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Social Media as a Sphere of Violence Discourse during
Times of Civil Unrest in South Africa: An Analysis of the
2021 Looting Protests

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to explore the extent to which X (formerly Twitter) was used as a forum for violent discourse during times of civil unrest and looting. It examined the looting that occurred in South Africa in July 2021 under the hashtags #LootingSA and #FreeZuma, which started in the KwaZulu-Natal province on 8 July 2021 and spread to the Gauteng Province. This study argues that the normalisation of violence and the encouragement of harmful behaviours on social media can spread false information about unrest and incite violence. Data were analysed using the content analysis technique which is rooted in the qualitative research approach. It was found that there was significant engagement in looting on X and this platform was used to create a discourse of violence during the 2021 looting. It was also found that although X did not perpetuate violence, it was used as a forum for expressions of public violence. Protest Participation Theory (PPT) and Galtung's Theory of Violence (GTV) underpinned this study and supported the findings from a theoretical point of view. The findings also show that violent tweets revealed a substantial presence of aggressive language, calls for violence, threats, and incitements to harm during the period of civil unrest. Interestingly, a

significant portion of these tweets did not explicitly endorse violence, but circulated content related to violent acts.

Keywords: Violence; Social Media; Twitter; LootingSA

Introduction

Social media has become an important function for activism during times of civil unrest and protests. As Lim (2012: 123) explains, 'social media is not simply a neutral tool to be used or adopted by social movements but rather influences how activists form and shape social movements.' As such, it serves as a complementary tool, rather than being the primary means of communication and mobilisation for South African activists. Noting that social media has been used largely by activists in contemporary civil upheavals, it is imperative to explore the implications of using social media as a platform for public discourse on violence (Lim, 2012). With the recent widespread use of social media, some scholars argue that the content created on social media by activists is believed to predict offline protest behaviour (Scott, 2023; Mdlalose, 2023; Lim, 2012; Bosch, 2017). However, some argue that there was previously no correlation drawn between social media usage and real-world behaviour. However, the worldwide use of social media platforms by recent protesters provides an unparalleled opportunity to witness how social media use can have real-world behavioural ties (Scott, 2023).

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa and the restrictions of the major lockdown were in place, a major civil unrest in the form of looting began on 8 July 2021. Looting is regarded as a form of civil unrest, an act of stealing, or the taking of goods by force, typically amid a military, political, or other social crisis, such as war, natural disasters, or rioting (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1970). According to the Africa eNews Channel (eNCA) (2021), the civil unrest was in response to the national lockdown restrictions and the arrest of former president Jacob Zuma (Henceforth Zuma). Zuma was sentenced to 15 months in prison for defying the order to appear before the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into allegations of state capture, corruption, and fraud in the public sector.

According to Ngwane (2021), the commotion began with inflammatory posts on social media that threatened to rain down fire and brimstone if former president Zuma was not released from prison. As such, this study examines the violence discourses of tweets shared on X during #LootingSA

and #FreeZuma, to broadly explore the uses of social media during times of civil unrest. It will use tweets shared under the two hashtags on X. Social media became flooded with posts about looting, particularly on X, and that is where #LootingSA and #FreeZuma originated and gained the attention of social media users and mainstream media platforms (Ngwane, 2021).

Gilbert, Vitak, and Shilton (2021) acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with the rise of social media as a means of staying connected in a world of social distancing, has enhanced the influence of these platforms, although their role in mitigating polarization is not always fulfilled. The use of social media during the pandemic to rally individuals across various political divides in reaction to perceived wrongs offers a valuable perspective on the medium's function and obligations, as well as the upcoming challenges for socio-political communication (Gilbert et al., 2021).

This scenario underscores that the absence of timely and reliable information from government entities has created a perilous void in information, particularly evident during public protests in South Africa (Mare, 2013). In crisis times, the quest for information is innate, and the different social media platforms provide a sense of community and connection for those impacted (IOL News, 2022). However, the blend of actuality, personal experiences, and fabrications on these platforms can provoke societal anxiety, incite panic, and fuel racial or xenophobic sentiments (Geldenhuys, 2021), threatening South Africa's fragile societal fabric (Chenoweth, 2021). The public's engagement in sharing provocative or false content on social media can provoke unrest. Such actions carry consequences and are deemed criminal when social media is used as a tool for aggression (Wills and Reeves, 2009).

Despite these possible legal implications, the surge in social media use, especially amid crises such as the KZN floods, the July 2021 riots, and the Covid-19 pandemic, underscores the vital role of authentic information dissemination in protecting lives (Majoko and Dudu, 2023). However, with existing literature suggesting that social media plays a crucial role as an extension of the mainstream media, the extent of social media as a forum of the discourse of violence in times of looting has not yet been intensively explored (Felkins, 2021; Xaba and Akinola, 2022; and Bosch, 2017). The nature of this gap is due to the minimal frequency of looting protests in the country. Additionally, with a notable rapid increase in social media subscriptions, it is worth undertaking a study of this nature that will help understand to what extent the tweets pertain to the looting, that is, #LootingSA #FreeZuma, display violent discourses, and whether the platform was used to perpetuate violence during civil unrest by active social

media users and looters. This will be done in line with the objective of the study, which includes exploring the extent of social medium platform X, as a sphere of violent discourse in times of civil unrest.

As such, this study contributes significantly to the current scholarship on the use of social media to perpetuate violence in real life. It argues that the normalisation of violence and the encouragement of harmful behaviors on social media, in this study specifically platform X, can spread false information about unrest and incite violence. This could amplify the spread of misinformation, false narratives, and hate speech. This also highlights a significant gap in the literature on social media and violent discourse. In relation to the background described above, this study aims to explore the extent to which a social medium, i.e., X, was used as a sphere of violence discourses in times of civil unrest in South Africa. This study uses mixed methods to explore the possible implications of using X as a platform for public violence discourse.

Social Media and Society

The literature review helps the researcher avoid repetition of content and identifies knowledge gaps and unresolved problems that the study can address (Wolverhampton, 2018). As such, this section reviews the existing literature on the use of social media in times of civil unrest and demonstrates the existing gap in the field of media studies on the use of social media during civil unrest. Additionally, this study contributes to the growing literature on the role of social media in times of civil unrest. Independent Online News (2022) (IOL) states that according to Jean le Roux, a researcher at the Digital Forensic Lab, the former president's daughter photographed and videotaped the looting and arson while captioning them "Amandla" and "We see you" with fist emojis. Subsequently, this created the impression that there is support for violence that fosters an urge to continue and celebrate violence (Mathe and Motsaathebe, 2022). When the looting began, most accounts on the social medium X celebrated it (Majoko and Dudu, 2023). Planning and coordination were done behind closed doors, but through posts on X.

Social Media and Public Discourse

Mengü and Mengü (2015) state that today's new media, like social media, have been reported to have a greater impact on public perception. There is a wide spectrum of studies that have examined social issues and how they relate to new media (Mengü and Mengü, 2015). Individuals engage in

dialogue, share ideas and images on-line, and find that their participation in various groups fulfills their need for community belonging. Social media serves as a space of freedom, allowing users to communicate publicly and privately. However, it is also an environment where various types of violence can manifest themselves or be perpetrated through these very means of interaction (Kiunga, 2023).

The qualities of social media make them vulnerable to discourses that could lead to or even incite violence (Kiunga, 2023). According to Mdlalose (2023), most of the content shared on social media websites is unverified and therefore can convey violent ideas to users. Meaning fewer controls on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) may make it easier for users of these platforms to distribute and access violent information. Recent research has explored how social media impacts individuals in various domains. However, it has not thoroughly examined the specific patterns of social media use or its role in wider social events, particularly the extent of X usage. This study aims to bridge that gap by analysing human behavior on how social media users engage with these platforms and the effect of social media on civil unrest, focusing specifically on the use of X during three days of South African civil unrest.

Significant existing literature on social media and protests tends to have focused more on the Arab Spring and #RhodesMustFall, #ZumaMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. A study focused on the impact of social media on social cohesion in South Africa suggests that platforms have become essential for nation building, potentially bridging racial, ethnic, cultural, and geographical gaps in South African society (Matema and Kariuki, 2022). Meanwhile Mpofu (2024) suggests that social media have been used primarily as a communication tool among young people, particularly in South Africa. Furthermore, Bosch (2020) also suggested that in contemporary South Africa, social media are used as an immediate communication tool among activists and youth. These studies have largely explored the primary role of social media in South Africa. While acknowledging this significant contribution, the studies did not focus on specific social media platforms. Therefore, this article pays attention to the 2021 looting movements to bridge the aforementioned scholarly gap with a special focus on X.

Mdlalose's (2023) recent study about civil unrest suggests that such violent activities/protest go as far as affecting the economic stability and the leadership of the country South Africa. Furthermore, a study by Mahaye, Dlomo, and Ajani (2023) aimed to explore the impact of this unrest in schools and establish how teaching and learning had been affected in South African institutions. It suggested that widespread looting in Kwazulu-Natal

and Gauteng Provinces was the result of civil disturbances that intensified daily throughout that time (Mdlalose, 2023). Demonstrators burned and plundered numerous stores and warehouses during the unrest. Some private and public schools were plundered and vandalised due to the unrest (Mahaye, Dlomo and Ajani, 2023). Even with the current research in this area, it is plainly evident that further investigation is required to determine how much social media users use X for public conversations.

Social Media as a Source of News

Despite the positive use of X, it has been discovered that it is usually used as a major battleground where citizen journalists compete with professional journalists for scoops (Van der Vyver, 2017). This can be attributed to X, which allows people to open fake accounts, and one individual can own multiple accounts. However, the process of verifying the story takes a little longer on the side of professional journalists than on the side of citizen journalists. Therefore, this difference creates space for fabricated news to be posted on X instantly.

In addition, a series of works focused on the evaluation of the credibility of tweets by inspecting the contextual content of tweets discovered that X could serve as a source of trendy information but is unreliable (Zubiaga and Ji, 2014). Furthermore, according to a study by Yan et al. (2013) that focused on investigating the trustworthiness of users considering the underlying social network structure of X through the number of followers, retweets, and other social relationships between users, most of the current work focused on evaluating the credibility of general tweets, rather than exploring the extent of tweets to promote violence.

Internationally, social media have ignited large-scale protests that have led to the fall of long-standing governments, the Arab Spring being a notable example (Arafa and Armstrong, 2016). Social media, especially X, have been found to be instrumental in disseminating revolutionary and democratic sentiments beyond geographic and political boundaries (Howard et al., 2011). Hove and Chenzi (2020) note that in Zimbabwe, amid economic and political decline, young activists used social media to organise nationwide protests against the government. This demonstrates social media's global potential to rally people around common grievances.

Meanwhile, civic groups in Zimbabwe utilized social media to encourage unity against the ZANU-PF, with #Tajamuka and #ThisFlag being prominent movements (Hove and Chenzi, 2020). Without platforms like X, orchestrating such widespread mobilization would have posed

significant challenges (Hove and Chenzi, 2020). The rapid spread of the 2016 protests across Zimbabwe, from Beitbridge to Harare and beyond, shows the power of the Internet to overcome physical and political barriers (Tarisayi, 2016b). The studies mentioned above presented and discovered how the public uses social media during civil unrest. However, this study explores the extent to which X, in particular, is used during civil unrest.

Above literature, this study has mostly focused on the impact of social media on national protests, leaving out the possible impact of social media content on real-life behaviours. With the literature discussed above, this study contributes significantly to current scholarship on the use of social media to perpetuate violence in real life. It argues that the normalisation of violence and the encouragement of harmful behaviours on social media can spread false information about unrest and incite violence. This could amplify the spread of misinformation, false narratives, and hate speech. This also highlights a significant gap in the literature on social media and violence discourse. Additionally, existing literature, such as Bosch's (2019) work on social media and protest movements in South Africa, has focused on general protests rather than specifically looting, which is the focus of this study.

To sum up, this section captured the existing literature pertaining to the use of social media in times of civil unrest, covering studies from the global community to the African and South African context, which were supported by relevant examples and scenarios. It also outlined how social media and violence are interrelated and indicated the way that social media can play a critical role as a platform for public discussions. Based on the literature examined, it has been found that social media are tools that the public uses to raise issues such as poverty, unemployment, and political discourse. Furthermore, it has been found that social media plays a fundamental role in perpetuating violence during civil unrest globally and locally.

Protest Participation Theory

This study adopts Protest Participation Theory as one of its theoretical lenses. This theory seeks to expound upon individuals' decisions to engage in protest activities. It encompasses three overarching categories: biographical availability, political engagement, and structural availability (Wu and Gerber, 2017). In accordance with the Protest Participation Theory, this study highlighted individuals' proclivity to participate collectively which, in turn, can shape the occurrence and scale of protests (Meyer, 2004). This observation was evident during the multiple days of civil unrest, although this research focused on specific periods of three days. It underscores the fact that people join protests for a variety of reasons, including

dissatisfaction with the political landscape, expressions of discontent with the governmental leadership, and socioeconomic grievances such as poverty and unemployment. These findings, supported by the protest participation theory, indicated that most of the data pertained to violent discourses, while only a few related to non-violent discourse. This underscores the idea that people often engage in protests as a means of expressing discontent with the political landscape.

Galtung's Theory of Violence

This study also depended on Galtung's Theory of Violence as one of its conceptual tools. Galtung (1969) posits that violence arises when human potential, whether somatic or mental, remains unrealised. Galtung's (1969) conceptualisation of violence as the inhibition of human potential provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of violence, which he categorises into three overarching types. The first type is direct violence, also known as personal violence, which occurs when there is an identifiable actor responsible for committing violent acts (Galtung, 1969). In this study, some tweets were classified under violence classification (68%). It is crucial to note that this research focused primarily on the content of tweets rather than the identities of X users.

The observation suggested a substantiation of the perception that poor government service delivery in communities such as Soweto and Umhlanga contributed to the unrest, which was shown by a significant percentage of tweets related to violence (68%). Codes such as "government" and "corruption" were utilised to analyse tweets pertaining to government system corruption and its role in fomenting civil unrest. This linkage between the findings derived from the analysed data and the central tenet of the Galtung theory underscores the relevance of the theory in this research context. Consequently, the data robustly supported the premises of protest participation theory and partially corroborated Galtung's theory of violence. It demonstrated that factors such as government failures have the potential to influence the occurrence of riots, civil unrest, and protests, including individuals' political affiliations and political knowledge.

Research Methodology

This study used a mixed methods methodology to produce credible findings. The qualitative method is best used to explain exploratory and interpretive research questions (Koma, 2016). This enabled this study to explore,

interpret and understand to what extent X is a discourse sphere of violence. Johnson and Christensen (2000) stated that the quantitative research approach targets the 'how much' and 'how many' questions. This focused on quantifying tweets, the time frame of the looting period, the number of selected days of civil unrest, and the time frame of the tweets for each day. This rigorous methodology not only provided a structured approach to understanding the nature of discourse during civil unrest but also offered valuable insights into the interplay between variables that shape the tone and content of tweets in both violent and non-violent categories.

Population and Sampling of Tweets Section

The researcher collected two hundred and thirty-one (231) tweets from X that were tweeted during protests of civil unrest. However, twenty-four (24) were repetitive. Thus, the remaining tweets of two hundred and seven (207) were selected for the sample. consequently, the sample of this study consisted of 207 tweets that contained relevant captions to form the data set for this study. These 207 tweets were sampled using a specific criterion.

The elements of the criteria included the date and the nature of the tweet. This criterion focused on the dates on which the tweets were tweeted, thus the sample of this study was tweeted between the 11th July 2021 and the 18th July 2021. This study concentrated on tweets posted during the initial day and up to the third day of the protest. Specifically, we focus on the 11th July 2021 (Day 1), the 12th July 2021 (Day 2), and the 13th July 2021 (Day 3). The date played a crucial role in the sampling process because it allowed the researcher to sample data that fit the scope of this study. The second element of the criteria was the captions of the tweets that related to the hashtags #LootingSA and #FreeZuma. The tweets were sampled because their captions contain words or phrases that could potentially incite violence.

Content Data Analysis

This study used content analysis to collect its data. Conte analysis is a research tool that is used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data, such as text (Gheyle and Jacobs 2017). It allows quantification and analysis of the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts (Drisko and Maschi, 2016).

In this study, tweets that had the potential to contribute or influence protest actions were collected within the period of civil unrest in South Africa and which had the potential to have contributed or influenced protest

actions. In this study, quantitative content analysis was used to create codes and themes for the categories of tweets according to the time frame in which they were tweeted. The 207 tweets were reviewed and placed in categories according to their descriptions. These tweets were put in smaller manageable units (codes), which were determined by certain phrases and concepts, e.g. tweets with insult, violence, corruption or looting, were categorised accordingly. It is also worth noting that some of the tweets fall into more than one category. Below is the coding table used in the study.

Number	Codes name	Codes description
1	Insults	Data set that persuades the use of vulgarity, or insulative words or phrases. This could be any language or text that is offensive or obscene.
2	Violent captions	This set of data is about tweets that have violent terms or phrases in the captions.
3	Visual violence	These sets of data consist of tweets that promote violence through visuals and do not have captions.
4	Political	A data set that pertains to the role of both political parties and political officials. These data link protests, social media and looting, and the South African political spectrum.
5	Looting	These sets of data are about looting by the public and can either promote or obstruct looting activities or behaviour.
6	Fake-news	This set of data pertains to fake news in tweets, involving both captioned and visual tweets that were posted during looting.
7	Unemployment	These sets of data consist of tweets that associate poverty, unemployment, and corruption with looting activities.
8	Corruption	These sets of data are tweets that have been tweeted during the looting period in the name of corruption. They associate government with corruption.
9	Social media	These sets of data consist of data that talks about the platforms that the public uses during civil unrest in South Africa platforms in which the public discourse takes place.
10	Disruptions	These sets of data condone disruption of properties through tweets and visuals without captions. This could include tweets that have concepts related to disruption.
11	Other	These sets of data consist of tweets that were tweeted under #LootingSA and #FreeZuma but they don't fit within any of the mentioned codes.

12	Protest	These sets of data are made up of all tweets that promote or obstruct protests during civil unrest. This could be riots, marches, or public disturbances.
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Having several codes with common tweets, the codes with similarities were grouped into broader categories, allowing us to summarise and organise the data. As such, the final coding sheet consisted of five codes as seen in the following. This process is also defined as line-by-line decoding (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000).

Codes Number	Codes name	Codes description
1	Violent captions	This set of data is about tweets that have violent terms or phrases in the captions.
2	Visual violence	This set of data consists of tweets with no captions that promote violence through images.
3	Public disruptions	These data sets include all tweets that support or oppose protests during times of civil upheaval such as riots, public marches, or picketing. These sets of data are about looting by the public, and it can promote or obstruct looting activities or behaviour.
4	Political and corruption	This data set relates to the roles of both political parties and political authorities. It connects protests, social media, and looting to the South African political spectrum. These tweets were sent during the looting era in the name of corruption and associated the administration with corruption. This set of data comprises tweets linking poverty, unemployment, and corruption to looting.
5	Other	This set of data consists of tweets that were tweeted under the #LootingSA and #FreeZuma, but they do not fit within any of the mentioned codes.

Drawing on our codes, the following section demonstrates the formulation and implementation of thematic analysis in the study.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for analysing qualitative data that involves reading through a set of data and looking for patterns in the meaning of the data to find themes (Smith, 2017). In this study, tweets were considered the set of data. It was used to analyse classifications and present themes or patterns that relate to the data. It illustrated the data in detail and

dealt with various subjects through interpretations (Alhojailan and Ibrahim, 2012).

Findings and Interpretations

Theme 1: A high number of violent tweets and tweets exhibiting violent behaviour and tweets encouraging nonviolent behaviour.

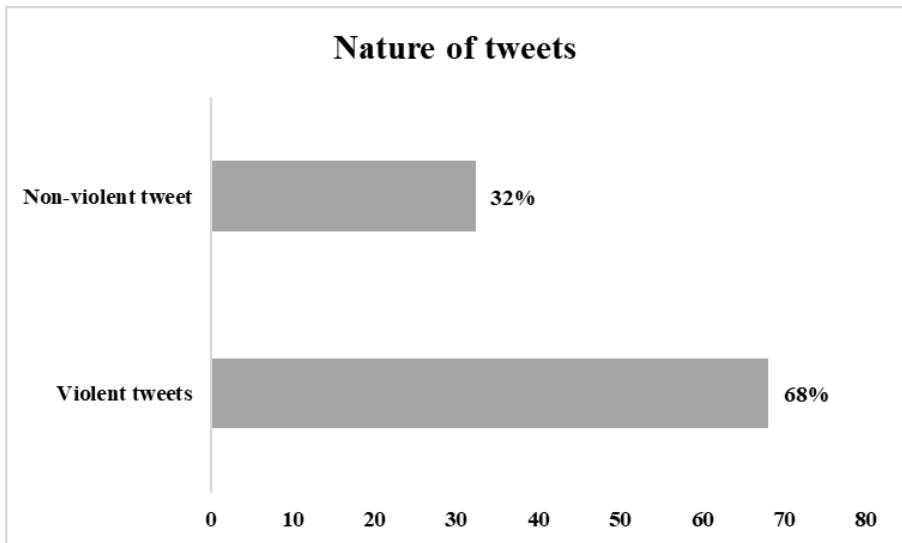


Figure 1. Nature of the tweets

Data shows that of the total number ($n = 207$) of tweets related to civil unrest, 68% ($n = 207$) were classified as "violent tweets". These tweets contained aggressive language, calls for violence, threats, incitations to harm, or explicit content related to civil unrest. However, this theme covers all tweets that were violent, whether they encouraged violent acts or not.

Sub-theme A: Nonviolent tweets accounted for more than a fifth of the total tweets.

Although most of the tweets were considered to contain violent content, the remaining 32% of the tweets were classified as "nonviolent tweets." These tweets encompassed a variety of content, such as discussions, updates, opinions, news sharing, personal experiences, and general conversation related to civil unrest. Non-violent tweets included expressions of concern, calls for peaceful solutions, information exchange, and attempts to raise awareness about the situation without advocating violence.

Theme 2: The violent discourses in the tweets on #LootingSA and #FreeZuma

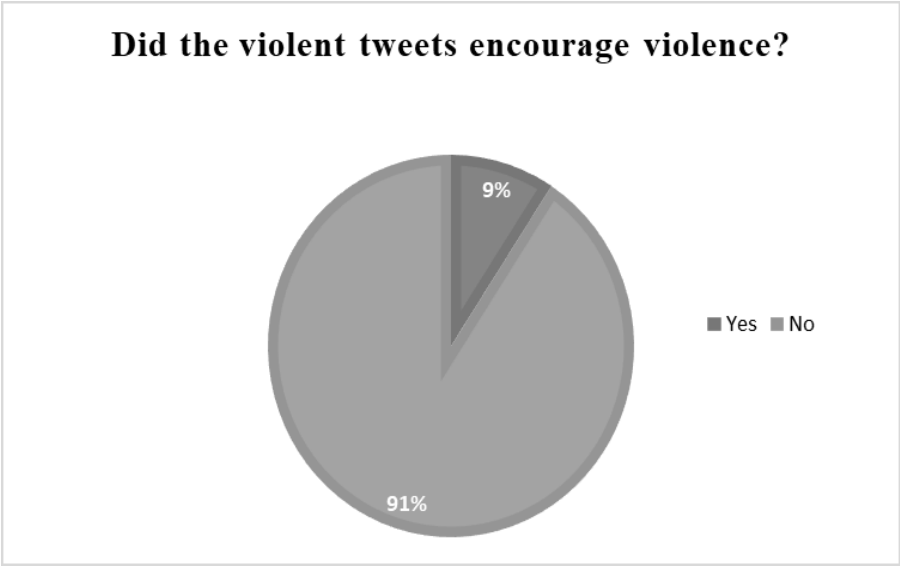


Figure 2. The violent discourses in tweets

Among the violent tweets, at least 9% of them encouraged violence during the civil unrest in South Africa. This was noted by the content depicted in the tweets, and the replies from the tweets or comments, supported the tweets about violent acts such as vandalism and insults. However, the majority of violent tweets (91%) did not encourage violence during civil unrest. These findings reflect the attitudes and opinions of individuals (tweeters) regarding their intent to encourage violence by posting 'violent tweets'.

Theme 3: Tweets in support of violent actions during the 2021 civil unrest

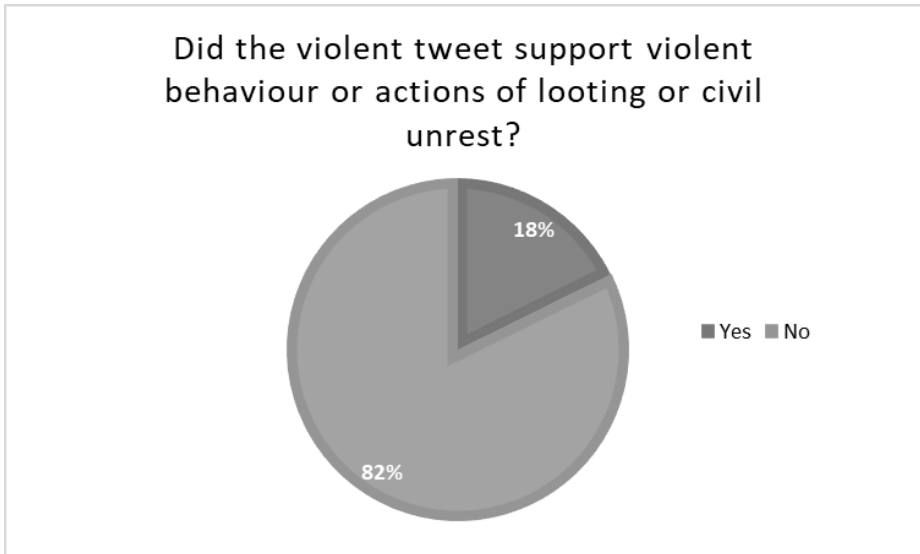


Figure 3. *Violent tweets on looting*

Among the violent tweets examined, 18% were found to have advocated violent looting operations or behaviour during periods of looting or civil unrest. However, the majority of violent tweets (82%) were believed to have opposed aggressive looting acts or behavior during periods of civil unrest. These findings are important because they help us understand how people perceive and interpret online content about sensitive situations such as looting and civil unrest. This is due to the strong support for looting activities. This study also emphasises that while those who tweet about looting were not the ones looting, they did contribute to stealing by advocating it on X.

Sub-theme 3.1: Tweets condemning violent behaviour during the 2021 looting

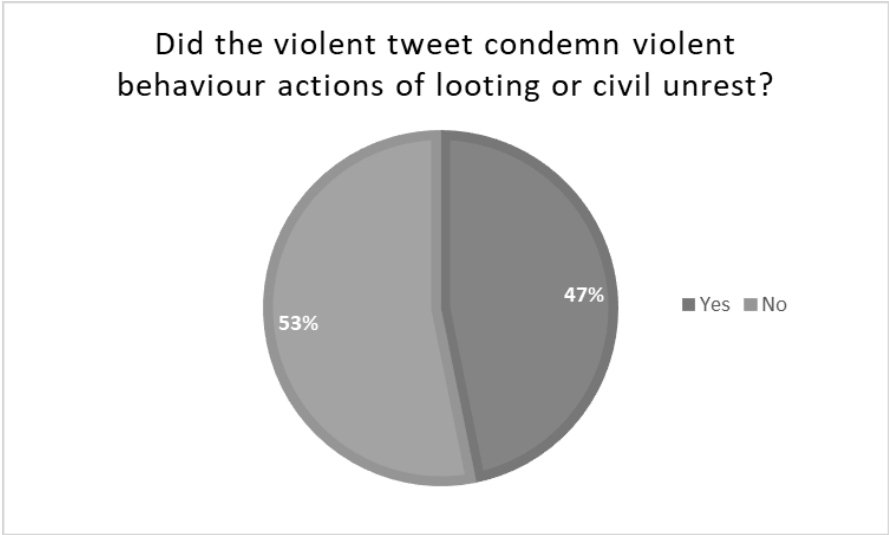
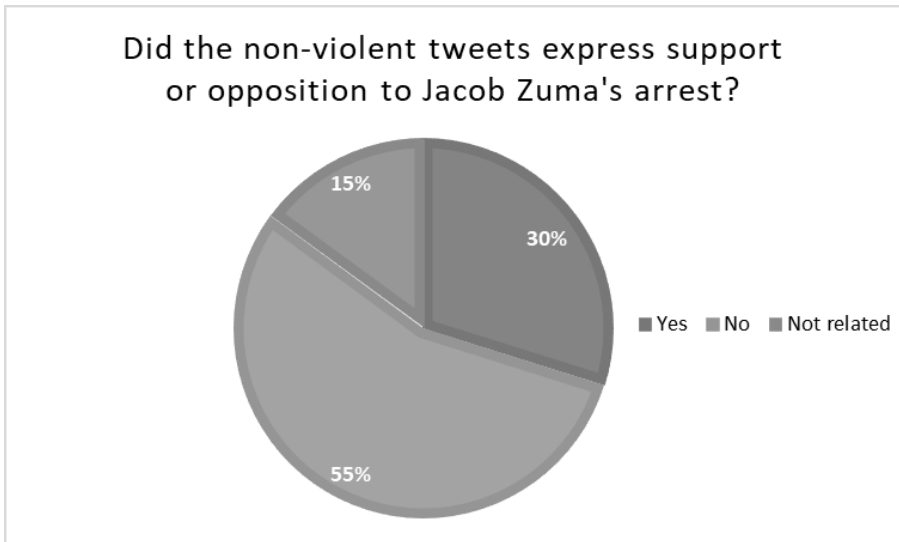


Figure 4. Tweets condemning violence

Among the violent tweets analysed, 47% of the tweets condemned violence during times of looting or civil upheaval. This indicates that a substantial portion of the individuals who tweeted expressed their disapproval or criticism of violent behaviour in the context of ongoing events. The remaining violent tweets, representing 53%, did not condemn violence during times of civil unrest.

Therefore, it should be noted that not all tweets with violent content encouraged violence during the 2021 election. Some tweets condemned violent behaviour, although they were about violent actions. For example, Figures 20 and 21 presented below form part of tweets that did not encourage violence. Although they were about violent actions, they condemned looting.

Theme 4: Tweets that did not condone or condemn violence (other)**Figure 5.** *Other*

The results provided pertain to nonviolent tweets expressing opinions on Zuma's arrest during the civil unrest. Among the non-violent tweets, (30%) expressed opposition to Zuma's arrest during the civil unrest. This suggests that a significant proportion of the tweets conveyed disagreement or criticism of the arrest, potentially indicating concerns about its timing, implications, or the effect it had on the unrest. Most of the tweets, representing 55%, expressed support for Zuma's arrest during civil unrest. A smaller percentage of tweets (15%) were classified as "not related." These tweets did not express support or opposition to Zuma's arrest within the context of the civil unrest and were unrelated to the topic altogether. As such, a significant number of tweets supported Zuma during his arrest by opposing his arrest and calling on the court to release him in order to neutralise the state of looting. Essentially, these tweets give the impression that if Zuma is arrested, then the country will collapse, as looting will continue in the name of #FreeZuma.

Discussion***Tweets Related to #Lootings #Freezuma Display Violent Discourses***

The findings of this study revealed a notable presence of looting-related tweets that exhibited violent discourses (68%). The prevalence of visual

content (31%) depicting violence was significant but not overwhelming. This shows that most of the tweets were related to violent discourse, either promoting it or not. Furthermore, both the texts and the visuals of the tweets played a significant role in participating in violent discussion on the platform. This observation aligns with previous research that has underscored the role of visual content in shaping online discussions and amplifying messages (Bastos and Mercea, 2019 and Bosch, 2017).

Through this significant use of visuals on tweets, this study suggests that visually appealing graphics or videos within posts tend to attract higher engagement in the form of likes, shares, and comments. This means visual content acts as a potent tool for capturing users' attention and facilitating message amplification. Meanwhile, Wilson et al. (2020) underscore the pivotal role of context in determining the impact of visual content. This study collectively emphasises the nuanced nature of the emotional impact and engagement potential of visual content and acknowledges the significance of factors such as the quality of textual narratives and the contextual background in shaping user reactions (Wilson et al., 2020).

The Main Uses of X during the 2021 Civil Unrest by Active Social Media Users and Looters

Based on the accumulated data, it was evident that the X social media platform served multiple purposes during the examined period. The data revealed that X functioned as a prominent forum for public discourse surrounding the topics of looting and the arrest of former president Zuma. This observation is substantiated by the analysis of nonviolent tweets that expressed both support and opposition to Zuma's arrest. Among these non-violent tweets, it is noteworthy that some articulated opposition to Zuma's arrest, while a majority conveyed support for Zuma's cause during the civil unrest. A distinct subset, constituting only a few tweets, did not exhibit a discernible stance either in favour of or against Zuma's arrest.

Furthermore, the data underscored that X was used as a platform to disseminate messages of a violent nature, which were predominantly in the form of tweets related to civil unrest. Within this category of violent tweets, which constituted the majority of the overall tweets, the content varied, with some tweets encouraging violent behaviour and others condemning such actions. Among the total of 141 violent tweets analysed, relatively modest tweets were identified as explicitly endorsing violence, while the overwhelming majority did not convey any explicit endorsement of violent actions.

Consequently, it is apparent that X functioned as a medium for the circulation of tweets addressing various aspects of South African political issues, including state violence, corruption, and unemployment. It is apparent that X was instrumental in providing real-time updates to its users on the unfolding events associated with civil unrest, particularly under the hashtags #LootingSA and #FreeZuma.

The results clearly highlighted the multifaceted role of X during the examined period, which encompassed the public discourse on matters of political significance, the expression of support, and opposition to Zuma's arrest, as well as the dissemination of both violent and nonviolent content pertaining to the civil unrest in South Africa. These findings therefore emphasised the importance of X as a platform for various forms of expression and communication that encompassed political activism, information dissemination, and discussions concerning critical socio-political issues within the context of civil unrest.

Primary Roles Played by X during South Africa's 2021 Civil Unrest after Looting

X served as a pivotal discussion forum where individuals exchanged information and engaged in discourse regarding the state of the 2021 civil unrest in South Africa. These characteristics were notably evident, as all tweets examined in this research were disseminated using the hashtags #LootingSA and #FreeZuma. These tweets were categorised into various codes, thus delineating the relevance of each tweet to the study objectives.

In particular, the analysis revealed that a significant proportion (sixty-eight percent) of these tweets centred on themes of violence, while a minority (thirty-two percent) of the tweets pertained to nonviolent content within the context of the 2021 civil unrest. Importantly, most of these tweets were shared using the hashtags #LootingSA and #FreeZuma, highlighting the platform's critical role in facilitating discussions about the civil upheaval. X demonstrated its multidimensional role by serving as both a platform for propagating violent tweets and a medium for sharing non-violent tweets that openly condemned looting activity.

As such, X emerged as a central hub for information exchange and discourse related to the 2021 civil unrest in South Africa, which is substantiated by the exclusive use of the hashtags, #LootingSA and #FreeZuma. The platform facilitated the organisation and analysis of tweets through the implementation of distinct codes. Moreover, X played a dual role in functioning as a conduit for both the sharing of violent content and

the dissemination of nonviolent messages condemning looting during civil unrest.

Recommendations

Not all the content shared on social media, particularly on X, corresponds to the real-time state of events. It is evident that some tweets contain recycled or reposted content. This practice has the potential to create chaos and portray events in a negative light to the public. Therefore, it is advisable for social media users to exercise caution and discretion. Users should adopt a critical approach by fact-checking the information with which they engage and assessing the credibility of their sources or accounts. Vigilance is paramount, as some individuals may create fake accounts with the intention of inciting violence in society while concealing their true identities behind fictitious profiles. These counterfeit accounts are often established to promote criminal activities or to promote violent behaviour.

Taking into account the current research findings, future studies should consider the following recommendations.

- Explore the implications of the use of social media on a national scale in times of protest and mass movement.
- Conduct comprehensive investigations into the results of extensive social media usage among social media users.
- Prioritise inclusivity by adopting a nationwide research focus and considering a diverse range of participants.
- Extend the scope of the study to include all major social media platforms such as TikTok and Facebook.

Additionally, future research endeavours should:

- Investigate how politicians and political parties leverage social media for their agendas.
- Examine the propagation of political ideas and their influence on public perceptions.
- Analyse the evolving dynamics of political communication in the digital age through an exploration of the political landscape on social media platforms.

Given the growing prominence of social media platforms like TikTok, it is advisable for future studies to explore their impact and usage patterns. Understanding the role of emerging social media platforms is crucial, especially since they amass substantial user bases. Furthermore, future research could investigate the positive contributions of social media in mitigating public violence or how governmental and non-governmental

organisations use these platforms to restore peace within societies. Such investigations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of social media in contemporary society.

Conclusions

This study found that the use of the social medium X during #LootingSA and #FreeZuma was active and used for a variety of purposes, including amusement, information, and the promotion of violent conversations about looting. Although many of the tweets included violent material, they did not explicitly encourage others to be violent. This study also highlighted that unemployment, corruption, and poverty were among the elements that fueled the #LootingSA and #Freezuma rallies.

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