes, influence social cohesion and, in some instances, contribute to offline tensions and violence.

This factsheet by the [Centre for Analytics & Behavioural Change](#) (CABC) examines the anti-immigrant conversation occurring across social media platforms, blogs and other online sources in South Africa between 1 January and 12 June 2026. The analysis explores the scale, sentiment, engagement and key themes present within the conversation, as well as the individuals and accounts driving the discourse. Particular attention is given to narratives relating to immigration, nationality, border control and perceptions of foreign nationals living in South Africa.

The findings indicate a substantial increase in the volume and reach of anti-immigrant content during the reporting period. The conversation is characterised by strong negative sentiment, emotionally charged language and recurring themes that portray migrants and foreign nationals as a threat to economic opportunities, public services and public safety. Several spikes in activity are linked to specific incidents, marches and mobilisation efforts, highlighting the dynamic relationship between online narratives and real-world events.

By documenting the nature and evolution of this discourse, the factsheet aims to support early warning efforts, inform responses to harmful online content, and contribute to a better understanding of emerging risks relating to xenophobia, discrimination and social cohesion in South Africa.

Key metrics

The mention volume which this analysis encompasses is 47.28 thousand mentions. See Figure 1 below. A 'mention' is any single piece of online content (like a social media post, blog article, news story, or forum comment) that contains the specific keywords, phrases, or topics being tracked. The conversation has shown a marked uptick compared to the prior period of the same duration. The mention volume has increased by 797% compared to the prior period. The number of authors has increased by 125% indicating that the conversation is increasingly topical on social media. The number of unique authors that this analysis shows is 1215 users who are posting across a variety of social media platforms and blogs. This means that each user is posting an average of 39 posts about immigration. This is a high average, either indicating a highly engaged group of users repeatedly posting about the topic, coordinated amplification of particular narratives, or the presence of a relatively small number of highly active accounts driving a disproportionate share of the conversation. This suggests that the discussion is being sustained by persistent and repeated engagement rather than by a broad base of users each contributing only once or twice. The

trending topics in order of prevalence are: (1) South Africans, (2) illegal immigrants, and (3) illegal immigration.

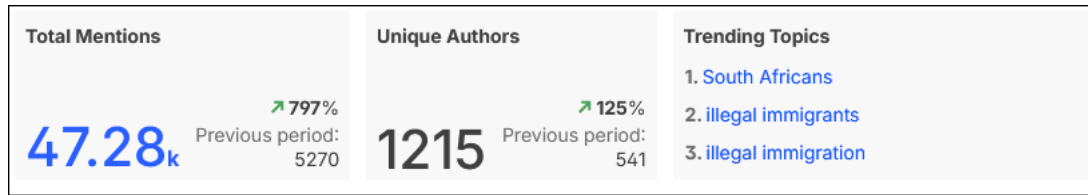


Figure 1: conversation metrics

Mention volume

The conversation size has grown in recent months, particularly since March. See Figure 2. There are noteworthy spikes in the conversation. The spikes tend to be incident driven such as conversation about specific xenophobic clashes, marches and repatriations. Within the spikes there are some noteworthy hashtags, particularly #marchandmarch and location-based hashtags such as #kzn, #southafrica and #africa.

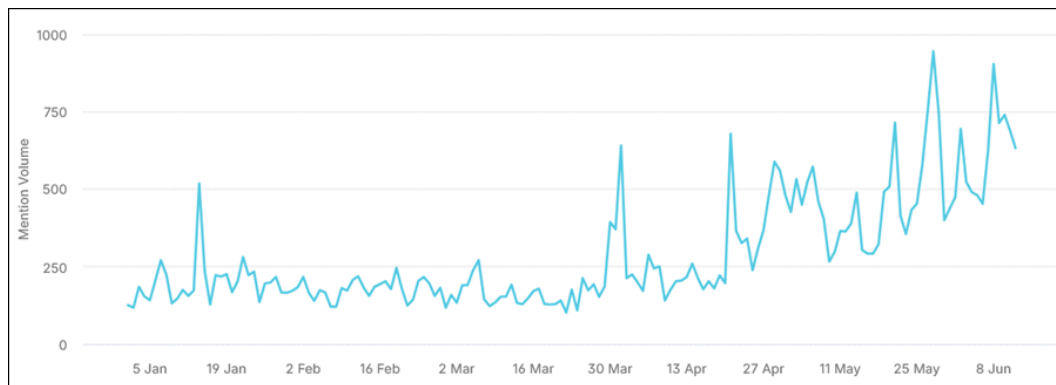


Figure 2: mention volume over time

Engagement

The figure below shows engagement with the conversation. Engagement refers to any active interaction your audience has with your content across social media platforms, forums, and blogs. The implications of the figure below are that it shows how social media amplifies a conversation. From mentions that range in the thousands of posts, the engagement score can reach in the millions.

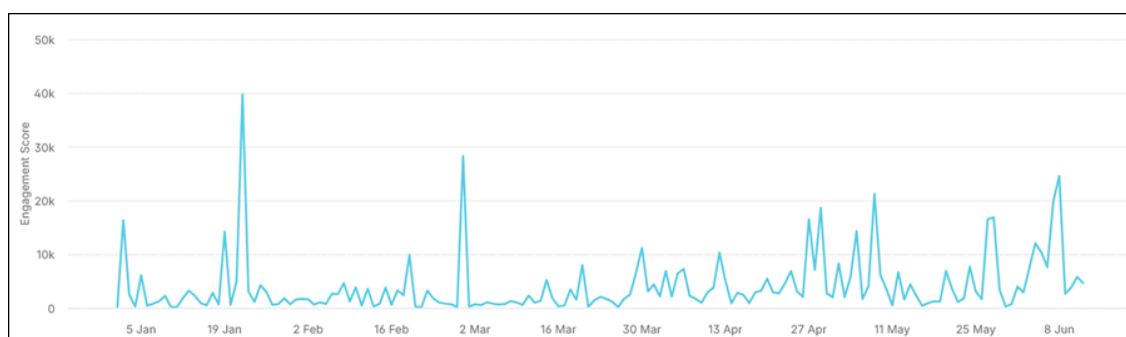


Figure 3: engagement over time

Sentiment

Sentiment in the conversation is predominantly negative, with a 964% increase in negative sentiment. This is shown in Figure 4 below.

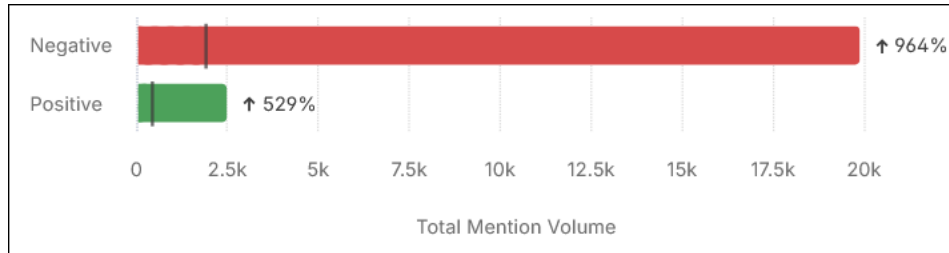


Figure 4: Sentiment

The conversation is eliciting a range of emotive responses. Refer to Figure 5. Notably, sadness is the most frequently identified response. This is followed by joy, signifying approval by anti-immigrant voices. The conversation is also characterised by disgust and anger. These prominent emotions in the conversation are increasing by notable unticks in percentage compared to the baseline (denoted by the line in the graph).

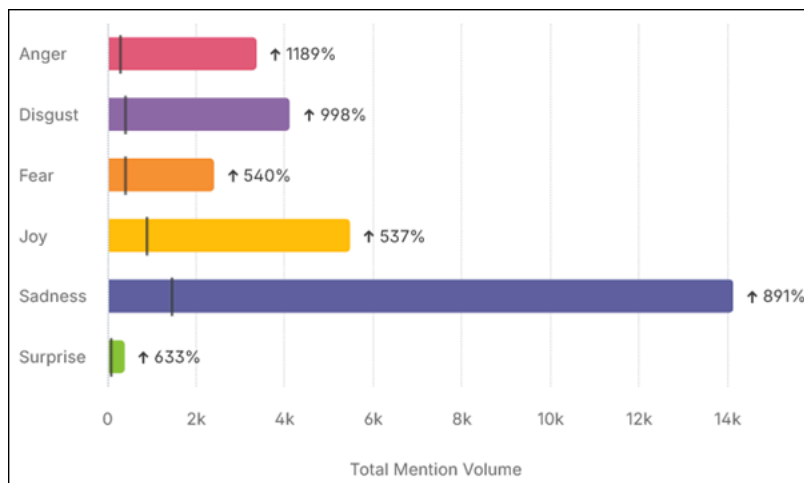


Figure 5: Mention volume for emotion

Most popular topics

The size of the word in Figure 6 indicates the prevalence of the topic in the conversation. The most prominent keywords in the conversation are 'White South Africans', 'people' and 'South Africans'. The flags in the word cloud are the South African and Nigerian flags. Illegal immigrants, illegal foreigners and illegal immigration are a topic cluster. The fire emoji is a signifier of both incendiary content that includes incitement to public violence and a form of approval that an anti-immigrant march or action is succeeding.

🚨 A critical situation was identified with 35 mentions exhibiting harmful reaction scores and negative sentiment. These discussions primarily focused on illegal immigration in South Africa, with strong sentiments about its negative economic and service impacts, alongside criticisms of Nigerian politics.

- **"South Africans" emerged as a top trending topic**, showing a significant outlier in trending metric with a value of 476 mentions expressed strong sentiment that "South Africans has every right to tell non South Africa to leave their country," reflecting concerns about illegal immigration and its perceived negative impact.
- **Discussions around "people" and "country" also showed high volume outliers**, with 5.7 thousand mentions each. These conversations highlighted the perception of Nigerians abroad, xenophobia, and calls for stricter border control, with one mention stating, "I don't think people over there are aware why rest of world doesnt like Nigerians."
- **"Illegal immigration" saw a peak in mentions** from 25 May to 15 June 2026, reaching a high of 237 mentions. The discussions emphasised significant concerns about the issue in South Africa, with claims of government downplaying the problem and public frustration.
- **"Cup" and "World" experienced multiple mention surges** related to the FIFA World Cup 2026, notably on 20-27 April 2026 with 356 mentions for "Cup" and 430 mentions for "World." These peaks were driven by Absa's promotion offering a chance to "Swipe. Spend. Score LITERALLY 🏆🔥" a trip to the event.
- **Soccer with xenophobia as a discussion point:** The FIFA World Cup has been discussed widely and within the conversation is a critique from users from a variety of countries in Africa of the Afrophobia in South Africa, with many fans openly stating that they would be supporting Mexico instead of South Africa in the match between the two countries. In turn, anti-immigrant users from South Africa have been discussing the support for Mexico and engaging in criticism of users supporting Mexico.

Top posters and influencers

The most mentioned posters on X are (1) @jacintangobese, (2) @psaflive, and (3) @knick_rsa. This order is sorted by all posts which is comprised of posts and reposts. See Figure 8.











Most Mentioned X Posters	POSTS	REPOSTS	ALL POSTS ▼	IMPRESSIONS
 @jacintangobese	89	929	1018	9698837
 @psaflive	18	666	684	5302769
 @knick_rsa	20	572	592	5621773
 @chrisexcel102	59	497	556	5847605
 @ghanaboynie	101	427	528	3700604
 @ephraim_snr	3	391	394	6801141
 @sabcnews	60	313	373	4892873
 @advobarryroux	73	290	363	2387752
 @isephara	11	339	350	4225744
 @dzungie007	14	317	331	3203233

Figure 8: Most mentioned X posters

Emojis

The top emoji is the South African flag, which is consistent with a nationalist pride that anti-immigrant groups are driving. The loudly crying face is a signifier again of how emotive this conversation is. Fire is both a signifier of incitement posts and approval of anti-immigrant marches and actions.











Top Emojis	POSTS	REPOSTS	ALL POSTS ▼	IMPRESSIONS
 regional indicator ...	154	2740	2894	29520858
 loudly crying face	310	1909	2219	36018463
 fire	117	1072	1189	22173918
 face with tears of ...	325	804	1129	15684932
 police cars revolv...	55	979	1034	8888163
 regional indicator ...	84	830	914	11375680
 !!	73	813	886	7629684
 ❤️ ❤️	64	724	788	13859925
 broken heart	60	641	701	8463777
 rolling on the floo...	241	454	695	8934761

Figure 9: Top emojis

Most engaged mentions across all platforms

Figure 10 below shows the most engaged posts across all platforms.







<input type="checkbox"/>	TITLE	ENGAGEMENT SCORE ↓
1 <input type="checkbox"/> ☆	 Olivia_LaGrange (🇷🇼Olivia La Grange🇷🇼) @Olivia_LaGrange The South African government DOES NOT WANT its citizens to know the true extent of illegal immigration . The numbers are over 25 million. RICA DATA #WAW  X x.com	8 Jun 9477
2 <input type="checkbox"/> ☆	 Olivia_LaGrange (🇷🇼Olivia La Grange🇷🇼) @Olivia_LaGrange I am being increasingly attacked online both by foreigners and by white South Africans . I'm a patriot and stand with my fellow brothers and sisters. Honestly I don't care what names you call me. You will never silence me #WAW  X x.com	7 Jun 6921
3 <input type="checkbox"/> ☆	 Malatjie_ (Village Lawyer 🇷🇼🇸🇰🇸🇰) @Malatjie_ I don't think both Ghana and Nigerian leaders are aware there's MILLIONS of their people in South Africa, they think it's just a couple of thousands 🤔  X x.com	7 Jun 5953

Figure 10: most engaged posts

Recommendations

- **Strengthen social media monitoring and early warning systems** to identify emerging anti-immigrant mobilisation, harmful narratives and potential triggers for violence before they escalate into offline incidents.
- **Monitor, document and report harmful content** that may constitute hate speech, incitement to violence, intimidation or discrimination, and refer serious cases to relevant authorities, regulators and social media platforms.
- **Develop and amplify counter-narratives** that promote social cohesion, constitutional values and factual information about migration, while challenging misinformation and harmful stereotypes.
- **Engage social media platforms** to improve enforcement against hate speech, incitement and coordinated harassment targeting migrants, refugees and foreign nationals.
- **Support prevention and protection measures** during periods of heightened tension, including planned marches, protests and mobilisation efforts, through coordination between civil society, community leaders and law enforcement agencies.

Conclusion

The analysis indicates that anti-immigrant discourse in South Africa has intensified significantly during the period under review. The conversation has expanded substantially in both volume and participation, with mention volumes increasing by 797% and the number of authors increasing by 125% compared to the previous period. This demonstrates that anti-immigrant narratives are not confined to a small number of actors but are increasingly reaching wider audiences across multiple social media platforms.

The conversation is characterised by predominantly negative sentiment and strong emotional responses, including sadness, anger and disgust. Engagement levels in the millions show the extent to which social media platforms amplify these narratives beyond the original posts, increasing their reach and influence. Discussions are frequently driven by specific incidents, marches and confrontations, creating spikes in activity that can rapidly mobilise online audiences.

A notable feature of the conversation is the repeated framing of migrants and foreign nationals through themes of illegality, criminality and economic competition. Nigerians are a particular focus of hostile narratives, with broad generalisations and stereotyping evident in many posts. The prevalence of incendiary language, harmful reaction scores, and symbols associated with confrontation and approval of anti-immigrant actions raises concerns about the potential for online rhetoric to contribute to discrimination, social exclusion and real-world tensions.

The findings suggest a need for continued monitoring of anti-immigrant narratives, particularly during periods of heightened mobilisation such as planned marches, protests and highly visible public events. The scale, growth and emotional intensity of the conversation underline the importance of early warning mechanisms, proactive counter-speech, accurate information sharing, and interventions aimed at preventing online hostility from escalating into offline harm.