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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Article

Framing Migration During the Covid-19 Pandemic in South Africa: A 12-Month Media Monitoring Project

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Abstract

Assumptions surrounding the origins of Covid-19, the relationship between human mobility and the spread of the virus, and the pressure that the pandemic has placed on communities, have exacerbated xenophobic tensions globally, including in South Africa, a country long-associated with xenophobia. Previous research exploring how the South African media frames migration, and research investigating the framing of migration during Covid-19 in other contexts, has found that the media tends to frame migrants in terms of (un)deservingness and blame them for the spread of disease. Our findings, however, identify different concerns. This article discusses findings from a 12-month study exploring how migrant and mobile populations in South Africa were framed in the media as the pandemic developed during 2020. A news aggregator—Meltwater—was used to scrape the internet for English language text-based media published globally in 2020 that met a search with key terms Migration, Covid-19, and South Africa. A total of 12,068 articles were identified and descriptively analysed. Informed by previous approaches, a framing analysis was then undertaken of a sample of 561 articles. Findings illustrate how articles published by outlets based in the US and UK have a far greater reach than locally or regionally produced articles, despite local and regional outlets publishing far more consistently on the topic. Consistent and sympathetic engagement with issues of migration by South African publications was seen across 2020 and suggests that those writing from the region are aware of the realities of migration and mobility. Findings show that rather than centring migrants as the locus of blame for failures of the South African state—as has been done in the past—the state and its failure to adequately respond to both Covid-19 and migration are now being clearly articulated by media.

Keywords

Covid-19; media; migration; South Africa; xenophobia

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore and exacerbated underlying inequities globally, including in South Africa, particularly in relation to health and well-being (Dorward et al., 2021; Hofman & Madhi, 2020). Migrant and mobile populations—including both those who move within and across the country's borders—have

been particularly affected by South Africa's response to the pandemic, which has, to date, failed to be migration-aware and left many behind, including in the country's vaccine roll-out (de Gruchy & Vearey, 2022; Mukumbang et al., 2020; Mulu & Mbanza, 2021; Mutambara et al., 2021; Vearey et al., 2021). In October 2021, the National Department of Health initiated a pilot project with the aim of improving access to the vaccine for migrant and

South African populations without identity or migration documentation in the major urban areas of South Africa (Stent, 2021). At the time of writing (February 2022), however, little is known about its implementation, challenges, or successes. In addition, due to the pressures that the pandemic and responses to it have placed on communities and political leaders in South Africa, xenophobia and xenophobic violence have, in some contexts, been exacerbated (Gatticchi & Maseko, 2020) and there are also signs that the pandemic has been used to justify the further securitisation of borders and the management of immigration (Vearey et al., 2021).

In this article, we define xenophobia as "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" (Workshop Group on Migration and Trafficking, 2001), and make use of Misago and Mlilo's (2021) definition of xenophobic violence as "an act of violence targeting one or more person due to their geographic or national background. An incident can result in one or more categories of victimisation and can affect several individuals" (p. 2). In addition, although we understand "migrant" and "migration" to refer to both internal and cross-border migrants and mobility, in our findings the terms were most often used to refer to cross-border migration and migrants. As such, unless otherwise indicated, the terms refer to cross-border migration and mobility, and non-citizen populations and communities.

As the pandemic developed globally, instances of xenophobia and racism—often directed at Asian populations and migrant communities—intensified (e.g., Esses & Hamilton, 2021; Reny & Barreto, 2020). Given the role that the media has been argued to play in exacerbating xenophobic tensions in South Africa (Banda & Mawadza, 2015; Smith, 2011), the Migration, Gender and Health Systems project—a collaboration between the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and the South African National Department of Health—initiated a media monitoring project to explore the ways in which migration and migrant groups were being written about in relation to Covid-19 in South Africa.

We wanted to understand: (a) how the media were reporting on migration and migrants during the pandemic, with a focus on where media articles were being written and produced, and by whom; and (b) how migration and migrants were being framed through this process. Our aim was to explore: whether there were patterns in publication; whether specific kinds of articles were more likely to get republished and reach a broader audience; how migration was being written about in relation to the unfolding pandemic and the resulting stresses the pandemic was placing on individuals, communities, and South Africa as a whole; and whether there was any relationship between the articles that were more likely to get republished and how those articles framed migration. In this article, we present our key findings and outline the ways in which the South African media is renegotiating how it has traditionally portrayed and framed migrant and mobile populations.

2. Method

To explore these questions, we developed a two-pronged approach. First, we undertook a quantitative assessment of what was being produced globally by English language media about Covid-19 and migration in the South African context over the course of 2020. This included text-based media that was published online and included newspaper articles, press releases and reports, opinion editorials, blogs, and websites. Social media—user-driven platforms that enable online engagement between people, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Aichner et al., 2021)—have been shown to play a key role in the ways in which xenophobia is publicly expressed and through which xenophobic violence is planned (Bezuidenhout, 2020). Social media content was not, however, included in our research as we were interested in the ways in which media outlets were framing migration and migrant and mobile populations, and our methodological approach was tailored to this.

Second, after excluding re-published articles (i.e., duplicates), we undertook a framing analysis of a 10% sample to explore the ways in which migration and migrants were framed by the media during the development of the pandemic in South Africa. This approach allowed us to develop a clear picture of what was published on migration and migrants in South Africa in relation to Covid-19 during the first year of the pandemic, by whom, and how this content changed as the pandemic progressed.

2.1. Quantitative Assessment

To conduct the quantitative assessment we used Meltwater, an "automatic news aggregator" which operates by "using a search engine that automatically indexes copies of the articles it scrapes from the Internet, compiles headlines and excerpts, while providing a link to the original source" (Quinn, 2014, p. 1192). While the primary focus of the platform is to allow "businesses to get real-time information about their brand's online impact as well as their customers' sentiments" (Chang, 2020), "Meltwater comes with a powerful research engine that scans all major social channels as well as over 300,000 global online news sites." This search engine and associated analytic tools that the platform provides make Meltwater a convenient choice for research that looks to examine the production of news content on a particular topic.

A total of 12,068 results were found for the period 1 January–31 December 2020 using Boolean search:

(((migration OR mobility OR refugee* OR "asylum seeker*" OR migrant* OR "cross-border" OR "cross

border" OR "cross* border*" or "border cross*" OR "crossing the border" or "across the border" OR migrate) near/25 ("South* Africa*")) and (coronavirus OR "covid-19" OR covid19 OR "covid-19'' OR "novel coronavirus" OR "corona virus" OR "SARS-CoV-2'')) not ("Car of the year")

To assess the changing ways in which migration and migrant and mobile groups were being framed in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, we approached each quarter of 2020 as a unit of analysis. More details about the results from each quarter can be found in the Supplementary File. The results from each quarter were analysed using functions within Meltwater and supplemented by further analysis in Excel once the results had been imported using a CSV file. The results were then compared across quarters in Excel, allowing us to answer key questions of interest, specifically where online media articles were being written and produced, and by whom.

2.2. Framing Analysis

Following the quantitative assessment of the results of our search, a framing analysis was undertaken of 561 articles—a 10% sample of the search results excluding duplicates (5,581, see Figure 1).

A review of approaches to content framing in the media (e.g., Goffman, 1974; Linstrom & Marais, 2012; Phillips, 2019; Van Gorp & Vercruysse, 2012), including recent publications exploring media framing in relation to Covid-19 (e.g., Jordan et al., 2020; Legate et al., 2020; Poirier et al., 2020; Venkateswaran, 2020), was undertaken by two of the co-authors (Thea de Gruchy and

Jo Vearey). Following this, it was decided to explore the use of six common frames in analysing the sample (Linstrom & Marais, 2012). The six frames are informed by those attributed to Neuman et al. (1992, as cited in Linstrom & Marais, 2012) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000, as cited in Linstrom & Marais, 2012, p. 28), details about which can be found in Table 1.

The sample for analysis was generated by downloading the search results for each quarter, dividing the searches into geographic regions, removing duplicates, and then using a random number generator to select articles to create a 15% sample that reflected the geographic breakdown found in the results. If the title of the article selected was found to refer to sport, business, or finance, the content was promotional or "unavailable in your country," or there was sufficient reason to believe that the article had nothing to do with South Africa and/or migration and/or Covid-19, it was excluded, and another article was selected through the random number generator. The articles for each quarter were then analysed by two authors (Thea de Gruchy and Jo Vearey in Quarter 1, and Thea de Gruchy and Thulisile Zikhali in Quarters 2, 3, and 4), each of whom analysed 50% of the articles and a further 10% of the articles analysed by the other to verify results. During the analysis process, additional articles were excluded when the body of the text revealed that they did not in fact deal with South Africa and/or migration and/or Covid-19 or meet the above exclusion criteria. After the analysis had been verified, if the articles analysed constituted less than 10% of the research results (excluding duplicates), additional articles were selected through the random number generator and analysed to ensure that a 10% sample was analysed for each quarter. While the frames applied were

Process	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2020
Results from Meltwater	1,545	4,966	2,634	2,924	12,068
Sample excluding duplicates	688	2,124	1,457	1,312	5,581
15% sample size	103	319	219	197	838
# of articles excluded during analysis	39	109	89	79	316
Additional articles added	5	3	16	14	38
Final sample size	69 (10.47%)	213 (10.03%)	146 (10.02%)	133 (10.06%)	561 (10.03%)

Figure 1. Sample for analysis.

Table 1. Overview of the six frames applied.

Frame	Description	Examples
Human interest	Bringing "a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, as cited in Linstrom & Marais, 2012, p. 28)	Stories that outline specific challenges faced by communities; Stories that create an emotional angle, including the use of inflammatory language and xenophobia
Attribution of responsibility*	"Presenting an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving to either the government or to an individual or group" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, as cited in Linstrom & Marais, 2012, p. 28)	Human mobility or migrant groups being framed as responsible for the spread of Covid-19
Power(lessness)*	"The dominance of forces over weak individuals or groups" (Neuman et al., 1992, as cited in Linstrom & Marais, 2012, p. 28)	The power of Covid-19; The power the state has to implement lockdowns; The powerlessness of many migrant groups in South Africa
Conflict*	"Conflict between individuals, groups, institutions or countries" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, as cited in Linstrom & Marais, 2012, p. 28)	National government in conflict with local government; State in conflict with migrant groups; South Africa citizens in conflict with non-citizens
Economic impact	"The preoccupation with profit and loss" (Neuman et al., 1992, as cited in Linstrom & Marais, 2012, p. 28)	Impact of the pandemic on livelihoods reliant on mobility; Impact of the pandemic on the mining industry
Moral values	"Morality and social prescriptions" (Neuman et al., 1992, as cited in Linstrom & Marais, 2012, p. 28)	Sympathy for migrant groups; Xenophobia; Assertions of inherent value of specific organisations

Note: * These three frames were applied separately during analysis but are presented together in the findings due to their interconnectedness and the benefits of reading them together.

determined through a preliminary analysis of Quarter 1, their subsequent application was subject to continued discussion throughout their use.

While this research was not risky in the sense that there were no ethical concerns about research participants, researchers conducting this kind of research should implement appropriate online security measures, for example, agreeing at the outset of a research project not to click through on unsecured links. By way of example, during one period of analysis, the links associated with one site took the two co-authors to a pornography site. It was unclear whether the links were faulty or the website itself had been hacked. In addition, link rot or death—the process through which "a Web page is moved, taken down or reorganised" (Link Rot, 2017)—is a reality of this research approach. As such, research of this nature is time sensitive and may be difficult to replicate.

3. Findings

3.1. Descriptive Analysis

Analysis of the results from our Meltwater search pointed to two key, interrelated findings, namely (a) patterns in publication corresponded to the development of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, and (b) peaks in publication numbers can be attributed to the rapid republication of articles by US-based media platforms.

3.1.1. Patterns in Publication Correspond to Developments of the Pandemic in South Africa

Across 2020, the volume of publications (which can be seen in Figure 2)—as well as their content—corresponded to the development of the pandemic

in South Africa (more details can be found in the Supplementary File). Between January and March (Quarter 1) the volume of articles reflecting on Covid-19 and migration in South Africa grew as the pandemic moved from being a distant threat to a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and then saw the implementation of a National State of Disaster in South Africa on 15 March 2020 as a growing number of cases were recorded in the country. During this period, 1,545 articles met our search criteria. During Quarter 2 (April–June), a growing number of cases were reported while those in South Africa were subjected to a hard lockdown which included the shutting down of several economic sectors, school closures, and the suspension of international and internal travel for all but essential purposes. During this quarter, 4,966 articles met our search criteria reflecting the way in which Covid-19 now dominated South African society. In July (the start of Quarter 3; July–September), South Africa reached the peak of its first Covid-19 wave. This was followed by a steady decline in the infection rate and, as such, the subsequent easing of lockdown measures, reopening of the economy and national reckoning with the impact of the pandemic and the existing inequities and issues of corruption that it had exacerbated. Two thousand, six hundred thirty-four articles were published during this quarter that met our search criteria. During the final quarter of 2020 (October–December), South Africa enjoyed a brief respite from lockdown, followed swiftly by the beginning of the second wave of Covid-19. During this quarter, 2,924 articles met our search criteria.

The location of publication mirrored geopolitical and social interest in and ties with South Africa. Additionally, due to the focus on English language media in the research, countries and regions that publish news in English dominated our sample. Although 113 countries featured in our results, the US, South Africa, and to some extent the UK were consistently the largest producers of news that met our search criteria, while only 73 articles that met our search criteria were published in Central and South America, accounting for only 0.6% of our results.

Due to this, when we looked at the results by geographic region to create the sample for the framing analysis, we looked at search results for those three countries, Africa (excluding South Africa), Asia, Europe (excluding the UK), the Middle East, South and Central America, and North America (excluding the US).

Of the 561 articles analysed, 374 (66.67%) were examined from their original source, while 187 were analysed as republished pieces. Two hundred and eleven of these articles did not clearly attribute the piece to a specific author or organisation, while an additional 45 were attributed to organisations or government bodies. Twenty-five of these 45 articles were directly attributed to UN agencies.

Within the sample of 561 articles, six journalists were found to have authored articles more than twice—five of

whom are based in South Africa, the sixth being based in Zimbabwe. This points to a key finding, which we expand on below, that while a significant number of search results came from places outside of South Africa, specifically the US, South African publications and journalists wrote about migration and migrants in relation to Covid-19 consistently throughout 2020.

3.1.2. Peaks in Results Are Driven by Republication in the US

In Figure 2, defined "peaks" can be seen in the number of articles published throughout 2020. These peaks by and large correspond to the rapid republication of specific articles, usually by online media platforms based in the US. On 2 June 2020, for example, the largest peak is seen with 886 articles published that day. Examining the results shows how 821 of the 886 (92.66%) are republications of the same 11 articles. Of those 821 articles found to be republications, 798 (97.2%) were found in US-based publications.

Due to this pattern seen across 2020, the US accounts for a significant proportion (30.44%) of articles included in the search results. However, once duplicates are accounted for, US publications only account for 15.7% of results. South Africa's portion on the other hand increases once duplicates are removed, suggesting that articles are more likely to be original and less likely to be republished in South Africa. The same can be said more broadly of the African region. When duplicates are included in the results, South Africa and Africa account for 28.18% and 12.71% of the results respectively. However, once duplicates are removed, South Africa accounts for 35.03% of the search results, and the rest of the African continent for 17.69%.

In addition, while Meltwater data indicated that publications based in the US and UK had a bigger "reach" and were read, or at least opened, by more people, the publications that produced the highest volume of articles that met our search criteria consistently were predominantly South African or based in Southern Africa. These included *AllAfrica.com*, the *Daily Maverick*, and MSN South Africa, all of which are based in South Africa. In addition, *Bulawayo24* and *Club of Mozambique*, based in Zimbabwe and Mozambique respectively, were also regular producers of search results.

Finally, peaks in article republication did not necessarily correspond to developments in the pandemic in South Africa. In the first quarter, for example, on 14 March an article titled "Virus Cases Spread Across Africa, Nations Prepare for More" was republished 235 times creating a peak that did correspond to growing case numbers across the continent and in South Africa. Several days later, however, a press release titled "The IHUBApp Digital Experience Platform Launches NeedServ App to Help Millions During Covid-19 Pandemic," which mentioned South Africa and migrants in passing, was republished 101 times creating
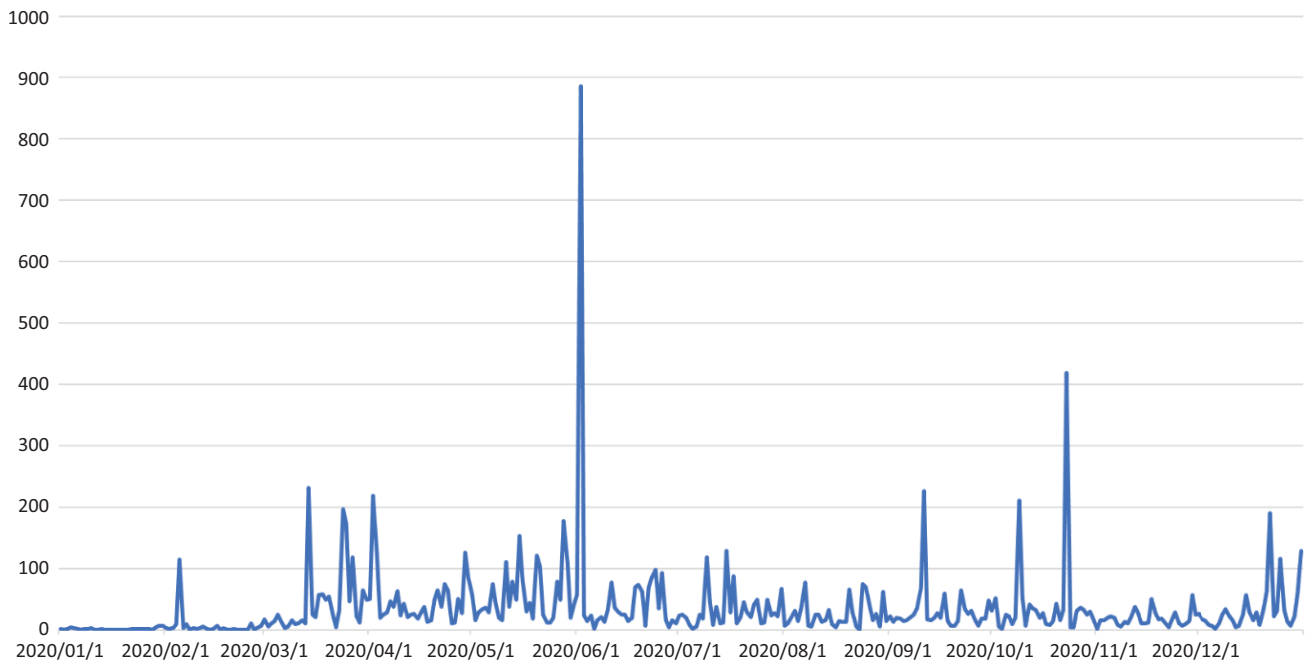
Figure 2. Volume of search results across 2020.

another peak, with no correlating development in South Africa's pandemic.

Developments in the publication of articles about migration and Covid-19 in South Africa can therefore be understood to be related to the development of the pandemic, intersecting geopolitical interests and language, and publication trends in the US that are, in many ways, separate from the previous two factors.

3.2. Framing Analysis

As outlined above, six deductive frames (Linstrom & Marais, 2012) were identified and used to conduct a framing analysis of 561 articles. The findings related to these frames are discussed in detail below.

3.2.1. Human Interest Frame

Most stories across all four quarters did not have a "human face" or "emotional angle," even when the impact of Covid-19 on communities, including migrant communities, was outlined. Only 88 of the articles analysed (15.69%), for example, included quotes from migrants themselves. Although in the minority, however, there was consistent publication of stories that did present a human face employing either extensive quotes and stories or visceral descriptions to do so. Key examples include articles outlining the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on blind migrants in Johannesburg (Q4_075), the experiences of migrant mineworkers, and the challenges faced by refugees kept in camps in Cape Town (Q3_039, Q4_055). In addition, articles in which personal reflections on life in the pandemic were given by middle-class individuals that used migrants

and refugees as a comparison to their own anxieties around the pandemic provided a constant emotional angle throughout 2020:

> I think of Nelson Mandela and his 26 years of imprisonment. I think of human rights defenders, migrants, homeless people, or the Bangladeshi garment factory workers who now have no economic lifeline. I know I'm fortunate, but somehow that doesn't calm my racing mind. (Q2_052)

The role of South African media in contributing to the xenophobic climate in South Africa has been well documented (Banda & Mawadza, 2015; Danso & McDonald, 2001; McDonald & Jacobs, 2005; Muswede & Mpofu, 2020; Pineteh, 2017). As a result, we had anticipated identifying publications that were inflammatory and xenophobic in nature and that included inaccurate information about migrant and mobile populations. Interestingly, however, only 25 articles (4.46%) were flagged during analysis as expressing xenophobic ideas. Some of these articles argued quite explicitly that non-citizens should be excluded from the economy (Q3_139) or that "illegal" migrants would put South Africans at risk of Covid-19 (Q2_036, Q2_090). While others used the term "illegal" uncritically (Q3_034, Q3_045), implying "both criminality and difference…[in addition to] a close connection with crime and criminal acts" (Peberdy, 1997, as cited in Pineteh, 2017, p. 6).

In addition, in only 14 articles (2.5%) did researchers note concerns about inaccuracies in the data presented. Articles that were identified included the inflation of numbers, specifically in relation to non-citizens in informal settlements and in the economy (for example,

Q2_072, Q2_132, Q2_104) and the incorrect use of the term "human trafficking" (Q2_185, Q2_188, Q2_175). However, contrary to previous media analyses, these kinds of incorrect or misleading comments about migrants were not widespread as the pandemic developed in South Africa.

3.2.2. Responsibility, Power, and Conflict

During analysis, the power, responsibility, and conflict frames were applied separately to ensure that nuances in framing were captured. Analysing the application of frames and analysis itself, however, made clear the interconnectedness of these three frames and the benefits of reading them together. Through this process, five themes emerged as key to our understanding of how migrants and migration were being written about and framed in the media.

The first was that Covid-19 was consistently portrayed as a disruptor—a black swan event—that was responsible for the increased precarity of many, including migrants. Given the powerful role played by the pandemic, states and communities were consistently portrayed as in conflict with Covid-19.

Given the close association between mobility and the spread of Covid-19, the framing of human mobility as powerful and important within the Southern African region was a second finding. Mobility—including local mobility within cities—was consistently presented as a key way in which Covid-19 spreads (for example, Q2_105, Q2_183). Travel bans and restrictions were therefore framed as a logical response to the pandemic. However, in writing about the effects of travel restrictions on communities, articles clearly articulated the power of mobility in the lives of many in the region by showing how without the ability to move many lost their jobs, livelihoods, and food security:

> Zivhu says the coronavirus has put many cross-border traders in a dire situation. Many live a hand-to-mouth existence and must sell goods to earn money, he says. Closing the border with South Africa has left the traders and workers who support them vulnerable and without money to pay for rent, school fees or even food. Zivhu likens it to a natural disaster. (Q2_081)

Within this context, the reasons why mobility persists—even when it involves breaking the law—are clear. Through this framing of mobility, the powerlessness of migrants and those reliant on mobility for work and well-being is clearly pushed to the fore and emerges as a third finding. This is additionally supported by the framing of these individuals and groups as being in conflict with policymakers and law enforcement globally. As the acute phase of the pandemic came to an end—towards the end of 2020—articles began to highlight the opportunity the pandemic had provided to states to stop asylum

systems and create additional financial and logistical barriers to documented mobility. The use of Covid-19 certificates is a clear example of this:

> To stop the spread of Covid-19, the South African government requires all foreigners, including Basotho, to produce a Covid-19 certificate showing they tested negative for the disease. The problem, however is that such a certificate does not come cheap. A Covid-19 certificate costs a staggering M1 350 [approx. 89 USD at the time of writing] at a private clinic in Maseru, a fortune for most Basotho who survive on less than US\$2 a day….Without a Covid-19 certificate, some Basotho have chosen to cross the border at illegal points along the river such as the one in Maputsoe, risking their lives as they do so. Last week, one woman fell off the inflated mattress and drowned. (Q4_065)

The use of the pandemic to further state-sanctioned xenophobia was a key component in the framing of the state across 2020. The South African state was portrayed as powerful through its ability to impose and enforce lockdowns, the general callousness displayed towards vulnerable groups, including refugees in Cape Town, and displays of force. Simultaneously, however, the state was portrayed as powerless in the face of Covid-19 and to put a stop to human mobility. While there was little consensus on how the government should respond to either Covid-19 or migration, the state was seen as failing to respond to both adequately, in addition to being responsible for a plethora of related issues. Within this framing, the South African state was seen as being in conflict not only with migrants, but also with its own citizens, industry, Covid-19 and, most interestingly, itself. In various articles, different parts of the South African state are seen in conflict with one another—a key example of this being in relation to the refugees in Cape Town:

> Home Affairs and the City of Cape Town are engaged in a blame game over who should shoulder the responsibility for the repatriation or deportation of refugees and asylum seekers who have been left in limbo….The City of Cape Town…said it was not within the legal mandate of the City and that refugees and asylum seekers remained the responsibility of the department [of Home Affairs]. (Q2_024)

Finally, and often because the state is framed as reneging on its responsibilities towards migrants, the primacy of UN agencies and humanitarian organisations is asserted throughout the articles. This is in part due to the number of articles written by UN agencies themselves promoting their work with migrants during the pandemic. Twenty-five articles in our sample were written by UN agencies, primarily the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (n = 6) and the International Organization for Migration (n = 8), and often republished

by other outlets. While this contributes to only 4.46% of the sample, these articles, in addition to other articles referencing them, created a body of work that inextricably linked these organisations to the well-being of migrant and mobile communities, and vulnerable communities more broadly in the Southern African region. This link reaffirms the power and importance of the humanitarian status quo in the region and when thinking about migrant and mobile populations.

3.2.3. Economic Frame

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a disruptive impact on economies. As such, it was unsurprising that many of the articles analysed included reflections on the economic impact of the pandemic and the economic consequences of responses to the pandemic. Articles by and large framed the economic impact of Covid-19 and pandemic responses interchangeably—few differentiated or tried to differentiate between the effects of the pandemic and those of the state responses. Those that were critical of state responses due to their economic impact rarely highlighted the pandemic itself as a disruptor or outlined the economic impact that different responses to the pandemic may have had.

Economic effects were framed in three ways. The first involved highlighting global and national recessions. The second was in relation to industries and the economic impact—the loss of profit and business— experienced by these industries, specifically in South Africa. Finally, the economic effects of the pandemic on communities and individuals were highlighted. The loss of livelihoods and jobs because of the pandemic and various stages of lockdown for migrant and mobile populations were written about across 2020. These articles often linked the loss of income to food insecurity, highlighting the reliance of many in the region on cross-border mobility for food security. They also showed how travel bans and restrictions, and the cost of Covid-19 testing and certificates, affected life for those reliant on cross-border mobility, particularly those without documents—the quotes attributed to Q2_082 and Q4_065 highlight these concerns.

3.2.4. Moral Values

Various moral values and perspectives underpinned the articles analysed. Fifty-nine of the articles, just over 10% of the sample, were found to share information without any specific moral values attached. For example, articles providing information about where to access a social grant. However, 90% of the articles analysed gave some indication of the assumptions and assertions underpinning the article.

Three perspectives appeared consistently in relation to migrants and migration across 2020. Primarily articles were sympathetic to migrant and mobile populations. While a few were explicitly xenophobic or uncrit-

ical of the xenophobic statements they were reporting, on the whole articles highlighted the difficulties faced by these communities due to the pandemic and poor state responses to migration.

The second perspective related to the importance of UN agencies and humanitarian agencies for migrant and mobile populations. As noted, 25 articles analysed were written by UN agencies themselves, outlining the work that they did across 2020 for "vulnerable communities" (Q2_198). This ranged from United Nations Children's Fund training community health workers (Q2_125) to the International Organization for Migration offering Covid-19 screening at their cross-border Occupation Health Centre in Ressano Garcia (Mozambique; Q3_037) and assisting with voluntary repatriation of non-citizens from South Africa (Q4_013). All of which assert the centrality of these organisations to responses to migration.

Finally, the importance of mobility for lives and livelihoods, which—specifically in the fourth quarter—often included a critique of current approaches to border management, particularly between South African and Zimbabwe, frequently underpinned the stories being told about the implications of the pandemic for migrant and mobile populations.

4. Discussion

Reflecting on the portrayal of immigrants in the media globally, Moyo and Mpofu (2020b) write:

> Understanding how the media report immigration and its consequences, including xenophobia, is critical in today's world, where the majority of global citizens do not "experience" immigration and xenophobia first-hand but mostly through secondary sources, including…the media….What has often been referred to as the "migration crisis" in Europe and the USA, for instance, has largely been "witnessed" by many through the media, which play the role of "primary definers" in naming and describing the phenomenon….This, however, does not suggest that the media are all-powerful since the mediation process does not exclude listeners, readers or viewers who also have power in negotiating social meanings. (pp. 4–5)

Our findings differ from much of the existing literature exploring how the media portrays migrants and migration in South Africa. Previous research argues, very convincingly, that the media have played a key role in the proliferation of xenophobic ideas in South Africa, and in xenophobic violence itself (Banda & Mawadza, 2015; Danso & McDonald, 2001; McDonald & Jacobs, 2005; Muswede & Mpofu, 2020; Pineteh, 2017). This has allowed "democratic thinking," popular and populist ideas within South African society, to define how migrants and migration are framed (Moyo & Mpofu,

2020a, p. viii). Although the causal link between newspaper articles and xenophobic violence has been contested both academically and legally (Smith, 2011), the role of the media in contributing to the xenophobic climate in South Africa is seldom disputed.

Our research, however, suggests that the media is renegotiating its framing of migrants and migration in South Africa. The framing of migrants and migration as a threat to South Africans was far less prevalent than in findings from previous research. Rather, migrants were given a human face through the publication of articles that detailed the difficulties they were experiencing due to the pandemic and the state's failure to develop responses to Covid-19 that did not render migrants and those reliant on mobility additionally vulnerable. Previous research has outlined how the media has in the past been a key avenue for the framing of migrants and migration in populist and xenophobic ways. For example, framing the use of the healthcare system by migrants as a key reason why South Africans face barriers when trying to access healthcare (Muswede & Mpofu, 2020). Our findings, however, suggest that the failure of the state with regards to both Covid-19 and migration and the implications of both this failure and the pandemic on communities—both migrant and South African—is of far greater interest to the media now.

Across our sample, there was consistent publication of migrant interest stories that explicitly linked the experiences of migrants to state action or inaction. For example, the loss of life and danger experienced by Basotho nationals due to the requirement of an exorbitantly priced negative Covid-19 test to cross the border into South Africa. These articles reflect the importance of mobility for many in the region and are critical of the South African state's current approaches to migration management. While our study does not allow us to determine the cause of this shift, it appears that the Covid-19 pandemic has created opportunities for these changes in framing to take place—our findings suggest that the English language media in South Africa is contesting "democratic thinking as a framework for understanding the foreign Other" (Moyo & Mpofu, 2020a, p. viii).

5. Conclusion

Our findings show that patterns in the publication of articles on the topic of migration and Covid-19 in South Africa broadly corresponded to the development of the pandemic in South Africa in 2020. However, although local and regional journalists and outlets published on the topic consistently, articles from US- and UK-based publications were more likely to be rapidly republished—leading to peaks in the search results—and had a larger reach. This suggests that much of the information about and framing of migration in relation to Covid-19 in South Africa is not being produced by local media. However, our findings indicate that framing across both local and global media was, on the whole, consistent.

Drawing on frames informed by the existing body of literature on media analysis enabled us to think more critically about the assumptions underpinning articles and the literary devices utilised by journalists to convincingly frame their arguments and perspective. Importantly, however, articles that framed migration or migrants as a threat or as detrimental to South Africa and South Africans were far fewer in number than articles that were sympathetic to the difficulties experienced by migrants. Recognition of the centrality of mobility to both the spread of Covid-19, and responses to it, and the lives and livelihoods of many in South and Southern Africa was a key feature of the framing of migration and migrants across 2022. The framing of those reliant on mobility as powerless in response to travel restrictions and the use of the pandemic to further state-sanctioned xenophobia was an additional key feature. An important example of both was the use of the pandemic by the Department of Home Affairs to justify closing the applications process for visas and permits in March 2020, and only beginning to assess applications for permanent residency again in January 2022, 22 months later (VISA Immigrations SA, 2022). Examples such as this point to one of the key findings that emerged from reading the responsibility, power, and conflict frames together—the state is clearly framed across 2020 as failing to take responsibility for migration and migrants. Such framing also supports the idea that UN agencies and humanitarian organisations are essential in responses to migration as they fill the gaps left by the state.

The social ramifications of the pandemic and responses to it are naturally intertwined with its economic impact. This impact has been felt by individuals and communities, industry, and business, and by the country as a whole. The wide-scale loss of jobs and rising unemployment were used to frame calls to close access to the economy and job opportunities for non-citizens. However, this kind of anti-migrant sentiment was not widespread in our sample.

Given that media reporting around migration and migrants in South Africa has historically been anti-migrant and fed into xenophobic narratives, our findings suggest that English language journalists and publications are currently renegotiating how they portray migrants and migration. What the implications of this renegotiation, of contesting "democratic thinking," will be are currently unclear. As xenophobic reporting is understood to have contributed to xenophobia and xenophobic violence in the past, will reporting that is sympathetic to migrants and migration similarly encourage South Africans to be more accepting of migrants and less xenophobic? Or will readers move away from media that challenges their beliefs about migrants and migration, and find alternative sources for information? Will social media—which in 2020 played a role in exacerbating xenophobia and co-ordinating xenophobic violence (Bezuidenhout, 2020)—fill this gap, and what might the long-term implications of this be for South

Africa? Additional research is needed to respond to these questions, including research that expands beyond the English language and looks at the increasingly important function played by social media sites.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge and thank the members of the Migration, Gender and Health Systems project who were not directly involved in the pilot project, but who provided insights and guidance during its conception and the writing of this article—Lucy Gilson, Karima Manji, Langelihle Mlotshwa, Moeketsi Modisenyane, Jill Olivier, and Helen Walls. We would like to thank Lenore Longwe and Kwandakwethu Ndaba of the ACMS for administrative support throughout the project. In addition, we would like to thank Nadine Schenk and the team from Meltwater for their assistance during this project.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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