# An Evaluation of Users' Perception of Social Media Posts on the 2019 Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa

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## Abstract

The study evaluated users' perception of social media posts on the September 2019 attacks against African migrants in South Africa. It adopted survey research design, using questionnaire to generate data. The study found that users believed that social media posts played both positive and negative roles in the attacks. The results of the study, however, indicated that social media posts played more negative role by fuelling the attacks, creating unnecessary panic about the attacks and provoking reprisal attacks. The study recommends that Social media users should exercise some restraint and sense of social responsibility during crisis to avoid escalating the situation; governments and other crisis managers should endeavour to harness the positive attributes of social media to quell crisis; and governments, NGOs and civil society groups should sensitize the public periodically on how to use social media in the interest of the society, especially during crisis.

Keywords: Xenophobic, Social Media, South Africa

### Introduction

For over a decade, South Africa has been rocked by sporadic waves of vicious attacks against African migrants. Many commentators have described the attacks against foreigners of African descent in South Africa as xenophobia. "South Africa now has the unfortunate reputation as one of the more hostile destinations in the world for African migrants" (Claassen, 2017, p.1). The intermittent xenophobic attacks have, over the years, caused diplomatic rows between South Africa and African countries whose citizens were victims of the attacks, resulting in repatriation of foreign nationals and other angry reactions. Against this backdrop, South African officials have made spirited attempts to explain the attacks away as the nefarious acts of few criminal elements and amorphous groups. But it is held in various quarters that "these are not attacks caused by small bands of provocateurs or criminals; both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests widespread participation in, and support for, the violence in the affected communities" (Claassen, 2017,p.1; Claassen, 2014). Xenophobia is a strong feeling of dislike, hatred or fear of people from other countries (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 6<sup>th</sup> edition). It is the "attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity" (Scalabrini Centre, 2019, p.2). The persistent feeling of dislike, hatred and rejection which people of a country have towards people of other countries who are foreigners in their country is xenophobia. It manifests in abuse, avoidance, rejection and attack of foreigners.

Xenophobia in South Africa, like other crises of similar magnitude across the globe, has unsurprisingly attracted huge media attention. The mainstream media in various countries and different social media platforms were awash with disturbing reports on the xenophobic attacks in South Africa in September 2019. It has been observed that "the media play a critical role in shaping and responding to opportunities and challenges offered by migration and diversity" (Desmares, 2017, p.5).

Social media are online interactive, democratic and participatory communication platforms that allow uninhibited exchange of information and documents among connected persons (Odii, 2013). Social media can be described as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). They are free and interactive online communication channels like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc. With their growing interactivity, user-generated content, anonymity and ease of use, social media are fast becoming preferred media for crisis reporting by the populace. Chan (n.d, p.2) notes that "the advent of a

plethora of social media tools has changed the landscape of crisis management considerably over recent years with possibilities for social action now becoming realities." Social media platforms were deployed for varying purposes during the 2019 xenophobic attacks in South Africa, including reporting, criticizing, condemning and defending the attacks. It is, therefore, imperative to critically analyze and evaluate the implications of social media representations of the 2019 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. This is the focus of this study.

#### **Statement of Problem**

The 2019 xenophobic attacks in South Africa drew overwhelming media attention. While the attacks lasted and in their immediate aftermath, reports on, and reactions to the attacks flooded the mainstream media and various social media platforms. Social media reportage on the attacks generated mixed reactions and altercations in various quarters. However, the implications and effects of social media representations of the attacks are not immediately clear. It is necessary to investigate whether social media fuelled or helped to quell the attacks.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

- 1. What was the nature of social media stories on the 2019 xenophobic attacks against African migrants in South Africa?
- 2. To what extent were the audience exposed to social media stories on the 2019 xenophobic attacks against African migrants in South Africa?
- 3. What was the effect of social media on the 2019 xenophobic attacks against African migrants in South Africa?

## **Review of Relevant Literature**

Researchers and commentators have given attention to the intermittent attacks on African migrants in South Africa. The South African Catholic Bishops' Conference reported in its Briefing Paper 339 of 2013 that South Africa faced a series of xenophobic attacks against immigrants in April 2008, noting that in Gauteng Province where at least 42 people died, thousands of persons were injured, more than 16000 were displaced, and 400 people were arrested. A total of 62 persons were killed in the attacks. The Conference noted that CPLO's 2008 briefing paper on the violence identified eight 'points of concern' surrounding the attacks. The points are: competition for resources; criminality and opportunism; inadequate intelligence; inefficient procedures at the Department of Home Affairs; a culture of violence; lack of leadership; the international pervasiveness of xenophobia; and failure of the security forces to quell the violence.

The Conference (2013, p.2) further observed that "in some cases, attacks are committed because foreigners are perceived as members of a criminal element within a community." It stated that "another issue is the difficulty immigrants face in receiving justice from the legal system in South Africa. Only one perpetrator of the 2008 attacks was punished by the legal system. Of the 62 deaths in 2008, only 33 cases of murder or attempted murder were reflected in the records of the justice department."

In line with the claims of the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference, Claassen (2017) stated six theories that have been or could be advanced to explain South African xenophobia are: (1) resource competition, (2) poverty, (3) relative deprivation, (4) frustration with government, (5) mobilization, and (6) symbolic threat. Claassen (2017, p.1) reported that:

The results of a multi-level regression analysis show support for the explanations of poverty, relative deprivation, frustration with government, and social mobilization, with mixed evidence for resource competition. Taken together, the results point towards a mechanism of scapegoating, where frustrations and helplessness produce aggression that is targeted at African immigrants.

Other research findings and sources of evidence have lent credence to the foregoing possible causes of attacks against African migrants in South Africa. The Scalabrini Centre (2019, p.5) observed that:

Migrants are often linked to chaos and anarchy. They are also linked to disease, counterfeit goods and adulterated food. This impression is furthered by imagery of smoke, flames, displacement and words like 'floods' and 'swarms.' Those without documents are referred to as 'illegal immigrants,' further linking migration and crime. These linkages are not a truthful reflection of the majority of non-nationals.

Various research findings have blamed the mainstream media and online media platforms for fuelling xenophobic attacks. "Several research studies have shown how the media have uncritically reproduced xenophobic language and sentiments time and time again. The media have certainly been complicit in encouraging xenophobic attitudes among the population," (Smith, 2009, p.10; Danso and McDonald, 2001). Citing Coombs (2014a), Cheng (2016, p.1) concludes that "with the emergence and exchange of user-generated contents, social media create a breeding ground for crisis or risks."

In a meta-review of the role of the South African media's coverage of xenophobia and the xenophobic violence prior to and including May 2008, Smith (2009) found that the key points the reviewed studies were in agreement on were that a majority of print media articles:

- > Were anti-immigration or at least made negative references to migrants and immigrants;
- ▶ Were of un-analytical/simplistic approach, with little in-depth analysis;
- > Persisted in using certain labels when referring to migrants such as 'illegal immigrants';
- Perpetuated negative stereotypes about migrants using such terms as 'job stealers', 'criminals', 'illegal'.

In their analysis of cyber media in North Korea, Ji and Jung (2014) found that much of public debates about migration, minorities, multiculturalism and related government policies occur on the platforms. They found that active foreigners used the cyber media to diversify prevailing negative discourses about migrants (Desmares, 2017, p.8). Desmare (2017, p.5) found that:

Value-laden pejorative and stereotypical migration coverage tends to foster xenophobic sentiments, increase the support of anti-migrant parties and alter migration groups' integration experience. Conversely, fair, precise, impartial and respectful representations of migrants raise civic awareness and enable citizens to take well-informed political decisions. To this extent, the media represents an important factor in the ethical governance of migration.

Various governments across the world appear to have adopted Benoit's (1995) image repair theory in dealing with conflicts and crisis, including xenophobia. The media, both mainstream media and social media have been used for this purpose. Benoit (1995), cited in Cheng (2016, pp.2-3), developed the image repair theory (IRT) and argued that an attack with two dimensions (ie, an offensive act and an accusation of responsibility for the action) might threaten the image of the organization. Benoit proposed five strategies that can help organizations maintain positive reputation during crisis. The first strategy is denial (simple denial or shifting the blame). This means that the commentator can simply deny that the incident happened or shift the blame in hopes of absolution of culpability. The second strategy is evasion of responsibility. This strategy is reducing offensiveness. This strategy has six sub-strategies including bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accusers, and compensation. The fourth strategy is corrective action which is used to 'mend one's ways'. The last strategy is mortification, which implies that organizations can apologize for act.

Most governments have adopted the strategies of denial and evasion of responsibility in crisis situations. Students have revealed that the South African government has adopted these strategies in dealing with the waves of xenophobic attacks in the country South African Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2013).

Researchers have attempted to proffer solution to the negative effects of media coverage on xenophobia. Scalabrini Centre (2019, p.7) provides the following guides on how to write differently to unsettle dominant, damaging narratives about migration:

- 1. Pitching proactive stories about migration rather than the usual reactive stories covering xenophobic events.
- 2. Writing unique and exclusive stories on the 'humans' behind migration.
- 3. Publishing stories that do not follow dominant narrative that relate migration with violence and crime.
- 4. Moving away from stories that cast non-nationals vs South Africans as caricatures.
- 5. Pieces that explore how our politicians comment on the issue of with always having the facts to back it up. (p.7)

Similarly, Chan (n.d, p.13) identified early detection, optimized task handling and integrated public alert and feedback system as the three capacities to be developed in using social media to manage crisis.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the theory of structural violence and the realistic conflict theory. Theory of structural violence explores structural violence in the contexts of poverty and inequality of access to resources. It helps to explain the root causes of conflicts and illustrates other conflict factors (Li, 2018; Disabil, 2017; Galtung, 1990). This theory is considered appropriate for the study because it helps to understand the role of social media in the xenophobic attacks in South Africa. Similarly, realistic conflict theory is the theory that helps to analyze the drivers of conflicts. The theory presupposes that prejudice can cause competition between groups for scarcely available resources, power, or territory (Li, 2018; Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). This theory will help to understand how social media posts contributed either to escalate or deescalate the 2019 xenophobic attacks in South Africa.

## Methodology

The study adopted the survey research design. Questionnaire was used to generate data for the study. The population of the study was the population of residents of Enugu State, Nigeria. The population of Enugu State, according to the 2006 National Census, was 3,267,837. However, the National Bureau of Statistics (2017) gave 2015 population projection for Enugu State as 4,273,202.416. The study used the National Bureau of Statistics population projection for Enugu State for 2015 because it is more recent. A sample size of 385 respondents was determined for the study, using the Australia sample size calculator provided by the National Statistical Service (NSS). The sample size was determined using a confidence level of 95%, precision level of 0.05 and an estimated variance proportion of 5%. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents for the study, to ensure that the copies of the questionnaire were administered to social media users only.

#### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The data generated for the study are presented and analyzed below. The presentation and analysis of data are done simultaneously to avoid unnecessary repetitions. Out of the 385 copies of the questionnaire administered to the respondents, 378 copies were correctly filled and returned while eight (8) copies were lost. The data presentation and analysis in the study are based on the 378 copies of the questionnaire returned.

The demographic information provided by the respondents showed that 214 of them were male while 164 of them were female; 83 of them were between 18 and 25 years old; 48 of them were 26-30 years old; 112 of them were 31-35 years old; 135 of them were 36 years old and above. On educational qualification, 13 of the respondents had First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC); 61 of them had Ordinary Level Certificate; 28 of them had OND/NCE; 276 of them had First degree/HND and above. Based on occupation, 124 of the respondents were students; 168 of them were self-employed; 75 of them were civil/public servants; and 11 of them had other occupations.

All the respondents (100%) stated that they were exposed to social media stories on the 2019 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. In their responses to item 8 on the questionnaire which contained five sub-items, 369 of the respondents indicated that they saw pictures/videos clips of looting of foreign-owned shops in South Africa; 344 of them stated that they saw pictures/video clips of mob killing of foreign nationals in South Africa; 353 of them stated that they saw social media posts warning African migrants to leave South Africa; 282 of them said they saw social media posts describing Africa migrants in South Africa as criminals; 324 of the respondents stated that they saw social media posts blaming African migrants for unemployment and poverty in South Africa.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Valid	Patriotic	14	3.7	3.7	3.7
	Xenophobic	321	84.9	84.9	88.6
	Criminal	32	8.5	8.5	97.1
	Nationalistic	3	.8	.8	97.9
	Don't Know	8	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	378	100.0	100.0	

 Table 1: Respondents' Description of 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South Africa

Table 1 above presents the respondents' description of the 2019 attacks on African migrants in South Africa. From the table, 14 (3.7%) of the respondents described that attacks as patriotic; 321 (84.9%) of them described the attacks as xenophobic; 32 (8.5%) of them described the attacks as criminal; 3 (0.8%) of them described the attacks as nationalistic; while 8 (2.1%) of them did not describe the attacks. The analysis shows that a majority of the respondents expressed the view that the 2019 attacks on African migrants in South Africa were xenophobic.

 Table 2: Respondents' Perception of Social Media Role in 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South

 Africa

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative
				Percent	Percent
Valid	Fuelled Attacks	143	37.8	37.8	37.8
	Helped to quell Attacks	103	27.2	27.2	65.1
	Created unnecessary panic	78	20.6	20.6	85.7
	provoked reprisal attacks	54	14.3	14.3	100.0
	Total	378	100.0	100.0	

From table 2, 143 (37.8%) of the respondents stated that social media fuelled the 2019 attacks on Africa Migrants in South Africa; 103 (27.2%) of them believed that social media helped to quell the attacks; 78 (20.6%) of them said that social media created unnecessary panic about the attacks; and 54 (14.3%) of them stated that social media posts provoked reprisal attacks.

Table 3: Respondents' Description of Social Media Posts on 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South Africa

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative
				Percent	Percent
Valid	Informative	61	16.1	16.1	16.1
	Sensational	152	40.2	40.2	56.3
	Accurate	25	6.6	6.6	63.0
	Confusing	84	22.2	22.2	85.2
	Frightening	56	14.8	14.8	100.0
	Total	378	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 displays the respondents' description of social media posts on the 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South Africa. Data displayed on the table indicate that 61 (16.1%) of the described the stories as informative; 152 (40.2%) of the respondents felt that social media reports on the attacks were sensational; 25 (6.6%) of them stated that the stories were accurate; 82 (22.2%) of the observed that the stories were confusing; and 56 (14.8%) of the did not describe the stories they were exposed to.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative
				Percent	Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	82	21.7	21.7	21.7
	Agree	164	43.4	43.4	65.1
	Undecided	15	4.0	4.0	69.0
	Disagree	75	19.8	19.8	88.9
	Strongly Disagree	42	11.1	11.1	100.0
	Total	378	100.0	100.0	

 Table 4: Respondents' Views on whether social media stories on 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South

 Africa made them feel hatred for South Africa/South Africans

From table 4 above, 82 (21.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed that social media stories on 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South Africa made them feel hatred against South African/South Africans; 164 (43.4%) agreed to that view; 15 (4.0%) of them were undecided; 75 (19.8%) of them disagreed to that view while 42 (11.1%) of them strongly disagreed. The foregoing analysis shows that social media stories on 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South Africa made most of the respondents feel hatred against South Africa/South Africa/South Africans.

Table 5: Respondents' Views on whether social media stories on 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South Africa made them consider reprisal attacks against South Africa/South Africans

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative
				Percent	Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	88	23.3	23.3	23.3
	Agree	158	41.8	41.8	65.1
	Undecided	15	4.0	4.0	69.0
	Disagree	71	18.8	18.8	87.8
	Strongly Disagree	46	12.2	12.2	100.0
	Total	378	100.0	100.0	

The respondents' views on whether social media stories on the 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South Africa made them feel hatred for South Africa/South Africans are displayed on table 5 above. From data displayed on the table, 88 (23.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed that social media stories on the attacks made the develop hatred for South Africa/South Africans; 158 (41.8%) agreed to that view; 15 (4.0%) of them were undecided; 71 (18.8%) of them disagreed and 46 (12.2%) of them strongly disagreed. The results implies that social media stories on the 2019 Attacks on African Migrants in South Africa made a majority of the respondents to feel hatred against South Africa/South Africans.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The results of the study reveal many facts about users' perception of social media representations of the 2019 xenophobic attacks against African migrants in South Africa. All the respondents (100%) stated that they were exposed to social media stories on the 2019 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. In their responses to item 8 on the questionnaire which contained five sub-items, a majority of the respondents indicated that they saw pictures/videos clips of looting of foreign-owned shops in South Africa; pictures/video clips of mob killing of foreign nationals in South Africa; social media posts warning African migrants to leave South Africa; social media posts describing Africa migrants in South Africa as criminals; and social media posts blaming African migrants

for unemployment and poverty in South Africa. The analyses show that the audiences were highly exposed to social media stories on the 2019 xenophobic attacks against African migrants in South Africa.

Most of the respondents expressed the view that the 2019 attacks on African migrants in South Africa were xenophobic attacks. This contradicts the positions of South African political leaders who have at various times claimed that the acts were carried out by few criminals. Respondents' views rather re-enforce a similar earlier stance that "these are not attacks caused by small bands of provocateurs or criminals; both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests widespread participation in, and support for, the violence in the affected communities" (Claassen, 2017,p.1). The implication is that available evidence shows that the 2019 attacks against African migrants in South Africa were xenophobic attacks.

Data presented earlier on table 2 showed that the respondents expressed divergent views on the role of social media in the 2019 attacks against African migrants in South Africa. Most of the respondents stated that social media played negative roles in the attacks, including fuelling the attacks, creating unnecessary panic about the attacks and provoking reprisal attacks. However, a significant number of the respondents believed that social media helped to quell the attacks. This implies that social media played both negative and positive roles in the attacks. It is an indication of what social media are capable of doing in crisis situations and a warning to crisis managers and leaders generally to harness the positive attributes of social media to achieve peace in times of crisis.

The respondents described social media stories on the 2019 attacks on African migrants in South Africa in different ways, including sensational, informative, accurate, confusing and frightening. It should be noted that most of the respondents described social media posts on the attacks in the negative. The audience's perception and interpretation of social media stories on the attacks might have influenced their reactions to the attacks as shown in the data displayed earlier on tables 4 and 5. From table 4, social media stories on the attacks made a majority of the respondents to develop hatred against South Africa/South Africans. Similarly, the result on table 5 indicated that social media stories on the attacks made most of the respondents to consider reprisal attacks against South Africa/South Africa/South Africans.

### Conclusion

Xenophobia has been an unfortunate recurrent decimal in the relationship between South Africans and African migrants in South Africa. The xenophobic attacks against Africa migrants in South Africa have been blamed on a number of factors. The media, both mainstream media and social media, have been fingered in some studies for playing mixed roles in the waves of xenophobic attacks in South Africa.

The findings of this study reveal that social media played both negative and positive roles in the 2019 attacks against African migrants in South Africa. The study, however, indicated that social media played more negative role by fuelling the attacks, creating unnecessary panic about the attacks and provoking reprisal attacks. This is an indication that social media can be an effective tool for quelling crisis, if their positive attributes are harnessed for that purpose. The results equally imply that social media can be utilized to escalate crisis, if the outputs of the social media outlets are not carefully managed in crisis situations.

#### Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study:

- 1. Social media users should exercise some restraint and sense of social responsibility during crisis to avoid escalating the situation.
- Governments and other crisis managers should harness the positive attributes of social media to quell crisis.
- 3. Government, NGOs and the civil society groups should sensitize the public periodically on how to use social media in the interest of the society, especially during crisis.

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