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Xenophobic violence in South Africa, online disinformation and offline consequences

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ABSTRACT

Despite the paucity of evidence determining the aptitude of malicious online content to influence people to resort to violence, social media is fast becoming one of the catalysts of contemporary xenophobic narratives. Malicious contents in the form of fake news and hate speech are increasingly contributing to enflame online and offline tensions and violence. Focusing on September 2019 anti-foreigner violence in South Africa, this paper aims to assess the way misleading online content migrates into real-word attitudes and actions such as anti-migrant violence, reprisals, and counterviolence actions. Based data collected online and group discussions with young Africans in two African countries after the September 2019 outbreak of violence, our findings indicate a consistent positive association between exposition of young Africans across the continent to online content on violence in South Africa and their resentment against South Africans. Nevertheless, our findings could not establish a strong positive correlation between exposition to fake news and outbreak of violence. It is then not sure if messages shared on social media resort to violent offline actions. Taking the example of South Africa, our discussion assessed the propagation of deceitful content via social media, as a strategy for actors (community and political leaders) to advance ideas and social positions in the struggle for livelihood, identity, and sovereignty. The paper concludes that investing in digital media literacy could contribute to reduce the belief in online disinformation and the migration of emotions they create, into offline attitudinal and behavioural actions.

Introduction

Recent literature on online crime reveals that the prevalence of online hate speech has fuelled horrific real-world hate-crime (Mathew et al., 2019). This process is facilitated by social media that have provided breeding grounds for 'fake news', extremist conspiracy theories, and hate speech. Social media that can spread information fast and widely

provide a broad discursive context to potential perpetrators of violent actions to gain visibility, resonance, and legitimacy (Williams et al., 2020). Literature also confirms that malicious contents diffuse farther, wider, and faster and have a greater outreach than other contents (Mathew et al., 2019). As these authors argue, posts produced by hateful users have a much 'higher spreading velocity' because those users are densely connected and generate a large portion of content, despite their limited number. Misleading online activities such as the spread of fake news and hate speech are instrumental to sow mistrust and confusion among populations and to sharpen existing sociocultural divisions such as nationalistic, ethnic, racial, and religious tensions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Despite the paucity of evidence determining the aptitude of malicious online content to influence people to resort to violence, social media is fast becoming one of the catalysts of contemporary xenophobic narratives in South Africa (Chenzi, 2021). The September 2019 episode of anti-immigrant violence in South Africa has revealed the potential of stories, photos, and videos shared on social media, to enflame tensions inside and outside the country. Foreign nationals could quickly and widely share their xenophobic experiences through social media around the world, sparkling tensions, and retaliatory violence in other countries across the continent. While some of the narratives on xenophobia were genuine, others were fake online and misleading information.

Anti-immigrant violence is not new in South Africa. Threats and violence of xenophobic nature regularly occur in the country since the end of apartheid. The deadly episodes in 2008 and 2015 made international headlines and some heads of state have flabbily expressed their concerns and protest. However, the September 2019 outbreak of violence received more pronounced international reactions across Africa, especially in countries with large number of citizens living in South Africa. African leaders have been more expressive, condemning the attacks and recalling the South African Government to take measures to restore peace and security. In some African countries, there were calls for a boycott of South African companies, cancellation of an international friendly football match, and reprisal attacks (Chenzi, 2021). Demonstrations and actions in several countries have shown the increasing continental disdain for South Africa. Retaliation actions have been taking place in African countries during past xenophobic outbreaks in South Africa, but often limited to media retaliation (e.g. banning air play of all South African music on radio stations) in Zambia (Mkandawire, 2015); or mass demonstrations accompanied with minor infrastructure destruction in Nigeria or Zimbabwe. In September 2019, reprisal actions broke in several countries like Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia where South African symbols (diplomatic offices) and businesses were openly targeted (Chenzi, 2021; Ogunnoiki, 2019).

Studies have demonstrated that xenophobic attitudes are deeply entrenched in South Africa and anti-foreigner attacks have become common (Crush et al., 2013; Crush, 2020). However, for some researchers, xenophobia is the wrong word to describe the antagonism directed towards foreign nationals in violent attacks that have erupted in the country for about two decades (Tarisayi & Manik, 2020; UNISA, 2016). Afrophobia that captures the fear of a specific other, i.e. the black other from north of the Limpopo River, is a more relevant word. According to Tarisayi and Manik (2020), the September 2019 violent attacks of foreign nationals were afrophobia and not xenophobia because the main targets were black foreigners from other African countries. Anti-immigrant sentiment is spurred by the perception of foreigners by locals as a threat that constitutes a robust

predictor of potential participation in violence (Gordon, 2020a, 2020b). As illustrated by studies on violence on foreign shopkeepers in Cape Town, anti-immigrant violence in South Africa cannot be explained adequately through a macro-lens of the concept of xenophobia (Charman & Piper, 2012; Piper & Charman, 2016). A micro-level analysis of violence in South Africa reveals that economic motives are behind most of violent crimes in the townships and this has something to do with business practice and violent entrepreneurship (Charman & Piper, 2012). Those studies challenge the idea that South Africans experience less violent crime than foreign nationals living in the country (Piper & Charman, 2016).

The production and circulation of information has played a major role in shaping attitudes of people around violent crime or anti-immigrant violence in South Africa. A paper published in 2001 indicated that the coverage of international migration by the South African press has been largely anti-immigrant and unanalytical. Media have contributed to the high levels of xenophobia in South Africa by creating and reinforcing ideologies, discourses, and policies related to cross-border migration and the lives of migrants (Danso & McDonald, 2001). This negative role of media in exacerbating anti-immigrant sentiment has not really changed two decades later. Even today, media are accused of misrepresentation, biasness, unbalanced reportage mostly on xenophobic-related violence (Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2021). In most media articles on the September 2019 violent attacks, foreign nationals have been portrayed as criminals engaged in drug-related crimes (Tarisayi & Manik, 2020).

The virtual space has increasingly become an arena for afrophobic attacks and stereotyping of foreigners. A study analysing three hashtags that trended on South African Twitter, indicated that in online discussions, black foreigners are stereotyped as criminals (Tarisayi, 2021). In that case, physical attacks involving murder, looting of businesses and displacement of foreigners have migrated online, making very narrow the limit between online activity and offline attitudes and actions. Misleading information distilled by social media contributed in great deal to shape the emotions on events in South Africa and outside. Tensions and reprisal attacks in some countries have been fuelled by misleading social media posts about the anti-immigrant violence gripping South Africa (Chenzi, 2021).

What is the rationale behind the production and distribution of false information? In trying to answer this question, it is important to unpack the concept of 'fake news' or manipulation of information in general. Fake news is a buzzword increasingly used in the media ecology to characterize information diffused to intentionally deceive people (Rini, 2017). It is described as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Two main motivations underlie the production of fake news: financial and ideological. Even though the concern over fake news is global, much remains unknown regarding the vulnerabilities of individuals, institutions, and society to manipulations by malicious actors (Lazer et al., 2018). Fake news is thoroughly false information solely created for financial gain or to boost attention (Meinert et al., 2018). In some cases, outrageous and fake stories that go viral provide content that is convertible into advertising revenue with clicks. Information can also be manipulated by their producers to promote some ideas or people that they favour, often by discrediting others (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

An important aspect of the fake news challenge is the economics of emotions. How does the phenomenon affect the feelings and behaviours of people? Specifically, how are emotions leveraged to generate attention and viewing time, and converted into advertising revenue (Bakir & McStay, 2018)? Through social media, it is possible to assess information about emotions, intentions, and attitudes generated by individuals but also the society at large. In individual communication acts, people are increasingly using emojis and emoticons on social media. On Facebook for example, users can respond to a post by 'liking', commenting, or reacting on it in a way that captures their emotional response to the post (Chiou & Tucker, 2018). When most social platforms are engineered for people to publicly perform through likes, comments, or shares, it is easy to understand why emotional content travels so quickly and widely (Bakir & McStay, 2018). This online activity makes it possible to capture feelings, emotions, moods, perspectives, and intentions of people.

If online emotions can be captured and accessed through social media technologies, what happens with 'offline' emotions? Specifically, what can be popular emotional reactions and behaviour after being exposed to manipulated information from social media? In many cases, readers ignore the fake news stories they come across, but in some cases, their consumption can structure attitudes and lead to concrete actions (Tandoc et al., 2018). Reactions of people in real life can be measured through votes, public debates, and protests. However, little is known about the process of migration of online misleading information to offline feedbacks of people. Assessing emotions in the modern mediated life is not just about smileys, or the sharing of updates, selfies, and point-of-view content to provide valuable understanding of life moments (McStay, 2018), it is also an opportunity to measure offline individual and collective emotions. This is expressed through attitudes and behaviours resulting from the exposition to manipulated information.

This paper relies on the economics of emotions showing that the fake news phenomenon is motivated by specific economic, political, or symbolic purposes (Bakir & McStay, 2018). There are economic and political incentives to produce a deceitful content to influence group emotional behaviour within social networks. This influence can refer to intangible values such as reputation or propagation of an ideology. The production and spread of deceitful online content aim at influencing attitudes, decisions, behaviours, and emotions of consumers of fake news (McStay, 2018). The popular rating of some contents shared on social media contributes to play with the emotions of online users. The emotional contagion can affect online users who turn to believe in the truthfulness of information they like, comment, or share, without fact-checking. Online messages influence peoples' experience of emotions, which may affect a variety of offline behaviours (Kramer et al., 2014).

The paper investigates the vulnerabilities of individuals and society to manipulations by malicious actors (Lazer et al., 2018). The focus here is not the online emotional language, but offline consequences. The 2019 outbreak of violence in South Africa, offers an interesting opportunity to measure the impact of misleading information on feelings and behaviours of young people across the continent. An analysis of social consequences of fake news could tell more about the feelings, moods, and emotions of peoples, especially in an international context characterized by diverse national identities, pride, and prejudice. Focusing on September 2019 anti-foreigner violence in South Africa, this

paper aims to assess the way misleading online content migrates into real-word attitudes and actions, such as reprisals or the strengthening of anti-foreigner sentiments.

Research methodology

Materials for this paper were collected from secondary and primary sources of data. The data collection process was conducted in two phases, including online and primary face-to-face data collection.

Phase 1: online data collection

Through a Google search, the first phase consisted in the collection communication contents comprising newspapers and opinion articles focusing on violence in South Africa. Documents were daily compiled from 03 to 16 September 2019, systematically using the following specific keywords: violence in South Africa, violence in Gauteng, anti-immigrant attacks in South Africa, and xenophobia in South Africa. Sixty-seven (67) documents were harvested from national and international online newspapers in English but also in French (languages accessible to authors). An important inclusion criterion was the publication date (the publication should cover the period from August 27 to 16 September 2019). Information was harvested on the nature and magnitude of xenophobic violence, immediate and deep causes of violence, retaliation actions across the continent, and the impact of social media on violence. In our analysis, we considered papers focussing mainly on xenophobia, social media, fake news, hate speech, and retaliatory discourse.

Another process consisted in collecting messages, photographs, or videos distributed on social media during the riots, especially on Twitter, Facebook, and randomly on WhatsApp. When violence erupted, several videos circulated on YouTube calling South Africans to attack and kill foreign nationals. Other pictures and videos went viral on social media supposedly showing atrocities suffered by foreigners in South Africa. Those images were shared on WhatsApp and other digital platforms beyond South African boundaries and were abundantly commented by social media users. An unlimited number of photographs shared between 3 and 16 September 2019 were collected for a content analysis. However, eight photographs describing riots and lootings and abundantly tweeted or shared on Facebook were selected based on the number hits. The selected pictures were those that had at least ten thousand views and at least a thousand shares or retweets on social media. An emphasis was placed on the veracity and facticity of those photos, especially considering the caption that accompanied them. For videos, we did not use a specific method to harvest and filter online materials. Therefore, our analysis focussed on five of them collected in WhatsApp groups. We contacted one member of the Nigerian, Zimbabwean, and Congolese communities (among the most numerous) living in South Africa to harvest videos that were shared in their respective groups. Those videos described either hate speech against foreigners or supposedly reprisal attacks on South African interests across the continent. We subsequently harvested and analysed tweets from the following three hashtags that trended during the incident: #SayNoToXenophobia, #XenophobiaInSouthAfrica, or #XenophobicAttacks. We tracked the three hashtags to harvest 163 tweets between 4 and 21 September 2019 using the following keywords:
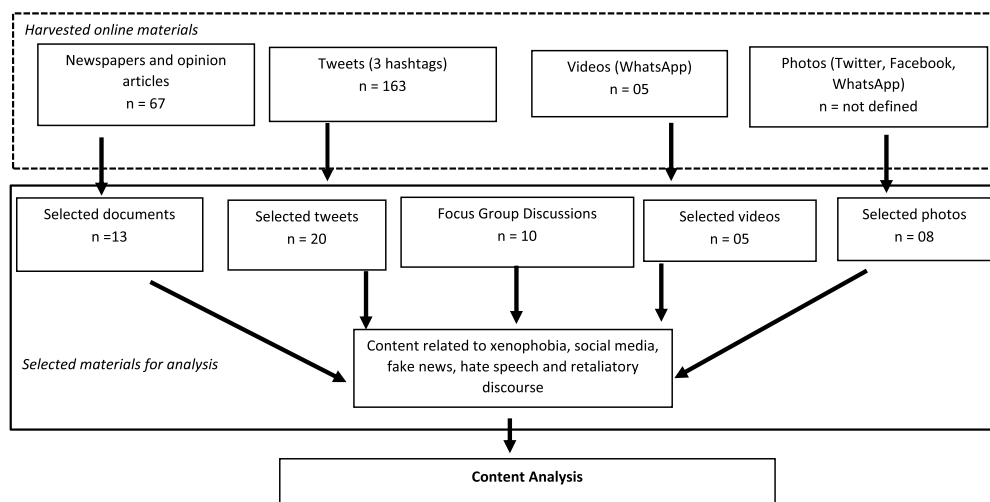
Figure 1. Methodological framework.

xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, fake news, hate speech, and retaliatory discourse. In a sort of contradictory debate, selected tweets were those either expressing anger and disgust about violence in South Africa, or those bringing arguments in justification or in support of attacks against foreigners. Ten tweets from each category were finally selected on 21 September 2019 for analysis based on the number of comments (at least five hundreds), likes (at least ten thousand) and retweets (at least one thousand) received by the tweet. Additionally, during our search of online content, we were often redirected to some Facebook pages where violence and anti-migrant discourse in South Africa were commented. Without having a particular strategy for collecting information on Facebook sites, we explored the content of four pages that presented interesting content (relevant posts and user comments) for our analysis. Photographs have been described, videos transcribed, and compiled with harvested tweets and Facebook posts for textual content analysis (see Figure 1).

Phase 2: primary data collection

The second phase of data collection consisted in assessing attitudes and opinions of people elsewhere in the continent about repeated waves of violence in South Africa. In November and December 2019, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire) and Yaounde (Cameroon). Abidjan is the economic capital city of Cote d'Ivoire (West Africa) and Yaounde the capital city of Cameroon (Central Africa). The FGD helps the researcher to catch and consider the peoples' feeling, expressions, views, believes, and responses of peoples in view to provide in-depth information in a relatively short period of time (Gundumogula, 2020). Abidjan and Yaounde are two cosmopolitan cities where large African communities coexist and where South African economic interests are present through the telecommunication giant MTN or satellite television service provider DSTV. Even though reprisals actions have not been noticed in those countries,

our aim was to uncover the 'silent voices' of young people, well informed through social media, but whose emotions are yet to be captured and measured.

Data collection consisted of ten (10) FGDs that included young female and male social media users between 18 and 35 years old (5 in each city). Participants were selected in various municipalities in both cities and represented different socioeconomic backgrounds. The content of the discussion included knowledge of violence against foreigners in South Africa; sources of information on xenophobic violence in South Africa; the rise of an anti-South African sentiment on the African continent and its consequences. All FGDs were conducted in French and were recorded using a digital voice recorder and systematically transcribed and translated into English for content analysis.

This study utilized Content Analysis (CA) to assess the way misleading online content on violence in South Africa migrates into real-word attitudes and actions. Content analysis can be viewed as an interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. CA has the purpose to organize and elicit meaning from data collected and to draw realistic conclusions (Bengtsson, 2016). This analytic approach was particularly used for organizing ideas according to the convergence of meanings, establishing groupings of points of view on discussed topics and drawing up a writing plan to interpret the results. This study adopted a conventional content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) that makes it possible to gain direct information from the analysed content without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives. Content analysis was used to analyse media content harvested through online newspapers, tweets, Facebook posts, photos and videos, and transcripts from Focus groups, in view to identify logical sequence of data as well as trends.

Content analysis was possible after a manual coding of all sets of data composed of transcripts of FGDs and videos, tweets and Facebook posts and other research material harvested online. The coding was based on a preliminary list of codes elaborated from the research objectives and completed during a careful reading of data. Data were classified, sorted, and arranged according to specific themes. Those themes include attitudes of peoples inside and outside South Africa regarding anti-foreigner violence, impact of online disinformation on emotions of people, and the translation of online hate speech into offline negative attitude and actions, in order to develop meaningful conclusions.

Results

The 2019 xenophobic violence in South Africa as described African media

Violent riots broke out in South Africa's major cities in the Gauteng province (Pretoria and Johannesburg) in early September 2019, targeting foreign nationals. Violence erupted in Pretoria during the last week of August as result of protest action taken by taxi operators after the death of Jabu Baloyi one of their colleagues. According to testimonies, Baloyi was murdered during a confrontation between taxi drivers and alleged drug dealers in Pretoria. His death sparked violent riots in which foreign-owned businesses were looted and burnt in and around the Pretoria central business district.

On 2 September 2019, riots started in Johannesburg when, during the previous night, an old building in the city's centre caught fire and collapsed, killing at least three people.

Mobs protested targeting foreign-owned businesses in several parts of the city. During a dozen of days, protesters torched cars, vandalized properties, and looted shops, demanding owners to return to their countries. Several dozens of foreign nationals lost everything, and hundreds obliged to leave. During an inter-ministerial press address on 10 September 2019, ministers of Defence, State security, Police, Home Affairs and Justice, relayed figures about that wave of violence. Surprisingly, concerning the death toll, the report revealed that 12 people lost their life among those, 10 were fellow South Africans (Head, 2019).

Nevertheless, in the new era of technology of information and communication, the shock of anti-foreign attacks has quickly and instantaneously reverberated across borders through mainstream and social media reports. During the first half of September 2019, xenophobic violence in South Africa made the headlines of major newspapers across the continent. For *Wakat Sera* in Burkina Faso (2019),

> what is happening in South Africa is simply surrealistic [. . .]. There is no other way for Madiba's compatriots to kill him for the second time by undertaking this inexplicable jihad against those they are currently chasing from a country that is called, ironically, the Rainbow Nation [translated by authors from French].

The same tone is used by *The Guardian* (06 September 2019) in Nigeria qualifying violence in South Africa, as 'a slap on Africa's face' or an 'African tragedy of unimaginable proportions'. For that Nigerian newspaper, it is an insult for both common sense and sense of history that Africans would turn against each other. Rwagatare (2019 , September 10) of *The New Times* in Rwanda, argued that anti-immigrant violence and retaliation acts in some African countries are simply cases of 'misdirected anger'. Those that should be blamed are governments who have failed to address social, economic, and political structural problems. For the same Rwandan newspaper (The *New Times*, 2019, 5 September), 'the Nigerian or Malawian immigrant is not responsible for lack of social protection for many in the shantytowns. The real culprits are sitting back content that discontent has been directed away from their direction'. In that case, xenophobic attacks should be viewed as 'acts of violence of victims against other victims'. For Allison (2019, 4 September) of the South African *Mail & Guardian*, violence against foreign nationals is viewed by some local peoples as 'the shame of being a South African in the rest of Africa'.

Indeed, the news of attacks on foreigners in South Africa spread rapidly across the world. Pictures and videos of lootings and vandalized properties quickly went viral on social media and were commented and shared by tens of thousands of people in support or against violence. Some people in South Africa used the scarcity rhetoric to justify the ongoing violence. For an anonymous commenter on the hashtag #XenophobicAttacks (8 September 2019),

> What is happening is a natural phenomenon. Our country is in such a state that most of our people are in poverty. Aggravating this problem is the influx of foreigners now fighting for the same small bone. Xenophobia is just a natural outcome of this.

For other South Africans commenting the events on social media, 'we must ban the *bantu* settlers who have now clearly overstayed their welcome, back to outside our borders. Let them become someone else's burden' (anonymous commenter on the hashtag #SayNoToXenophobia, 6 September 2019). As consequence, videos and messages have

circulated on WhatsApp directly threatening foreigners and giving them deadlines to leave South Africa or else, they will come under attack.

Outside South Africa, images, videos, and messages claiming that African foreign nationals were targeted in the attacks, have widely circulated on social media, inflaming tensions. Few examples presented below illustrate the misleading character of those messages. A cyber-activist of *Observatoire Démocratique en Côte d'Ivoire (ODCI)* posted: 'It's a mess in South Africa. They are killing their own African brothers. I make a call: let's get rid of every South Africans in the country [translated by authors from French]'.[1] This call for reprisal attacks against South Africa is fuelled by alarming messages attesting mass massacres in South Africa. On 4 September 2019, a post on *Méritocratie Malienne*, another Facebook platform from Mali, presented what was considered by the author as statistics of a 'butchery' of foreigners in South Africa:

> # Africa is dying. A new attack on Tuesday [3 September 2019] afternoon in South Africa against foreigners. As results, 45 foreigners burned alive and several wounded. Here is the list of countries that have lost their compatriots: 1. #Zimbabwe with 7 dead; 2. # Chad : 8 dead; 3. #DRC : 6 dead; 4. #Zambia : 9 dead; 5. #Congo-Brazzaville : 3 dead; 6. #Mali : 3 dead; 7. #Swaziland : 4 dead; 8. #Tunisia : 2 dead; 9. #Cameroon : 2 dead; 10. # Senegal : 1 dead [translated by authors from French].[2]

Those figures are obviously false as no more than two foreign nationals have been officially reported to have been killed during two weeks of violence in Pretoria and Johannesburg.

Other messages described the supposedly *modus operandi* of people behind the spread of inflammatory information to spur violence against foreigners. On 8 September 2019, a Congolese Facebook page (InfoplusDRC) posted a message to warn compatriots in South Africa on what was about to come:

> A fellow African from Mali was blinded this afternoon [8 September 2019], downtown Johannesburg under the gaze of passers-by and the police did nothing to stop it. According to some sources, the 'Amazulu' have planned to go door to door from Monday, 9 September 2019. They will visit neighbourhoods, avenues, cities to track down foreigners. Families and friends in Kinshasa are asked to alert their families in South Africa [translated by authors from French].[3]

We confirm that rumours have circulated at that period in foreign communities in major cities on possible attacks from South African extremists, but they were never based on clear evidence. According to one of the videos that circulated on WhatsApp, foreigners are invited to leave South Africa:

> Let me warn you. We are giving any foreigner fourteen days to get out of our country. If you can't get out of our country, I can guarantee you, we shall execute a lot of foreigners that we come across in our regions . . . We shall continue killing and no one will threaten us. South Africa for South Africans, period [Transcript of an undated and unauthenticated video].

This was part of false information spread either to spur fear or on contrary to incite anger and reprisal actions. Those messages have been commented and shared by thousands of members of social media platforms with emotional reactions ranging from sadness to anger and desire of retaliation.

Social media in the construction of an anti-South African sentiment over xenophobic violence

In the contemporary media environment, understanding how news affect citizens' attitudes and behaviours is critical in the new economy of emotions. The September 2019 episode of anti-foreigner violence in South Africa offers a good example of the contribution of social media in spurring tensions and counterviolence. South Africa has suffered international backlash for the 2019 anti-foreigner attacks and resentment against South African interests in several African countries has garnered momentum. It emerges from discussions with youth in Cote d'Ivoire and Cameroon about September 2019 violence that, opinions of young Africans on xenophobia in South Africa are most often constructed on media reports, and when information is manipulated or polluted, it could generate negative perceptions. Many people are exposed to manipulated information in the form of fake news that can be quickly and abundantly spread through social media.

Reference to South Africa on international headlines has been dominated in recent years by anti-immigrant riots targeting people from other African countries that have been a feature of South African life for decades. In September 2019, however, the popular reactions across Africa were more pronounced and more violent. In several places, protests turned into violent actions against South African symbols and interests. In Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South African-owned shops were sacked and looted while the South Africa's consulate in Lubumbashi was vandalised. In Zambia, a signboard outside the South African Embassy in Lusaka was symbolically burned by protesting Zambian students. In Nigeria, there was temporary closure of the South African diplomatic missions in Lagos and Abuja, in fear of reprisal attacks against its citizens. Angry demonstrations on the streets openly threatened South African-owned businesses (grocer Shoprite and telecommunications giant MTN) of retaliation. Discussions with youth from Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire revealed that many young Africans are increasingly animated by a feeling of revolt, disgust, and hatred towards South Africans. This feeling is expressed by many young Ivorians:

> Every time we hear about xenophobic violence in South Africa. Ironically, it is always black people killing other Africans and vandalising their properties. When I saw images of what happened recently [September 2019], it pissed me off. I told to myself that something must be done to make this stop, even if this means attacking South African economic interests in the country.[4]

A group of Cameroonian informants would like African youth to take more actions against South Africans:

> We will not always continue with this habit of letting go. We should find ways to fight South Africans back. We should start treating them the same way they are doing to others. To cure the evil, we must act in return. We have to show them that other people also have an animal inside them.[5]

Why were protests and demonstrations against South Africa across the continent so violent this time? Resentment against South African interests in Africa could have been fuelled by social media. During the September 2019 events in Johannesburg and Pretoria, there was the usual condemnation on social media with hundreds of thousands of users expressing their indignation on Facebook, Twitter, and other popular online platforms

following the outburst of violence. The use of social media to spread misleading pictures and videos has contributed to inflame tensions and spurred more public anger and resentment against South Africa. The opinion of young Cameroonians and Ivorians over retaliatory actions in some countries is mixed, some of them hailing reprisal actions while other strongly condemn what they consider as the 'therapy of violence with violence'. For many informants, retaliatory actions on South Africa owned businesses are like 'shooting oneself in the foot' as tens of thousands of local jobs are at stake. The telecommunication giant MTN for example employs mainly a local workforce in each country where it is operating. Some other people have felt satisfaction after seeing images and videos of supposedly retaliatory acts against South African interests on the continent. They are in favour of reciprocity being inflicted on South Africans.

> I watched a video where people were fleeing from a building in flame, some of them in blood. The accompanying message indicated that it was the South African embassy in Nigeria that had been set on fire. I confess that when I saw these acts of revenge, there was a kind of satisfaction deep inside me. You couldn't pretend nothing had happened neither. They [South Africans] killed people and then life should continue as usual? I had a feeling of satisfaction.[6]

Even though Nigerian government quickly debunked reports of an explosion at the Abuja premises of the South African embassy, many people across the continent would have been happy if this news was true.

In the narratives of young African from Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire, social media platforms are increasingly becoming the vehicle of tensions and conflicts between communities around the world. Nevertheless, most of informants agreed that exposure to social media is not always a catalyst for hate speech and physical violence. As it emerged during a discussion with Cameroonian participants,

> It is not because I am exposed to information on social media on violence in South Africa that I will start vandalising properties or killing people. First, I feel for South Africans who are invaded by foreigners every day. Besides that, there is no proof that information we are receiving on the violence is genuine. We should not let our emotions taking the best of us.[7]

Violence is often instigated by some agitators manipulating people. The identity of people behind the manipulation of information contributing to the rise of afrophobia or on contrary the anti-South African resentment in Africa is not clearly described. Nevertheless, it is obvious that manipulators are both inside and outside South Africa. On one side, it is believed that protests and violence against South African interests across the continent are often fuelled by social media activists and politicians to push government addressing local societal issues like employment, inequality, and migration. It can also be a pretext to point out the responsibility of national governments concerning issues like misgovernance, state capture, and corruption, as well as claims for accountability, fair and transparent elections. In Nigeria, false reports on an explosion at the South African embassy that went viral on social media, were interpreted by the government as fake news orchestrated by a desperate opposition to cause panic and chaos among the populace, surely for political dividends. In that case, the spread of misleading information on attacks on South-African interests might not be an indicator for the rise of an anti-south African resentment. It can be interpreted as a new form of domestic socioeconomic and political battles.

On the other side in South Africa, people pushing hashtags and Facebook posts, spreading misleading pictures, videos, and inflammatory flyers on social media, clearly aim to expel foreign nationals from the country. Their intention might be to send a message to their government to address persisting social and economic ills, as well as governance issues. However, foreign nationals are not only scapegoated to demand more efficient governance and policing in the country. The attitude of many south-Africans who believe that foreign nationals have 'overstayed their welcome', can be interpreted as a sort of nationalism constructed from below, i.e. from the streets and from communities, and abundantly relayed by social media activists. The objective of the nationalistic sentiments may be to restore the 'Mzansi identity' supposedly tarnished by migrants. The rhetoric used is that fear should be instilled in the collective imagination, by showing through misleading images and stories, that South Africa has become an unsafe or a no-go place.

The anti-foreign violence from online emotions to offline consequences

With the emergence of digital technologies as the new form of everyday communicative interactions, there are ever-increasing mediated communication modes like texting, chatting, and social media giving connected people plenty of opportunities to share their emotions with others. Online emotions can be captured and assessed through likes, comments, and reactions on information shared through posts. The emotional architecture of social media has created a space in which emotions are activated and expressed. The example of violence in South Africa demonstrated that emotions expressed by people on social media influence those of other people in a form of emotional contagion via social networks, with a potential to degenerate into negative attitudes and behaviours. The translation of online emotions into offline or real-world emotions and actions poses the problem of the importance of social media in the economics of emotions.

We postulate here that online contents influence emotions of people and it can consequently affect their attitude and offline behaviors. Social media have become a channel of creation and expression of affection or disgust, fear or joy, approval or disapproval, within large communities. However, those emotions can transcend the online context and they are played and displayed in the real-world. Social media users express various form of emotions within their online communities and those emotional contents can travel widely and very quickly and become contagious through comments and shares. The way online emotions are transformed into real-world emotions depends on individual predispositions and people's underlying beliefs. However, the level of access to good information is critically important. The facticity of information can then play a critical role in building negative feelings.

The process of translation of online emotions into offline attitude is accelerated by influencers or in the case of xenophobic violence, a manipulator. That person (or a group of peoples) is capable of shaping awareness about a product, trend, topic, or idea. The amount of factitious online contents shared during the outbreak of violence in September 2019, is an indication that there might be faceless people pulling strings in the backstage and pushing disadvantaged people to violence. A like, a comment or an emoji is never neutral, it is an engaged message that can be interpreted by friends and

followers as a code to modulate their own attitude and behaviours accordingly. When a public personality retweets a photo of the xenophobic violence in South Africa with a caption commenting a 'barbaric butchering' of African people, this will widely affect the emotions of fans. As reacted a fellow Nigerian during a discussion in Abidjan,

> I was shocked when I saw those pictures [of anti-foreigner violence] on social media but I started believing that it was true when I read comments of some celebrities in Nigeria condemning killings of other African peoples and cancelling events in South Africa. As public personalities, they couldn't go to that extent if the information was fake.[8]

The intention of some influencers is not always to foster offline negative emotions, but their posts contribute rather to fuel the fire with unexpected consequences.

Inter-community conflicts are commonplace on the African continent. Recent events in several countries around scarce resources such as land, pastures, or market opportunities, provide alarming stories of the deterioration of peaceful existence of communities in certain regions of the continent. Dozens of intercommunity clashes are recorded in Africa each year resulting in hundreds of deaths. Even when they have an international dimension, these conflicts did not have the same media resonance as the attacks in South Africa against foreigners. Nigerian traders have been repeatedly targeted in Ghana as the result of a discriminatory Ghanaian trade policy prohibiting foreigners from engaging in retail trade. Attempts to enforce that law by local traders is often cause of bloody clashes with Nigerians. Nevertheless, those events and many others across the continent did not receive the same attention compared to what happened in South Africa. Even when in April 2020, videos showing mistreatment of Africans living in the Chinese city of Guangzhou went viral on social media as a clear act of xenophobia and racism, the event received little public criticism in the continent.

One could suspect the existence of hidden hands driving the mediatization of anti-foreigner violence in South Africa for a specific gain. The argument of 'ungratefulness' of South African does not longer suffice to explain the magnitude of public criticism against violence in South Africa when the same acts on Africans are tolerated elsewhere. Social media are not only serving as a channel for the expression of feelings of people but also contribute to model those feelings. As marketers do, sharing information that inspires emotional reactions is a way of seeking validation from those who matter. Propagating fake news on violence in South Africa via social media, might be a strategy from inner and outside forces to advance their ideas in the struggle for livelihood, identity, and sovereignty.

Discussion

Studies on xenophobia have demonstrated that South Africa exhibits levels of intolerance and hostility to outsiders higher than in any other country worldwide (Crush et al., 2013). This resulted in frequent attacks against foreigners since the country became a constitutional democracy in 1994. The September 2019 anti-immigrant protest was just an episode of violence facing the country over three decades with the most resounding events in 2008 and 2015 when mass attacks ended with dead of dozens of peoples and hundreds of others displaced, their properties and businesses looted and vandalized. Those attacks generally cover a wide geographic area, with hotspots in major urban areas

and oriented towards African immigrants considered as 'soft targets' (Crush et al., 2013). The particularity of September 2019 episode of violence in South Africa was the con- tinentwide resonance of the event. Hundreds of immigrants were displaced, amid mass looting and destruction of foreign-owned homes, properties, and businesses; twelve people lost their life according to official statistics, among them 83% were fellow South Africans (Head, 2019; Landau, 2019). Unlike previous years, reactions that ensued in African countries were surprisingly different (Ogunnoiki, 2019). The magnitude of con- demnation went beyond the usual diplomatic moves, and more people in Africa showed concerns, especially in countries whose citizens have been allegedly targeted in South Africa.

Our findings indicate a consistent positive association between exposition of young African across the continent to online content on violence in South Africa and their ressentiment against South Africans. Misleading information have contributed to create negative emotions leading some of them to anger and disgust, and for other to violent retaliatory actions. Reactions of officials and population across the continent, indicate that xenophobic violence of September 2019 played a key role as 'triggering event' (Williams et al., 2020) for retaliatory acts, however, the magnitude of reactions and violence shows that offline hate attitude existed even in the absence of outbreaks of violence in South Africa. Social media contributed to spread misleading pictures and videos inflaming tensions and spurring more public anger and resentment. It is assumed that social media through online messaging influence people's experience of emotions, which may affect a variety of offline behaviours (Kramer et al., 2014).

Xenophobic violence is not irrational violence or a spontaneous popular revolt. It is not a mere act of criminality as politicians have repeatedly portrayed, confirming a sort of 'gross denialism within government circles on magnitude of afrophobia' (Tarisayi & Manik, 2020). Violence against other groups is also interpreted as an act rooted in the failures of South Africa's transformation (Landau, 2019). In South Africa, some people have an interest to sow fear among immigrants and discourage those planning to move into the country. In that case, the rhetoric revolves around the primacy of local populations through nationalistic concepts such as 'South African first' promoted by nationalist organisations. Literature on online crime reveals that the prevalence of online hate speech has fuelled horrific real-world hate-crime (Mathew et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2020). This process is facilitated by social media that have provided a breeding ground for 'fake news', far right and left conspiracy theories and hate speech.

Outside South Africa, the online discourse around 2019 xenophobic violence was less coordinated as narratives did not build on a specific ideology. However, our results confirm that misleading images and videos contributed to spark anger and negative emotions across the continent. The afrophobic or negrophobic character of violence was particularly pointed out. Reprisal attacks of African youth on several South African-owned businesses across the continent show that the people have had enough of the intolerance and victimization of Africans in South Africa (Ogunnoiki, 2019). Even though an online comment or a like is never neutral and can constitute a way to capture emotions of the author as well as a call for action (Peyton, 2014), those online posts are rarely harmful. However, few people can take online dialogue and disinformation activities offline and into action. That is what the youth did across the continent through various retaliatory acts ranging from non-violent protests in front of the South African diplomatic offices (e.g.

DRC, Zambia) to attacks on South African-owned businesses (e.g. Nigeria) (Chenzi, 2021). Nevertheless, findings of this study did not establish a strong correlation between exposition to 'fake news' and outbreak of violence. It is not sure if messages shared on social media played an important role in inciting violence. Other effects such as inter-personal networks, verbal communication, opportunities to loot or socio-political reasons could be critically important. In a volatile socioeconomic and political context, violence outbreaks may constitute a pretext for some political maneuvres, making matters worse by distilling false news that is inflaming tempers across the continent (Pate et al., 2019).

Two key elements of discussion deserve a critical attention: 1) the way foreign nationals are portrayed in South Africa, especially in media and; 2) the nature and form of violence in South Africa that spurs anger and negative sentiments across the continent. Concerning the first element, media in South Africa (digital and mainstream) contribute to instil an afrophobic sentiment in people by creating and reinforcing ideologies, discourses, and policies related to cross-border migration and the lives of migrants (Danso & McDonald, 2001; Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2021). Foreign nationals are portrayed in media as criminals engaged in drug-related crimes (Tarisayi & Manik, 2020). Attacks on foreign nationals also happen in the virtual space. Online debates are often manipulated to further afrophobic narratives (Tarisayi, 2021). In that case, contrary to what is described in this article, physical afrophobic attacks previously witnessed in South Africa are repli-cated online without the loss of lives and properties.

The second element discussed here is the nature and form of violence experienced by foreign nationals in South Africa. As our findings revealed, Africans on the continent are more irritated by the fact that violence in South Africa is orchestrated by black South African against other black people. There is an apparent exclusion of white foreigners and other races by the perpetrators of the violence against foreigners in South Africa (Tarisayi & Manik, 2020). Nevertheless, it should be noted that violence is not always driven by anti-foreigner sentiment. It can also be explained in terms of criminal activities and economic competition in the form of 'violent entrepreneurship' (Charman & Piper, 2012). In such a context, foreign nationals in South Africa experience the same levels and forms of violence than South Africans (Piper & Charman, 2016).

What are the conditions for the migration from online hate speech and misinformation to offline actions? Our results indicate that the spread of misleading information is due either to the lack of right information, or an intentional activity of a group of manipulators distilling misleading information to spark specific emotions. A quantitative analysis of public participation in anti-immigrant violence in South Africa revealed that only a minority of people reported that they had participated in anti-immigrant violence. Nevertheless, a disconcerting number of non-participants claimed to be willing to con-sider participating in this type of discriminatory behaviour in the future (Gordon, 2020a). This result suggests that even if most of young people with whom we spoke in this study stated their reluctance to engage in violent retaliatory actions, nothing indicates that they will not be inclined to participate in the future. A recent reflexion from Ruedin (2019) on the reasons some individuals are more likely to oppose immigrants and minority groups than others, put the spotlight on personality and vulnerability as the proxies of the attitudes of in-groups to the out-groups. Thus, the same mechanisms that shape attitudes to immigrants in Western countries are at work in non-Western context, including South Africa. Those mechanisms are that vulnerable economic and social positions, personality,

and lack of contact with immigrants are associated with negative attitudes to immigrants (Ruedin, 2019). Similarly, in a sort of analogy, feeling collectively vulnerable or perceived social position, individual personality, and contact expectations might also influence the reprisal attitudes and behaviours of young people across the African continent against South Africa.

The migration of online emotions to offline action is tributary of the digital media literacy of users. This concept captures the skills and competencies needed to successfully navigate in a fragmented and complex information ecosystem. The deficit in digital media literacy worldwide has been identified as a critical factor explaining the widespread belief in online misinformation (Guess et al., 2020). Our study targeted young people with high level of literacy, meaning a good level of digital media literacy. Irrespective of the country (Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire), this level of literacy is positively associated with their reluctance of getting involved in street protests and violence. Even with a paucity of research in the domain, evidence can already show a relationship between digital media literacy and people's ability to distinguish between low- and high-quality online information (Guess et al., 2020). Investing in digital media literacy is likely to contribute to reducing the belief in online disinformation in the form of fake news and hate speech and the migration of emotions they create, into offline attitude and actions.

Limitations of the study

There were several limitations to this study. The study is based on the assumption that social media are contributing to the construction of an anti-south African resentment over xenophobic violence. Our study and many others before (Chenzi, 2021; Mkandawire, 2015; Ogunnoiki, 2019) have demonstrated that based on misleading reports, social media are contributing to spur tensions and counterviolence. However, the study did not establish a strong causal link between exposure of youth to online content and eruption of retaliatory violence against South African interests across the continent. This suggests that many other social, economic, and political factors should be considered in an analysis of causes of violent crime and reprisal actions. The other main possible disadvantage of the data presented in this study is our focus on youth in two countries that have not been particularly targeted in the 2019 anti-immigrant violence in South Africa. Our aim was to assess opinions and reactions of African young people exposed to online content on afrophobia in South Africa. It was noticed that youth in Cameroun and Cote d'Ivoire have increased resentment against South Africa due to repetitive waves of violence against foreign nationals. Nevertheless, investigations in countries where protests and acts of vandalism on South African interests (e.g. Nigeria, DRC, etc.) were perpetrated during the 2019 violence, could have provided different and more interesting narratives.

Conclusion

In discussing the 2019 xenophobic violence in South Africa, we have argued that social media have contributed to spread misleading information on the events, contributing to structure an unprecedented wave of reactions across the continent. Unlike previous years, reactions that ensued in African countries were more spontaneous and more violent. Our findings indicate a consistent positive association between exposition of young African

across the continent to online content on violence in South Africa and their ressentiment against South Africans.

Our discussion emphasized that the propagation of fake news and hate speech around violence in South Africa via social media, might have been a strategy from inner and outside forces to advance ideas and social positions in the struggle for livelihood, identity, and sovereignty. Through emotions created by images, videos, and messages, online hate victimization is part of a wider process of harm that can begin on social media and then migrate to the physical world. The emotional contagion can affect online users who turn to believe in the truthfulness of information they like, comment, or share, without fact-checking. They contribute to the economics of emotions, often based on manipulated and false information. The consumption of harmful online content can structure attitudes and lead to concrete actions. In extreme cases, it leads to real-world radicalization and to offline hate crime or terrorism. This study opens several routes for further inquiry. More evidence is needed to show the relationship between digital media literacy and people's ability to distinguish between low- and high-quality online news. This could lead to changes in education policy and the design of technology platforms.

Notes

1. Source: ODCI, 04 September 2019. A Facebook page on Côte d'Ivoire promoting democratic values in the country. https://www.facebook.com/groups/445220146321751//.
2. Source: *Meritocratie Malienne*, 4 September 2019. A Facebook page on Mali promoting equal opportunity for all. https://www.facebook.com/Meritocratie-Malienne-1403127779901134/.
3. Source: InfoplusDRC, 08 September 2019. A Facebook page on Democratic Republic of Congo providing online news.
4. Focus group discussion young Ivorians in Angré (Cocody municipality), Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (10 November 2019).
5. Focus group discussion young Cameroonians, Melen (Yaounde 6 municipality), Yaounde, Cameroon (04 December 2019).
6. Focus group discussion young Cameroonians, Oyomabang (Yaounde 7 municipality) Yaounde, Cameroon (22 November 2019).
7. Focus group discussion young Cameroonians, Melen (Yaounde 6 municipality), Yaounde, Cameroon (04 December 2019).
8. Focus group discussion young Nigerians, Adjame (municipality of Adjame), Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (15 November 2019).

Disclosure statement

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