



# Ethnic Stereotypes on South African Black Twitter: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Zulu, Venda and Pedi Representations

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## PUBLISHED ONLINE

Volume 44 (3) December 2025

Pages 76-90

Submitted October 2024

Accepted July 2025

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## DOI

10.36615/xzf50m42

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## ISSN

Online 2957-7950

Print 0259-0069

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## Abstract

Social media platforms have emerged as dynamic spaces for expressing diverse voices and negotiating identities. Among these platforms, X (formerly Twitter) stands out as a powerful medium where users engage in real-time conversations, shape narratives and participate in discussions on various topics. In the South African context, X has become a significant arena for public discourse, reflecting the complexities of a nation marked by cultural diversity and a history of social stratification. This article examines South African Black Twitter, a distinctive digital subculture that has gained prominence in shaping public opinion and influencing societal conversations. The focus is on critically analysing ethnic stereotypes within this digital space, specifically examining how Zulu, Venda and Pedi ethnicities are represented and stereotyped. While South Africa's multicultural landscape is celebrated for its diversity, it is not immune to the perpetuation of stereotypes, some of which are expressed on social media platforms such as X. By analysing a series of tweets, memes and graphics interchange formats collected through virtual ethnography, the study elucidates how the understanding and representation of these three ethnic groups in South Africa are embedded with stereotypes.

## Keywords

Black Twitter, ethnic stereotypes, Pedi, social media, South Africa, Venda, virtual ethnography, Zulu

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## INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media platforms have become powerful arenas for shaping public discourse, influencing identity formation and constructing cultural narratives. Among these platforms, X (formerly Twitter) has emerged as a crucial space for discussions on ethnicity, race and cultural identity, particularly within historically marginalised communities. In South Africa, Black Twitter has developed into a dynamic and influential subculture where users engage in conversations that affirm, challenge and negotiate ethnic identities (Aiseng, 2024). While this space fosters solidarity and cultural expression, it also serves as a platform for the reinforcement and circulation of ethnic stereotypes, some of which contribute to divisive and exclusionary narratives.

This article critically examines how ethnic stereotypes about Zulu, Venda and Pedi people are constructed, disseminated and engaged with on South African Black Twitter. Although South Africa is often celebrated as a "rainbow nation" that embraces cultural diversity, ethnic stereotypes remain deeply ingrained in social interactions and media discourse (Tewolde, 2024). The rise of social media has amplified the reach and intensity of these stereotypes, allowing them to spread rapidly across digital spaces in ways that both reinforce and contest longstanding biases (Intravia & Pickett, 2019). Using a virtual ethnographic approach, this study analyses tweets, memes and graphics interchange formats (GIFs) to identify dominant themes in ethnic stereotyping, explore how users interact with these representations and assess their broader implications for social cohesion and identity politics in South Africa.

Black Twitter represents a distinct subculture within the X platform and is characterised by frequent

use of hashtags (Lee, 2017). These hashtags, often centred on themes related to Black culture and societal issues, provide a platform for humour, social commentary and expressions of frustration among Black individuals. As a virtual community, Black Twitter serves as both a public and private forum that enables social movements (Klassen et al., 2021). Its members self-identify as Black, actively generating culturally significant content, sharing information and engaging in discussions about Black identity. Black Twitter not only fosters social connections but also challenges mainstream media narratives by presenting alternative viewpoints and critiquing negative representations of Black people in traditional media (Klassen et al., 2021).

While “Black Twitter” globally refers to a loosely connected network of users – primarily African American – who engage in online discourse centred on Black culture, identity and politics (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013), South African Black Twitter represents a localised variant of this subculture. It is distinguished by its focus on South Africa-specific socio-political dynamics, cultural vernaculars such as “Mzansi humour” and the intersection of race and ethnicity in public discourse (Aiseng, 2024). Although informed by the broader ethos of Black Twitter, the South African iteration is shaped by unique local histories, including apartheid legacies, ethnic pluralism and vernacular language practices. This study uses “South African Black Twitter” to refer specifically to this geographically and culturally bound digital subculture.

Black Twitter has emerged as one of the most influential digital subcultures globally, particularly in the United States (US), where it serves as a platform for political discourse, cultural expression and social activism (Aiseng, 2024; Mpofo, 2019). As a loosely connected but highly engaged online community, Black Twitter amplifies issues related to race, identity and marginalisation, often shaping mainstream narratives through viral discussions (Aiseng, 2024; Mpofo, 2019).

In South Africa, Black Twitter has become an essential space for public debate on political, cultural and ethnic identity (Aiseng, 2024), making it a critical site for studying the production and circulation of ethnic stereotypes. According to the SA Social Media Landscape Report 2024 by Ornico, X had over 4.1 million active users in South Africa in 2024. While precise statistics for Black Twitter in South Africa are limited, a significant portion of these users engage in discussions centred on identity politics, social justice and humour-driven discourse (Aiseng, 2024).

Unlike other social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, X’s algorithm promotes real-time, text-based conversations and facilitates the viral spread of ideas through hashtags, retweets and quote tweets. This makes it particularly useful for analysing discourse formation and stereotype propagation in digital communities. Furthermore, the platform’s public nature allows for the collection of authentic and spontaneous interactions, unlike private or semi-private platforms where discourse may be curated or censored.

Given its role in shaping social and cultural narratives in South Africa (Aiseng, 2024), Black Twitter is uniquely positioned as a powerful digital space where ethnic stereotypes are both challenged and reinforced. This study focuses on Black Twitter because it offers unparalleled access to discussions where ethnicity is negotiated, contested and performed in real time.

The platform rebranded from “Twitter” to “X” in 2023, yet this study retains the term “Black Twitter” due to its enduring socio-cultural significance (Aiseng, 2025a). The phrase “Black Twitter” has become a discursive and cultural marker that exceeds the platform’s corporate identity; it denotes a community practice and a way of engaging with Blackness in the digital space (Aiseng, 2025a). Therefore, its use here is conceptual rather than purely platform-specific.

Black Twitter plays a significant role in shaping public narratives on ethnicity and culture, but there has been little academic inquiry into how ethnic stereotypes are produced, circulated and contested within this digital space. The absence of such analysis limits our understanding of how social media functions as both a site of resistance and a vehicle for reinforcing ethnic prejudices. This study addresses this gap by investigating the mechanisms through which ethnic stereotypes manifest in online discourse, offering a nuanced exploration of how social media users navigate, challenge or perpetuate these representations.

This study was guided by the following key research questions:

1. How are ethnic stereotypes constructed and circulated on South African Black Twitter?
2. What dominant themes emerge in ethnic stereotyping within online discourse?

By examining these questions, the study contributes to broader discussions on digital culture, ethnic representation and the role of social media in shaping contemporary identity politics. It provides critical insights into how South African Black Twitter functions as both a space for cultural affirmation and a battleground for contested narratives about ethnicity.

## CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The mass media have always been more than mere outlets for entertainment and information; they serve as powerful conduits for cultural expression and oppression, with the potential to cause significant harm (Ward, 2020). Stvrtecka et al. (2024) argue that media are abstract systems and socialising tools that shape societal norms, values and behaviours, often in subtle ways. These platforms provide frameworks through which individuals interpret reality, thus influencing perceptions, ideologies and the transmission of culture. They also play a pivotal role in identity formation and the reinforcement or challenge of social structures. However, this power raises concerns, particularly about how media perpetuate stereotypes, biases and social inequalities. This underscores the need for critical scholarly engagement. Understanding the media's role in shaping these representations is crucial to deconstructing the racial and ethnic stereotypes they perpetuate (Castaneda, 2018).

While stereotypes are often associated with marginalised groups, they also target numerically dominant groups, such as the Zulu, who constitute South Africa's largest ethnic group (Aiseng, 2025a). As Castaneda (2018) notes, stereotypes can affect any ethnic group, reinforcing social divisions by framing even majority groups as threats or outsiders. In this study, tweets targeting Zulu people, such as those which label them as an "unnecessary tribe" despite their demographic dominance, illustrate how stereotypes function to marginalise groups regardless of their size or influence. This dynamic highlights the pervasive nature of ethnic stereotyping in digital spaces, where historical power imbalances and cultural narratives shape perceptions of both majority and minority ethnic identities.

Increasing research has focused on issues of race and ethnicity in digital spaces (Dixon, 2017; Intravia & Pickett, 2019; Nakamura, 2002; Sharma, 2013). Nakamura (2007) suggests that social media platforms, online communication methods and digital media are deeply embedded with ideological influences that reflect and exacerbate racial and ethnic conflicts. These platforms are far from neutral; they are infused with ideologies that both shape and are shaped by ongoing racial and ethnic debates. The content and interactions on these platforms often amplify existing social tensions, which reinforces or challenges stereotypes (Sharma, 2013). As a result, the ideologies present in these digital spaces significantly impact how racial and ethnic issues are contested and represented online. Lovink (2011) critiques the notion that the virtual world liberates individuals from their real-world identities, revealing it to be an illusion.

Stvrtecka et al. (2024) highlight significant negative phenomena on digital platforms, including the radicalisation of opinions and the formation of communities that create hostile environments. These spaces, often fuelled by provocative content such as memes and inflammatory posts, become breeding grounds for extreme ideologies. As Smieško (cited in Stvrtecka et al., 2024) observes, extremism adapts to technological advancements, utilising the Internet to spread ideas, recruit followers and organise activities offline. This digital expansion enhances the reach of these ideologies, posing substantial threats to societal stability.

While the Internet allows for global connectivity and "network neighbours", it also sparks cognitive conflicts and regional cultural differences, often leading to online disputes (Li, 2023). Stereotypes are a prominent manifestation of these conflicts. Online users frequently present their cultural patterns as superior or universally valid (Stvrtecka et al., 2024), which can fuel nationalism, chauvinism and ethnocentrism in both mild and radical forms. The nature of online communication, with its varying levels of user anonymity, indirect interactions and limited control over hate speech, facilitates the spread of these views.

Globally, there is increasing evidence of the marginalisation of temporary migrant, refugee and

immigrant populations, often driven by national policies and public sentiments that discriminate against foreigners (Devakumar et al., 2020). These discriminatory perceptions are reflected in social media, where hostile narratives targeting immigrant groups perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce societal biases. These digital platforms have become breeding grounds for xenophobia and racism, exacerbating tensions and contributing to the ongoing marginalisation of vulnerable populations.

Despite the opportunity for diverse perspectives, marginalising stereotypes remain pervasive in online discourse. This is amplified by the rapid spread of content on social media platforms (Dobson & Knezevic, 2018). Social media's expansive reach accelerates the dissemination of stereotypical content, which reinforces and perpetuates existing biases. Research shows that exposure to such content not only strengthens stereotypes among individuals predisposed to these views but also spreads harmful perceptions to new audiences (Turetsky & Riddle, 2018).

Numerous studies have analysed the impact of social media platforms such as X on society (Bouvier, 2020; Florini, 2014; Tufekci, 2017). While these studies initially sparked optimism regarding the democratising potential of platforms such as X (Bouvier, 2020), closer scrutiny reveals their involvement in perpetuating racial sentiments, ethnic animosity, homophobic ideologies (Makombe et al., 2020) and sexist stereotypes (De Ridder, 2017; Gerrard & Thornham, 2020). The dynamics of these platforms raise questions about how much attention has been given to their profound influence on identity markers. This article addresses the gap in understanding how ethnic stereotypes are produced and disseminated on South African Black Twitter, despite the growing influence of this digital space.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Ethnicity, digital media and stereotyping in South Africa**

The convergence of ethnicity and digital media has emerged as a critical field of study in Africa, where colonial legacies continue to influence socio-political identities and fuel intergroup tensions (Ekeh, 1975; Mamdani, 1996). In South Africa, ethnic identities have been profoundly shaped by historical state interventions, notably through apartheid policies that codified linguistic and tribal distinctions to entrench social hierarchies (Jensen, 2008; Posel, 2001). These entrenched divisions persist in contemporary digital arenas, particularly on social media platforms, where ethnic stereotypes are perpetuated, challenged and reshaped in dynamic ways. The accessibility and interactivity of these platforms amplify both the visibility and the complexity of ethnic discourses, making them a vital site for examining how historical prejudices intersect with modern communication technologies.

South African media scholarship has extensively explored race and representation, offering robust analyses of how media constructs racial identities (Chiumbu, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2010; Wasserman, 2010). However, the specific phenomenon of intra-Black ethnic stereotyping in digital contexts has received less scrutiny. Social media platforms have become central spaces for articulating interethnic rivalries, often cloaked in humour, satire or expressions of cultural pride (Bosch, 2017). X, in particular, plays a pivotal role in these dynamics, with "Black Twitter" communities serving as vibrant hubs for discussions about ethnicity. These communities navigate a delicate balance between celebrating cultural identities and inadvertently reinforcing harmful stereotypes through playful or critical exchanges.

Despite the growing relevance of Black Twitter, research focused on ethnic stereotyping within South African online spaces remains limited. Hove (2022) has explored how social media can both foster ethnic pride and propagate derogatory tribal labelling, highlighting the dual nature of digital platforms as spaces of affirmation and division. Similarly, Aiseng (2025b) has illuminated how language ideologies in South African Black Twitter often favour colonial principles of hierarchy, superiority, power and segregation of certain groups over others, which reflects historical efforts to marginalise some indigenous languages in favour of others. Such studies underscore that digital platforms do not merely reflect existing prejudices but actively reshape them through new forms of expression, such as memes, hashtags and viral threads. These digital artifacts often draw on longstanding cultural narratives, adapting them to contemporary contexts in ways that both preserve and transform ethnic stereotypes.

Beyond stereotyping, research on digital hate speech and xenophobia in South Africa sheds light on the broader challenges surrounding ethnic and national identities in online environments. Wasserman (2020) and Bosch (2020) highlight that the absence of traditional editorial gatekeeping on social media platforms facilitates the rapid spread of inflammatory discourse. This lack of oversight allows divisive rhetoric to flourish, often unchecked, as platforms prioritise user engagement over content moderation. A key manifestation of this issue is the normalisation of ethnic slurs and humorous stereotyping, which frequently evade moderation due to their subtle, ironic or culturally coded presentation (Daniels, 2018). Such content, often framed as playful or satirical, can perpetuate harmful biases by embedding negative ethnic perceptions in everyday digital interactions. This reinforces divisions within South Africa's diverse society. For instance, coded language or playful jabs at ethnic groups may appear benign but can reinforce harmful biases by normalising negative perceptions in public discourse. This dynamic is amplified by algorithmic systems that prioritise engagement, often elevating provocative content to wider audiences (Gillespie, 2018).

Comparative studies from other African contexts reveal parallel trends. In Nigeria, Ajetunmobi et al. (2024) found that X both mirrors offline ethnic biases and provides spaces for challenging them, with users engaging in both antagonistic and affirmative discourses. Similarly, Adegaju (2023) analyses Nigerian online responses to ethnic attacks, revealing how hate speech employs rhetorical devices such as metaphors and hyperbole to dehumanise targets, which escalates intergroup tensions. These findings highlight the broader role of digital platforms in amplifying societal tensions through their design, which rewards virality and polarisation. In South Africa, such dynamics are compounded by the country's unique history of racial and ethnic engineering that continues to shape how groups perceive and represent one another online.

Scholars have also debated the emancipatory potential of digital platforms. Some, like Bosch (2017), argue that social media empowers marginalised voices by providing spaces for cultural affirmation and political activism. Others, such as Hove (2022) and Aiseng (2025b), warn that these platforms can perpetuate exclusionary narratives and symbolic violence, particularly when stereotypes are repackaged as humour or critique. This tension is especially pronounced on South African Black Twitter, where humour and mockery serve as tools for both resisting dominant narratives and reinforcing intra-group divisions. For example, memes targeting Zulu cultural practices may be intended as light-hearted commentary but can inadvertently perpetuate perceptions of ethnic inferiority or difference.

A significant gap persists in the literature concerning the production and circulation of intra-Black ethnic stereotypes in South African digital spaces. Existing studies tend to focus on broader racial dynamics (for example, Black/White binaries), xenophobic prejudice or general identity politics, leaving the specific mechanisms of ethnic stereotyping underexplored. This study addressed this lacuna by investigating how South African Black Twitter constructs, disseminates and contests stereotypes about ethnic groups, with a particular focus on representations of the Zulu people, Venda people and Pedi people. It examines the interplay of humour, memes and hashtag activism with historical narratives of power, identity and belonging, offering a nuanced perspective on how digital platforms mediate South Africa's complex ethnic politics. By situating these dynamics within the broader socio-historical context of colonial and apartheid-era divisions, the study illuminates the enduring impact of structural inequalities on contemporary digital discourses and the potential of platforms such as Black Twitter to both challenge and perpetuate these legacies.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Media stereotypes

Stereotypes, defined as oversimplified beliefs about social groups (Kashima, 2000), are powerful discursive tools that shape societal perceptions and intergroup relations through media representations (Hall, 2018). According to Hall's theory of representation, stereotypes construct social groups as the "Other", positioning them as outsiders within cultural or national narratives, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies

(Hall, 2018). In the context of South African Black Twitter, ethnic stereotypes marginalise groups such as the Zulu, Venda and Pedi, undermining the post-apartheid ideal of a unified "rainbow nation". Media narratives, including those on digital platforms, are not neutral but actively shape perceptions of race and ethnicity, often perpetuating harmful biases through linguistic and visual content such as memes and tweets (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019). The Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) further illuminates how stereotypes reflect perceived group status and competition, categorising groups based on competence and warmth. In South Africa, these dynamics are amplified by the country's unique socio-historical context, where colonial and apartheid policies entrenched ethnic divisions. This contrasts sharply with the race-centric stereotypes prevalent in US media.

Unlike US media, where stereotypes primarily target broad racial categories (for example, African Americans as criminal or athletic) rooted in histories of slavery and immigration (Dixon et al., 2019), South African stereotypes are deeply tied to ethnic and tribal identities shaped by colonial "divide and rule" strategies and apartheid's Bantustan policies (Mamdani, 1996). During apartheid, the creation of ethnically segregated homelands, such as KwaZulu, Venda and Bophuthatswana, codified tribal distinctions, fostering perceptions of groups such as the Zulu as politically dominant, the Venda as marginal and mystical, and the Pedi as rural and backward (Evans, 2012). These historical constructions persist in contemporary digital spaces, where platforms such as X amplify stereotypes through viral mechanisms that include hashtags, retweets and quote tweets (Gillespie, 2018). The absence of traditional editorial gatekeeping on social media allows these narratives to spread rapidly, often embedding colonial-era biases in humorous or satirical content that normalises ethnic prejudice (Daniels, 2018).

Moreover, ethnic stereotypes on South African Black Twitter intersect with other identity markers, such as gender, class and region, adding complexity to their impact. For instance, stereotypes about Pedi women as hypersexual or Venda individuals as practitioners of witchcraft reflect gendered and regional biases that align with feminist media studies which highlight the compounded marginalisation of women from ethnic minorities (Crenshaw, 1991; Gerrard & Thornham, 2020). By applying content analysis, this study examined how Black Twitter's linguistic and visual content constructs these intersecting stereotypes, and how it perpetuates power imbalances in South Africa's multicultural society.

The distinct stereotypes that target Zulu, Venda and Pedi ethnic groups on South African Black Twitter are rooted in historical and cultural narratives shaped by colonial and apartheid policies that continue to influence contemporary digital discourse. These stereotypes reflect not only ethnic divisions but also the interplay of power, status and cultural representation in a post-apartheid context. Below, the unique historical and cultural roots of stereotypes for each group are outlined, drawing on the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) and historical scholarship to frame their significance:

- **Zulu:** Stereotypes portraying Zulu people as aggressive and dominant stem from their historical role in resistance movements, notably under King Shaka Zulu, whose legacy as a formidable warrior leader has been both celebrated and weaponised (Hamilton, 1998). As South Africa's largest ethnic group, constituting approximately 22% of the population (Aiseng, 2025a), Zulu people are often framed as a threat to other groups, a perception amplified by their political influence during and after apartheid (Castaneda, 2018). According to the Stereotype Content Model, Zulu people are stereotyped as high competence but low warmth, reflecting their perceived dominance but also social undesirability (Fiske et al., 2002). On Black Twitter, this manifests in tweets that mock Zulu linguistic pride or frame their cultural practices as outdated, which reinforces colonial narratives that dismiss African traditions as primitive (Mamdani, 1996). For example, the portrayal of Zulu culture as "loud singing and stomping" echoes historical efforts to trivialise their resistance heritage, positioning them as culturally excessive or threatening.
- **Venda:** Stereotypes of mysticism and isolation reflect colonial portrayals of the Venda people as geographically and culturally peripheral, often tied to exoticised spiritual practices (Nguyen, 2022). Historically, the Venda, a numerically smaller group concentrated in Limpopo, were marginalised through the apartheid-era Venda Bantustan, which reinforced their image as remote and disconnected from South Africa's urban centres (Evans, 2012). The Stereotype Content Model

frames Venda people as low competence and low warmth, casting them as mysterious outsiders whose cultural practices, such as traditional healing, are reduced to "witchcraft" or "juju" (Fiske et al., 2002). On Black Twitter, tweets such as "Venda people and their weird rituals" perpetuate these colonial tropes, exoticising Venda identity and marginalising their cultural contributions. This aligns with Nyamnjoh's (2010) argument that African media often amplify colonial-era stereotypes and undermine minority groups' legitimacy in national discourses.

- **Pedi:** Stereotypes of rural backwardness and religious fanaticism are linked to the apartheid-era marginalisation of the Pedi homeland (Lebowa) and the prominence of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) in Pedi cultural identity (Evans, 2012). Historically, the Pedi people were portrayed as rural and resistant to modernisation, a narrative rooted in colonial efforts to undermine their anti-colonial resistance under leaders such as King Sekhukhune (Mamdani, 1996). The Stereotype Content Model positions Pedi people as low competence but high warmth, reflecting perceptions of them as traditionalist and community-oriented but intellectually inferior (Fiske et al., 2002). On Black Twitter, tweets ridiculing ZCC practices or Pedi linguistic abilities, such as "Pedi men can't speak proper English", draw on these historical distortions, framing Pedi identity as backward and incompatible with urban, English-centric modernity (Lippi-Green, 2012). Gendered stereotypes, such as those that sexualise Pedi women, further intersect with ethnic prejudice, which compounds their marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991).

By situating these group-specific stereotypes within South Africa's socio-historical context, this framework highlights how Black Twitter both reflects and reshapes colonial and apartheid-era narratives. Unlike US Black Twitter, which often focuses on countering anti-Black racism through hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter (Florini, 2014), South African Black Twitter navigates intra-Black ethnic tensions, where historical power dynamics and cultural representations shape distinct stereotype profiles. This localised analysis underscores the need to examine how digital platforms mediate ethnic identities in post-apartheid South Africa, and the analysis offers insights into their role in perpetuating or challenging social divisions.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis of X posts associated with ethnic discourse on South African Black Twitter to understand how ethnic stereotypes are constructed, circulated and contested within this subculture. To ensure cultural and geographic relevance, South African Black Twitter is identified through:

- Use of geotagged content or references to South African contexts (for example, "eKasi", "ANC", "Mzansi");
- Hashtags widely recognised by South African X users, such as #BlackTwitterSA, #MzansiTwitter and #Satafrika;
- Comments in or involving South African languages or localised slang (for example, isiZulu, Setswana, Sepedi expressions);
- Engagement with distinctly South African themes, such as #LoadShedding, #FeesMustFall or #PhakamaRamaphosa.

Participation in these hashtag communities does not guarantee that a user is Black or South African. However, users' self-presentation, language use, cultural references and interaction with South African public discourse served as criteria to contextualise participation on South African Black Twitter. This interpretive approach aligns with studies that use linguistic, cultural and temporal cues to approximate demographic identity in social media research (Aiseng, 2024; 2025a; 2025b; Mpofo, 2019).

## Hashtag and sample selection

A purposive sampling method was employed to identify tweets representing ethnic discourse within South African Black Twitter. A dataset of 848 tweets was collected using the X Advanced Search function and the Python-based tool Twint, covering the period from June 2023 to June 2025. The initial search

included hashtags such as #BlackTwitterSA, #MzansiTwitter, #Zulu, #Venda, #Pedi, #TribalismZA and #StereotypeZA. The hashtags were selected for the following reasons:

- . They are commonly used to tag conversations explicitly referencing ethnicity, tribalism or cultural identity;
- . They reflect distinct South African ethnic identifiers (Zulu, Pedi, Venda);
- . They were active during national trending events (public holidays, viral incidents) that heightened ethnic discourse.

Tweets were filtered to exclude memes without accompanying commentary, automated posts and duplicated content. From the 848 tweets collected, a final sample of 180 tweets was selected for in-depth thematic analysis. However, only 30 of these tweets are presented here. These 30 tweets were purposefully chosen based on the following:

- . Richness of content in terms of stereotype articulation;
- . Inclusion of user engagement (likes, comments, retweets);
- . Use of ethnic labels or identifiers;
- . Clarity of language and interpretability within a cultural context.

To comply with ethical standards, all identifying information (such as usernames, profile details) was removed from the tweets that were analysed in this study to protect user privacy. While the sample of 30 tweets is small, it aligns with qualitative best practices and emphasises depth over breadth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The selected tweets enabled detailed discourse and semiotic analysis, as is suitable for exploratory studies of cultural representation. However, the limited sample size is acknowledged, and future studies could expand the scope for quantitative robustness.

### **Selection of ethnic groups**

Three intersecting criteria guided the focus on Zulu, Pedi and Venda ethnic groups:

1. Frequency of mentions in the broader 848-tweet dataset;
2. Historical and political salience in South African identity discourses;
3. Divergence in the nature of stereotypes observed in pilot sampling.

Zulu identity often dominates cultural and political discourse due to its historical prominence in national leadership and media. Pedi identity, while less prominent in mainstream media, holds significant cultural and historical importance, particularly in relation to resistance movements and religious practices such as the ZCC. Venda, though numerically smaller, frequently appears in stereotypical discussions, often involving exoticisation or cultural mystique. Although the study does not claim that these groups are more significant than others, their visibility on South African Black Twitter discourse during the data collection period justifies their inclusion. This selection enables comparative analysis of diverse stereotypes within the same digital ecosystem. Such stereotypes range from hypermasculinity (Zulu) to religious and historical misrepresentation (Pedi) and mysticism (Venda).

### **ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE**

Tweets were analysed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each tweet was coded inductively for dominant themes (such as power, humour, exclusion), discursive strategies (such as exaggeration, sarcasm, use of vernacular) and stereotype type (behavioural, occupational, cultural). Codes were refined iteratively, and emerging patterns were mapped against existing literature on stereotype formation and ethnic representation. Thematic categories were developed through multiple coding rounds, with findings cross-checked by a second coder for intercoder reliability. While the study does not generalise beyond its sample, it provides deep, contextual insight into the mechanisms and implications of ethnic stereotyping on South African Black Twitter.

### **FINDINGS AND DATA PRESENTATION**

This section presents the findings from a qualitative thematic analysis of 30 purposefully sampled tweets collected from South African Black Twitter between June 2023 and June 2025. The analysis addresses the

following research questions: (1) How are ethnic stereotypes constructed and circulated on South African Black Twitter? and (2) What dominant themes emerge in ethnic stereotyping within online discourse? Unlike US Black Twitter, which often challenges race-centric stereotypes (for example, African Americans as criminal or athletic) through hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter (Dixon et al., 2019), South African Black Twitter focuses on intra-Black ethnic divisions, reflecting apartheid's legacy of tribal segregation. The findings are organised into three subheadings, each focusing on stereotypes associated with Zulu, Venda and Pedi ethnic groups, followed by a comparative analysis to highlight their distinct profiles. Each subheading examines discursive strategies (humour, sarcasm, exaggeration), their amplification through X's platform affordances (hashtags, retweets) and intersections with gender, class and regional identities. The findings reflect patterns within the sampled discourse and do not claim to represent the entire South African population.

## ETHNIC STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH ZULU PEOPLE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The analysis identifies three dominant stereotype themes that target Zulu people: linguistic mockery, cultural simplification and aggression/exclusion. These stereotypes, rooted in the Zulu people's historical prominence as a politically dominant group and their demographic majority, are constructed through discursive strategies such as humour and exaggeration, which are amplified by X's viral mechanics.

### Linguistic mockery

Tweets that mock isiZulu pronunciation and naming conventions use humour and exaggeration to trivialise linguistic identity and reinforce English as the standard of modernity (Lippi-Green, 2012). For example, *"Why do Zulu names sound like a Wi-Fi password? Sibusiso, Thanduxolo, what's next? 😄"* employs exaggeration to liken Zulu names to incomprehensible codes, while *"Dear Zulu people: it's Bundle of Joy, not Bandile noJohn"* uses sarcastic humour to frame isiZulu speakers as linguistically deficient. These tweets, often tagged with #ZuluTwitter, gain traction through retweets and quote tweets, amplifying their reach and normalising linguistic prejudice. This strategy reflects colonial hierarchies that prioritise English over indigenous languages, which marginalises Zulu speakers in digital spaces (Mamdani, 1996). This dynamic aligns with Lippi-Green's (2012) concept of "language ideology", in which dominant languages are upheld as superior, while indigenous languages are devalued. This reinforces systemic inequalities in both online and offline contexts.

### Cultural simplification and negative traditionalism

Tweets on X often reduce Zulu cultural practices to simplistic or regressive stereotypes through ironic and dismissive commentary. This perpetuates colonial narratives that frame African traditions as inferior (Mamdani, 1996). For example, tweets such as *"Zulu culture is just loud singing and stomping, no depth to it"* or *"Zulus still living like it's 1800 with their spears and shields 😄 #ModernizeAlready"* employ irony to portray Zulu traditions as primitive and irrelevant in modern contexts. The hashtag #ModernizeAlready amplifies this narrative by encouraging user engagement that reinforces Eurocentric standards of cultural legitimacy. Such portrayals erase the richness and complexity of Zulu cultural heritage, including its historical significance in resistance movements under leaders such as Shaka Zulu (Hamilton, 1998). Moreover, these representations intersect with regional biases, often depicting Zulu people as rural and disconnected from urban sophistication, which further marginalises their cultural identity in digital spaces.

### Aggression and exclusionary rhetoric

Despite their demographic majority in South Africa, Zulu people are frequently stereotyped as aggressive and socially undesirable, a narrative rooted in their historical warrior legacy (Castaneda, 2018) and compounded by intersectional biases related to ethnicity, class and regional identity. Social media posts on platforms such as X amplify these stereotypes through hyperbolic and exclusionary rhetoric. For instance, tweets such as *"Zulus are too aggressive, always ready to fight over nothing. Chill, it's not a warzone"* exaggerate Zulu behaviour to portray them as inherently violent, while others, such as

*"Zulus are unnecessary tribe in South Africa tbh"*, dismiss their cultural and social significance within the national fabric. More extreme examples, such as *"my colleague said Zulus killed Jesus, and now God is punishing them"*, scapegoat Zulu people during crises such as the 2022 KwaZulu-Natal floods, exploiting hashtags such as #ZuluTwitter to spread divisive narratives. These portrayals align with the Stereotype Content Model, which positions Zulu people as high in competence but low in warmth (Fiske et al., 2002), framing them as dominant and socially threatening. This perception intersects with class and regional biases, often depicting Zulu people as rural, uneducated or overly traditional, which marginalises them in urban, cosmopolitan contexts (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, the stereotype of aggression is amplified for Zulu men, reinforcing gendered narratives that align with colonial tropes of African masculinity as hyper-aggressive (Morrell, 1998). Similarly, Zulu women may face intersecting biases that portray them as subservient or overly traditional, further entrenching their marginalisation in digital and social spheres. These intersectional dynamics not only perpetuate linguistic and cultural prejudice but also reinforce systemic inequalities by aligning Zulu identity with negative social attributes, which undermines their contributions to South Africa's multicultural landscape.

### **ETHNIC STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH VENDA PEOPLE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

Venda stereotypes centre on mysticism, isolation and linguistic ridicule, which reflects their historical marginalisation as a numerically smaller group in the apartheid-era Venda Bantustan (Evans, 2012). These stereotypes are constructed through sarcasm and exoticisation, and they are amplified by X's engagement-driven algorithms.

#### **Mysticism and exoticism**

Sarcastic posts on platforms such as X, such as *"Venda people are going to eat us one day"*, revive colonial cannibal tropes to dehumanise and exoticise Venda identity, while others such as *"Venda culture is all about juju and strange dances, nothing modern about it"* and *"Venda people and their weird rituals, always casting spells in the bush 🤪 #WitchcraftVibes"* reduce Venda spiritual practices to archaic, superstitious stereotypes. These portrayals, amplified through hashtags such as #VendaTwitter, align with Nguyen's (2022) argument that digital stereotypes project societal anxieties onto minority cultures, framing Venda traditions as alien and inferior. This intersectional marginalisation compounds biases by intertwining ethnicity with regional and cultural "otherness", portraying Venda people as rural and disconnected from modernity. This normalises prejudice and marginalises Venda identity in South Africa's multicultural digital landscape.

#### **Isolation and exclusion**

Tweets such as *"Venda is like another country, nobody knows what they're doing up there"*, perpetuate the stereotype of Venda as geographically and culturally peripheral, echoing apartheid-era spatial segregation that isolated communities such as Venda to marginalise their influence (Mamdani, 1996). Amplified by hashtags such as #Satafrika, these narratives diminish Venda contributions to South Africa's national identity, framing them as detached from the broader socio-cultural landscape. These stereotypes intersect with class and regional biases, depicting Venda people as predominantly rural and disconnected from urban modernity. This contrasts with US Black Twitter's focus on racial discourses, which often centre urban experiences and systemic racism (Florini, 2014). By portraying Venda identity as backward or irrelevant, these posts reinforce systemic exclusion, undermining Venda cultural and economic contributions in South Africa's diverse digital and social spheres.

#### **Ridicule of language/names and intellectual inferiority**

Tweets that mock Venda names and perceived cognitive capacity, such as *"Why do Venda names sound like a secret code? Mulalo, Tshifhiwa ... just say John! 😄"*, use humour to pressure assimilation into Western naming conventions, trivialising Venda linguistic identity. Similarly, tweets such as *"Is this how Venda people think?"*, often linked to unrelated incidents, insinuate irrationality or intellectual inferiority.

Amplified through reposts and hashtags, these narratives resonate with Lippi-Green's (2012) argument that language is weaponised for social exclusion, framing Venda speakers as outsiders in mainstream discourse. These linguistic stereotypes intertwine with class-based biases, portraying Venda individuals as rural and intellectually deficient within South Africa's urban-centric social hierarchy.

### ETHNIC STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH PEDI PEOPLE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Pedi stereotypes focus on historical distortion, religious ridicule and linguistic/gender-based prejudice rooted in the apartheid-era marginalisation of the Lebowa homeland and the prominence of the ZCC (Evans, 2012). These stereotypes are constructed through irony and exaggeration, and they are amplified by X's platform dynamics.

#### Historical distortion

Social media posts on platforms such as X, such as *"o bolailwe ke potata"* (he was killed by sweet potato), employ irony to trivialise the legacy of King Sekhukhune, a pivotal figure in Pedi anti-colonial resistance, which reduces his historical significance to a humorous anecdote. Similarly, posts such as *"Pedi Chiefs are just old guys in funny hats pretending to be important. 🤡 #NoHistoryHere"* mock traditional Pedi leadership as performative and irrelevant, which undermines their cultural authority. These distortions resonate with Mamdani's (1996) argument that colonial powers erased African histories to legitimise domination, a tactic echoed in digital spaces to delegitimise Pedi heritage. These narratives intersect with ethnic and class biases, portraying Pedi cultural practices as outdated and rural, thus marginalising their role in South Africa's post-apartheid national identity. By targeting Pedi-specific history and leadership, these posts, amplified through hashtags such as #NoHistoryHere, reinforce systemic exclusion, diminishing the Pedi community's cultural legitimacy in contemporary digital and societal contexts.

#### Religious ridicule

The ZCC, a central institution in Pedi identity, is caricatured through ironic tweets such as *"Pedi: ZCC. Into Witchcraft. Stupid. Carvella. Gold teeth"*, which reduce a respected spiritual movement to superstition and materialism. Others, such as *"Pedi people and their ZCC nonsense, always praying loudly like it's a concert 🤡"*, mock communal worship as disruptive, echoing colonial disdain for African spirituality (Mamdani, 1996). These portrayals align with Nguyen's (2022) argument that digital stereotypes project societal anxieties onto minority cultures, framing the ZCC as irrational and backward. These narratives intersect with ethnic and class biases, depicting Pedi ZCC members as rural, unrefined and disconnected from urban sophistication. Amplified through retweets and hashtags, such posts marginalise Pedi spiritual identity, undermining the ZCC's cultural and historical significance in South Africa's post-apartheid context.

#### Linguistic/Gender-based prejudice and negative physical stereotyping

Noticeably, some tweets also perpetuate linguistic and gendered stereotypes that marginalise Pedi identity, intersecting with ethnicity, gender and colourism to reinforce systemic exclusion. Tweets such as *"Pedi men can't speak proper English, always butchering words on radio"* exaggerate perceived deficiencies in English proficiency to imply intellectual inferiority among Pedi men. This aligns with Lippi-Green's (2012) argument that language is used as a tool for social exclusion. This linguistic mockery positions Pedi men as less competent within South Africa's urban-centric, English-dominated social hierarchy. Concurrently, gendered stereotypes such as *"Women love sex"* hypersexualise Pedi women, echoing a patriarchal-colonial legacy that fetishises Black women's bodies as objects of desire (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019). Such portrayals reduce Pedi women to sexual stereotypes, stripping them of agency and reinforcing gendered power imbalances. In addition, posts such as *"Lightskin Pedi people look so evil sometimes or ke nna fela?"* (light-skin Pedi people look so evil sometimes or is it just me?) weaponise physical appearance, intertwining ethnicity with colourism to stigmatise light-skinned Pedi individuals as untrustworthy or malevolent. This reflects broader societal biases where skin tone intersects with ethnic

identity to perpetuate intra-community prejudice (Hunter, 2007).

The stereotypes that target Zulu, Venda and Pedi groups on South African Black Twitter, as observed on platforms such as X, reveal distinct patterns shaped by historical, socio-political and intersectional dynamics that are rooted in apartheid's legacy of tribal segregation (Mamdani, 1996). These patterns leverage humour, sarcasm and colonial tropes to marginalise each group's cultural identity while fostering intra-Black rivalries in digital spaces.

Intersectionality shapes these stereotypes distinctly. Zulu men are disproportionately targeted for aggression, aligning with colonial tropes of African masculinity (Morrell, 1998). Venda stereotypes, applied broadly across genders, focus on cultural "otherness", while Pedi women are hypersexualised and Pedi men are mocked for linguistic deficiencies, such as "*Pedi men can't speak proper English, always butchering words on radio*". Colourism further complicates these dynamics, as seen in posts such as "*Lightskin Pedi people look so evil sometimes or ke nna fela?*" which stigmatises light-skinned Pedi individuals (Hunter, 2007). These intersectional biases – ethnicity, gender, class and skin tone – reinforce marginalisation within South Africa's urban-centric social hierarchy.

The affordances of X, including hashtags, retweets and quote posts, amplify these stereotypes by prioritising engagement. This embeds colonial and apartheid-era narratives in humorous digital discourse (Gillespie, 2018). Hashtags such as #ZuluTwitter, #VendaTwitter and #Satafrika enhance virality, while emojis (such as 😊, 😏) add a veneer of levity to prejudicial content.

## CONCLUSION

This virtual ethnographic study explored the construction and circulation of and engagement with ethnic stereotypes on South African Black Twitter, focusing on representations of Zulu, Venda and Pedi ethnic groups through a qualitative thematic analysis of 30 purposefully sampled tweets from June 2023 to June 2025. Guided by two research questions – (1) How are ethnic stereotypes constructed and circulated on South African Black Twitter? and (2) What dominant themes emerge in ethnic stereotyping within online discourse? – the findings offer tentative insights into the complex interplay of digital discourse, historical legacies and identity politics in post-apartheid South Africa.

Regarding the first research question, the study suggests that ethnic stereotypes are constructed and circulated through discursive strategies such as humour, sarcasm and irony, and they are amplified by X's viral features such as hashtags (#ZuluTwitter, #VendaTwitter) and retweets. These strategies, rooted in colonial and apartheid-era narratives (Mamdani, 1996), are not static but dynamically shaped by user interactions and platform affordances (Gillespie, 2018). The findings also highlight intersectional dimensions, with stereotypes intersecting with gender (for example, sexualisation of Pedi women) and class (for example, rural stereotypes for Venda), suggesting that ethnic identity is negotiated alongside other social categories (Crenshaw, 1991). However, these insights are specific to the sampled tweets and may not fully capture the diversity of South African Black Twitter discourse.

For the second research question, the analysis points to dominant themes of linguistic inferiority, cultural exoticisation and historical distortion, which vary across groups. Zulu stereotypes emphasise aggression and linguistic mockery, reflecting their historical dominance (Castaneda, 2018); Venda stereotypes focus on mysticism and isolation tied to colonial marginalisation (Nguyen, 2022); and Pedi stereotypes centre on rural backwardness and religious ridicule linked to apartheid-era policies (Evans, 2012). South African Black Twitter reveals intra-Black ethnic tensions, shaped by apartheid's legacy of tribal segregation. These themes, while prominent in the dataset, are exploratory and suggest patterns rather than definitive truths about ethnic stereotyping in digital spaces.

This study illuminates South African Black Twitter as a dynamic arena where ethnic stereotypes are both perpetuated and contested, reflecting the platform's dual role as a space for cultural affirmation and division. The findings are limited by the small sample size (30 tweets) and the interpretive nature of virtual ethnography, which restricts generalisability. In addition, the study focuses on negative stereotypes and may underrepresent counter-narratives, such as hashtags #ProudlyZulu or #VendaVibes, which resist marginalisation. Future research could explore these counter-narratives, employ larger datasets or use

mixed methods to examine how platform algorithms shape stereotype circulation. By highlighting the provisional nature of these findings, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about digital culture, ethnic representation and the role of social media in navigating South Africa's complex identity politics. The study findings invite further exploration into fostering inclusive online spaces.

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