Black Twitter and Digital Counterpublics in South Africa

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Abstract

The growth of technology has made the Internet an essential tool in society. Scholars have argued that the Internet supports a more deliberative democracy. However, scholars have also raised concerns about the role of the Internet in political matters. While scholars agree that the Internet has facilitated broader public discussion, in many regards, its 'virtual public sphere' still mirrors existing social structures. Twitter has become a common social media platform for many South Africans. This has led to a virtual community of Twitter users engaged in real-time discourses primarily related to Black South Africans. Black Twitter in South Africa is used for social, political, and economic motivations. This study argues for the practice of Black Twitter as a digital counterpublic in South Africa. The aim is to spotlight how black people in South Africa have used Black Twitter as a digital counterpublic for the marginalized groups within South Africa. The research will investigate the potential challenges and opportunities associated with Black Twitter functioning as a digital counterpublic. Utilizing digital ethnography, the study gathered a dataset of tweets from Black Twitter in 2022, focusing on those addressing social, political, and economic issues. More than 700,000 tweets were identified under these specific thematic hashtags.

Keywords: Black Twitter, public sphere, digital counterpublic, South Africa, social media, digital ethnography, politics

1. Introduction

The relationship between the state and civil society is essential in any democratic society. Civil society must always be aware of their country's political affairs, take part in matters of national interests, hold the ruling class accountable, and practice all their democratic rights and responsibilities. The concept of a public sphere has been used to describe the platform that civil society can use to maintain the relationship between them and the state. Habermas (1989) described the public sphere as a field of public interest where citizens can guide the exercise of power. Since the inception of this concept, many examples have been used to denote a public sphere: television, radio, theatres, schools, community halls, churches, and public gatherings.

Further than this, Fraser (1990) argues that Habermas' public sphere model had limitations. It was not inclusive and was primarily a space for the dominant groups; it did not represent the views of the religious, ethnic, and racial minorities, and it also excluded subordinate social groups such as women, workers, gays, and lesbians. Hence, Hill (2018) argues that the model has evolved into digital counterpublics, that is, virtual, online, or digitally networked communities in which members of the society actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities.

We live in a society where the presence of digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp cannot be ignored. Many people find employment opportunities on these platforms. They are essential in socio-political issues such as spreading political messages and protest movements. Artists also use these platforms in the creative industry to distribute their artistic materials. Businesses use them to sell their products. Some people use them as a source of income by creating content and uploading it online. In some instances, social media platforms are also used for learning and teaching, as was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns when many schools worldwide were shut down.

Social media in South Africa serves the same purpose and has a strong presence. Galal (2022) reports that the number of Internet users in South Africa was estimated at 37.6 million South Africans in 2021. Moreover, by January 2022, individuals actively using social media platforms were estimated to be around 28 million South Africans. WhatsApp is the most popular social media in South Africa, with 95% of internet users using the messaging app. Facebook and Instagram follow it with 87% and 73% of Internet users respectively (Galal, 2022). Twitter is used by 59% of the country's Internet users (*BusinessTech*, 2021).

Twitter is an international social media platform where users communicate in short posts, known as tweets. These include texts, videos, links, pictures, memes, and GIFs. Aslam (2022) reports that Twitter has more than 217 million active daily users globally, and more than 500 million tweets are sent daily. This shows the significance and dominance of this social media platform in our modern society. Many people use this platform to receive news and entertainment and follow high-profile celebrities and politicians. Twitter has become an increasingly relevant platform to access domestic and international politics. Politicians worldwide also use it to promote their policies and interact with citizens and other officials.

The presence of people on Twitter and its influence on their daily lives has led to a virtual community of Twitter users engaged in real-time discourses primarily related to Black people. This has been referred to as Black Twitter (Florini, 2014). Williams and Domoszlai (2013) state that Black Twitter is one of the most influential and unified identities that emerged on Twitter. However, Black Twitter does not in any way suggest that it is only for Black people, not that it is representative of all Blacks. However, its main hallmark is its diversity as a community of users discussing issues concerning Blacks (Mpofu, 2019). Mpofu (2019) further argues that Black Twitter is integral to South Africa's 'news menu.' The community's celebrity news, political matters, and social issues "light up" Twitter. However, politicians and businesses have also noticed the importance of Black Twitter in South Africa. The former uses Black celebrities during elections to campaign for them on Twitter, and the latter uses Black social media influencers to market and sell their products on Black Twitter. These arguments solidify the critical role of Black Twitter in South Africa.

2. Conceptualizing Black Twitter

Twitter was launched in 2006 and has become a key player in digital communication. It allows users to communicate and express themselves in 140 characters or less. Users can also post pictures, videos, links, memes, and documents. A key feature of Twitter has been the usage of hashtags for identifying and propagating messages in the network, with particular attention to popular trending hashtags that can impact broader media culture beyond the Twitter-sphere (Sharma, 2013).

Black Twitter emerged as one of these hashtags. Black Twitter can be understood as a virtual community through convergences around user-generated hashtags on topics of interest (Ngcongo and Fekesi (2019). Mpofu (2019) considers Black Twitter to be a networked cultural identity that began in the United States of America (USA). Black Twitter has elicited identity-based explanations, dwelling on the idiosyncratic behavior of African-American users (Sharma, 2013).

Online users who operate under the umbrella of Black Twitter tend to comment on black culture and society at large (Lee, 2017). Lee (2017) further claims that Black Twitter can be a space for jokes, social viewing of a television series, and for people to voice their anger and frustration. The power of Black Twitter comes from its participatory democratic nature – allowing users through hashtags to address social issues of racial bias and discrimination, among others. However, one must note that one does not need to be black to participate in Black Twitter (Lee, 2017).

Black Twitter users align themselves with black cultural experiences, enact black subjectivities, communicate shared knowledge and experiences, and perform their racial identities (Florini, 2014). This means Black Twitter is built on commentary about issues affecting mainly black people (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2012).

Black Twitter users have managed to participate in and mold national discourses (Graham & Smith, 2016). With global hashtag movements such as #ICantBreath, #BlackLivesMattes, #MetooMovement, and #BringBackOurGirls, Black Twitter has popularized itself worldwide. McDonald (cited in Graham and Smith, 2016) has described this space as a part of cultural force, cudgel, entertainment, and refuge.

According to Mpofu (2019), the role of social media has led scholars to engage in wide-ranging debates on their implications and roles, primarily as change drivers. Therefore, Black Twitter is an essential platform for researchers to analyze the social dynamics of the impact of media messages and events.

3. Understanding Digital Counterpublics: Theoretical Matters

Theoretically, the study draws on digital counterpublics to examine the role of Black Twitter in South Africa. According to Hill (2018:287), digital counterpublics are "any virtual, online, or otherwise, digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate identities." Frazer (1990) stated that counterpublics are discursive spaces where members of subordinated social groups invest and circulate counterdiscourses and formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. Counterpublics function as spaces of withdrawal, regrouping, and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward the wider public (Frazer, 1990).

Schafer (2015) envisions digital counterpublics as communicative spaces provided or supported by online or social media tools, where participation is open and freely available to everyone interested, where matters of common concern

are discussed, and where proceedings are visible to all. Hence, social media platforms like Twitter have been conceptualized as digital counterpublics. Mpofu (2019) contends that Twitter is a digital counterpublic, a virtual meeting hall where people gather around specific issues outside mediation by legacy media or the political elite.

The concept of counterpublics has been significantly applied to the digital environment (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Graham & Smith, 2016; Penney & Dadas, 2014). A study by Eckert and Chadha (2013) reported that Muslims living in Germany have little to say in national conversations. Therefore, they resort to using blogs as a space for discourse. A study by Penny and Dadas (2014) argued that users on Twitter formed a networked counterpublic during the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Elsadda (2010) argued that during the Arab Spring protests, Egyptian literary blogs represented a counterpublic sphere to the mainstream literary public sphere. Evidence shows that the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements are some examples that reveal the capacity of digital media to organize, mobilize, and call to collective action (Bannon, 2004; Tremayne, 2014).

The growth of technology has made the Internet an essential tool in society. Scholars have argued that the Internet supports a more deliberative democracy (Graham & Smith, 2016). Social media has activated citizens' behavior in media production. Citizens using social media freely impact participatory democracy (Shao & Wang, 2015). By creating 'we media' and having a voice on social networks, citizens are deconstructing the traditional mechanism of discourse production in public communication (Shao & Wang, 2015).

The rapid growth of the internet has also led to social and political practices becoming increasingly digitized (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). This digitization has also affected the political sphere by transforming the speed and scope of communication (Castells, 2011). Through the digitization of politics, citizens have launched accountability and crowdsourcing platforms, and journalists have published online to increase the transparency of the editorial processes (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013).

However, scholars have also raised concerns about the role of the Internet in political matters (Sunstein, 2007). While scholars agree that the Internet has facilitated broader public discussion, in many regards, its 'virtual public sphere' still mirrors existing social structures (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). Political professionals still use the Internet to talk amongst themselves, and the gap between them and the public will not be bridged unless they want it to be (Papacharissi, 2002). This is visible in South African Twitter, where politicians are more likely to respond to a tweet or a comment by another politician than they are to respond to a tweet by an ordinary citizen who does not occupy any political office. They hardly engage ordinary citizens. Hence, citizens use trending topics to solicit responses from politicians. By so doing, citizens use social media platforms as a weapon in their hands, something that mainstream media lacks.

It has been argued before that digital technologies question the public sphere discourses generated by traditional media, foster self-organization and open participation, and have a counterhegemonic potential (Atton, 2004; Couldry & Curran, 2003). These online tools can generate social mobilizations beyond television's reach and enable citizens to influence decision-making and public policy (Bennett, 2012; Castells, 2012). Sampedro and Avidad (2018) consider digital media to challenge the discursive hegemony of the centers of power.

However, digital counterpublics are also facing some criticism. The fact that social media platforms allow for equal participation and unfettered access is unrealistic (Kruse et al., 2018). Promoting notions that social media has unlimited access and equal participation ignores contemporary society's social and political realities. Not everyone has access to the Internet; access to the Internet also requires capital and infrastructure (Kruse et al., 2018).

Other scholars also raise concerns about surveillance constraints on social media. Fisk (2014), Kruse et al. 2018 and Marwick (2012) argue that surveillance practices constrain information and social media participation. Surveillance forces online users to alter their behavior (Lyon, 2007). Monitoring online behaviors limits users' freedom to use the site for a meaningful and free exchange of ideas (Kruse et al., 2018).

4. Methodology

This qualitative study used purposive sampling to analyze tweets shared under Black Twitter in South Africa. Using digital ethnography, the study purposefully looked for specific Tweets and Twitter hashtags by South Africans to examine the role of Twitter as a digital counterpublic. Skageby (2011:411) defines digital ethnography as a "qualitative approach to data collection in virtual communities."

The research utilized digital ethnography as a methodological approach to gather a representative sample of tweets originating from Black Twitter in 2022. Specifically, the study focused on identifying tweets addressing themes related to social, political, and economic responsibilities within this digital community. Notably, a substantial volume of 700,000 tweets were identified under these thematic hashtags. However, due to resource constraints, the analysis was limited to a subset of 500 tweets.

Working with digital ethnography poses ethical challenges for the researchers. Henderson, Johnson, and Auld (2013) question whether we should treat online data the same way as human subjects, conserving ethical concerns of consent, privacy, and confidentiality or treating online data as open for public consumption. However, Mpofu (2019) states that data from online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are not "private" as far as their accessibility is concerned. Mpofu (2019) further argues that users on social media platforms are made aware that their social media activities are viewable and searchable by anyone. Hence, users can change their account settings from public to private if they do not want their activities to be viewed by anyone. However, some drawbacks may arise. Privacy concerns may be experienced if social media users are not fully informed about the potential consequences of using their real names in a public research context; this may compromise their privacy, especially if the research involves sensitive, controversial, or stigmatized topics. This can also lead to unintended harm, potentially negatively affecting their offline lives. Also, power dynamics can still be present, especially if participants are unaware of the research or their voices are not adequately represented in the findings.

Nevertheless, the tweets collected for this study were not anonymized because the data collected did not pose any danger to the "participants." The participants posted their content online, knowing that everyone would view them. Hence, there was no need for the confidentiality of the participants. Also, the tweets used as data for the study do not involve sensitive, controversial, or stigmatized topics. Hence, no potential for harm may negatively affect the users' online or offline lives.

5. Black Twitter as Digital Counterpublic in South Africa

This section presents the data and analysis of the study. The section has three subsections. The first subsection focuses on how ordinary people in South Africa use Black Twitter to help needy people, promote moral values, and expose gender-based violence incidents. In the second subsection, political responsibilities, the study analyzes tweets that expose corruption, build political mobilization, and hold the elites accountable. The third subsection, economic responsibilities, focuses on how ordinary South Africans use Black Twitter to share employment opportunities, grow financial literacy, and build business networks.

5.1 Social Responsibilities

Research shows that Twitter is one of the essential social media platforms to help people stay connected in times of crisis (Gulsoy et al., 2022). During times of crisis, social media platforms such as Twitter are generally one of the first and most frequently checked sources of information (Gulsoy et al., 2022). The study focuses on the role of Black Twitter to help people in need in times of crisis. South Africa is one of the African countries that face numerous social issues: poverty, unemployment, high suicide rates, mental problems, illiteracy, and so forth. Van de Westhuizen and Ignatius (2015) claim that after almost three decades of democracy, South Africa is still battling with issues of poverty, inequality, unemployment, and hunger. Some of these challenges make South Africa the world's most unequal country (Govender, 2016). In Figures 1, 2, and 3, the study presents findings of Black Twitter's role in helping to alleviate some of the social challenges that face the country.
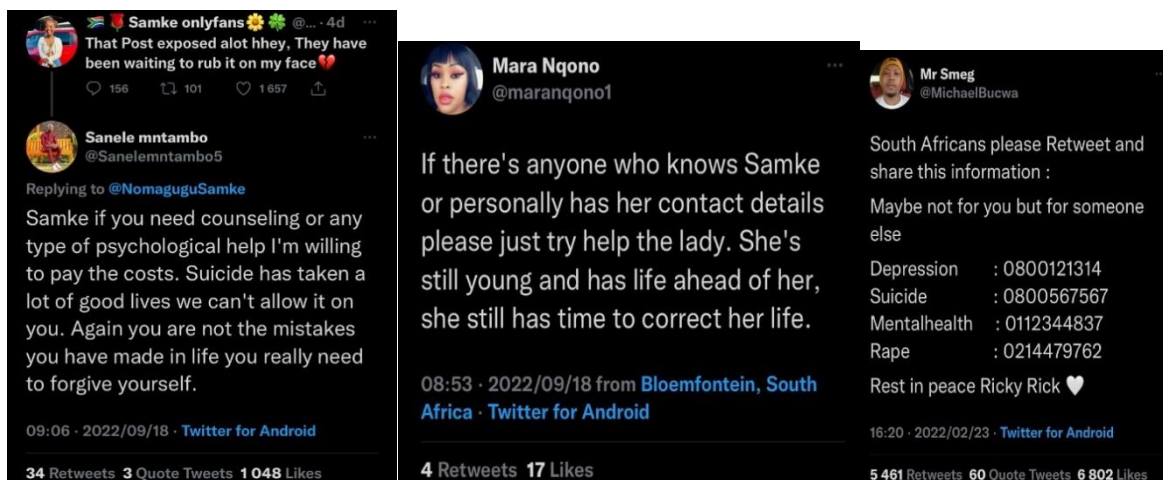
Figure 1. Helping the needy

Figure 1 presents data showing that Black Twitter is used as a platform to support fellow South Africans. Four tweets are promoting awareness about mental health challenges. In these tweets, Black Twitter educates people about mental health and shares tips for assisting those struggling with mental health. There is also a tweet appreciating getting help on Black Twitter when the user struggled to find employment. This references one of the most significant and most impactful tweets from South Africa, "*O jewa ke eng*" (literary translating to "what is eating you") from a black South African Twitter user, @Kea. This tweet saw hundreds of thousands of people sharing their life stories. The other tweet in Figure 1 shares a story of one of the famous actors in South Africa, Vusimusi Thanda, pleading for donations after he went bankrupt.

Figure 1 reveals that Black Twitter is actively fighting the social ills in South Africa. When people are facing a social crisis, Black Twitter helps them. Black Twitter has become essential in producing and disseminating information for those who seek help. As Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) argued, Twitter creates the possibility of networked conversations that are unaffected by social constraints or physical constraints of space and time.

The other role played by Black Twitter in South Africa is building moral values. Studies have shown that the success or failure of societies, organizations, and businesses strongly depends on the caliber of their personnel (Muleya et al., 2017). Many manifestations of moral decay are facing the world: perverse sexual practices, gender-based violence, robbery, vandalism, theft, alcohol and drug abuse, bullying trends, abuse, teenage pregnancy, and disrespect for authority (Tinyani, 2018).

Han (2013) notes that Africa is facing enormous challenges of youth moral decay caused by the convergence of old and new ways of life among the youth. Masoga (2017) states that the unfolding moral decay among African youth emphasizes the importance of self-identity among Africans. Ladzani (2014) contends that South Africa also has a defective ethical compass, which manifests through faulty morality among the youth. Tinyani (2018) proposes urgent moral regeneration to help reclaim and revive African ways of life and address the situation.

Figure 2 presents findings about Black Twitter as a platform to promote moral values and regeneration in South Africa. Studies have shown that social media platforms significantly erode social values (Jamwal, 2017). However, little research exists examining how social media can build moral regeneration. A study by Alshare, Alkhawaldeh, and Eneizan (2019) discovered that social media platforms impacted the ethical behavior of Saudi Youth and influenced their ethical and moral values. The findings below indicate that Black South Africa in South Africa also plays a role in promoting good morals and ethics in South Africa.
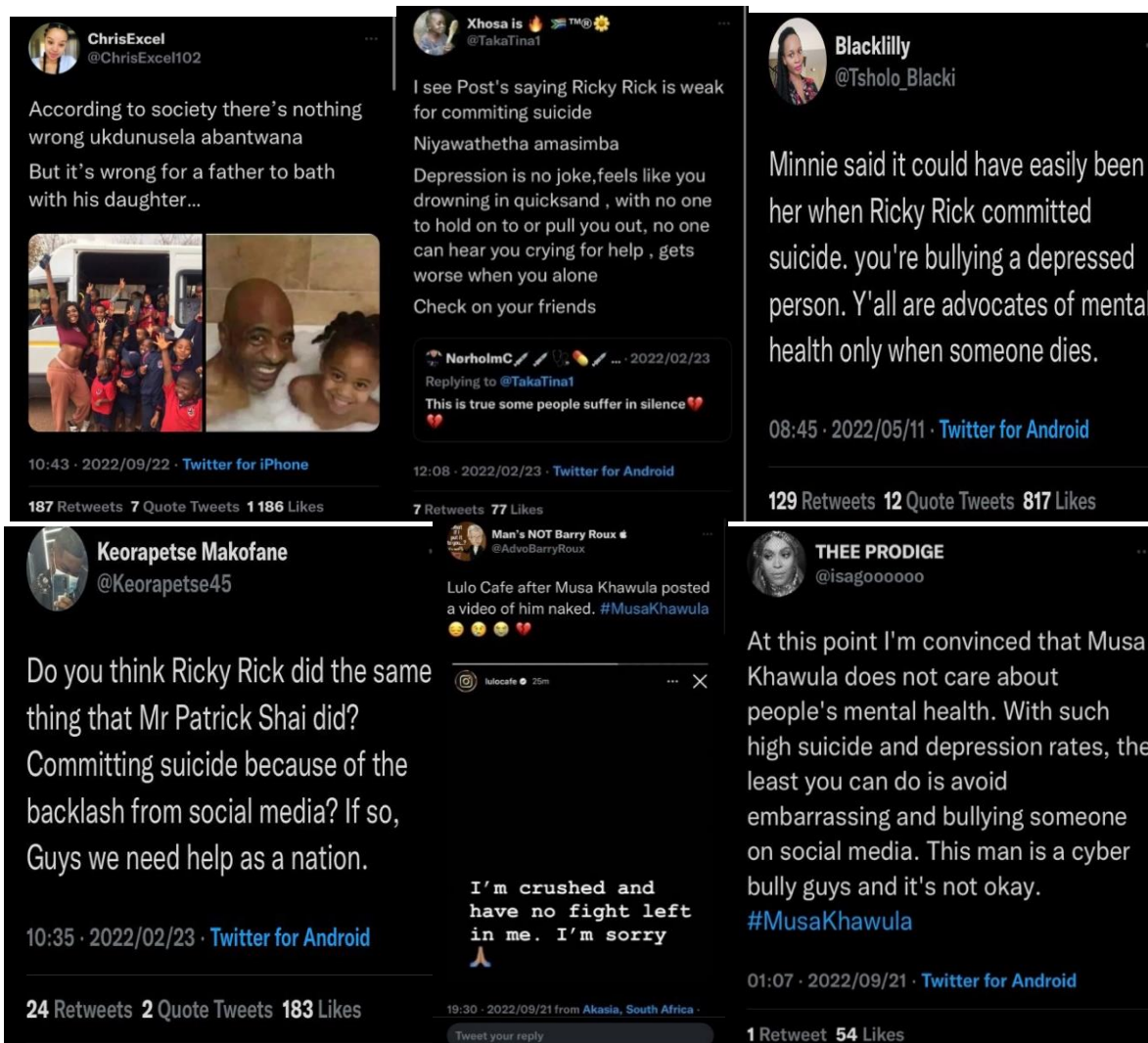
Figure 2. Promoting moral values

In Figure 2, we see multiple tweets that intend to challenge people who have lost their morality. A tweet in the top-right corner compares two images previously circulated on Twitter. One picture is of a lady with young school kids. The lady is fully dressed, but her buttocks are exposed. She has previously posted similar pictures of herself alone on Twitter. The other picture shows a man with a young girl inside a bathtub. The user criticizes society's reaction to these two pictures in this tweet. Some people on Twitter were not bothered by the first picture, while others were bothered by the second. These two pictures caused debates on Twitter. Moreover, this tweet criticizes people's moral standards for men and women. Other tweets in this figure are questioning social media's role in causing some of the suicides in South Africa. It has been alleged that some celebrities in South Africa have committed suicide due to cyberbullying. Here, we see Black Twitter raising the issue of cyberbullying.

Scholars have written extensively about cyberbullying as a serious social problem (Beauchare, 2014; Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Sterner & Felmlee, 2019). Some people who experience cyberbullying have effects such as attempted suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). These reveal that cyberbullying is serious in our societies. In Figure 2, we see Black Twitter challenging the issue of cyberbullying as one of the challenges of moral decay in South Africa. Black Twitter is criticizing those who are bullying others on Twitter.

South Africa is one of the countries with the highest statistics of gender-based violence crimes in the world (Enaifoghe et al., 2021). Moreover, some of these crimes go unreported (Nobanda et al., 2021). Black Twitter plays a role in exposing some of these crimes.
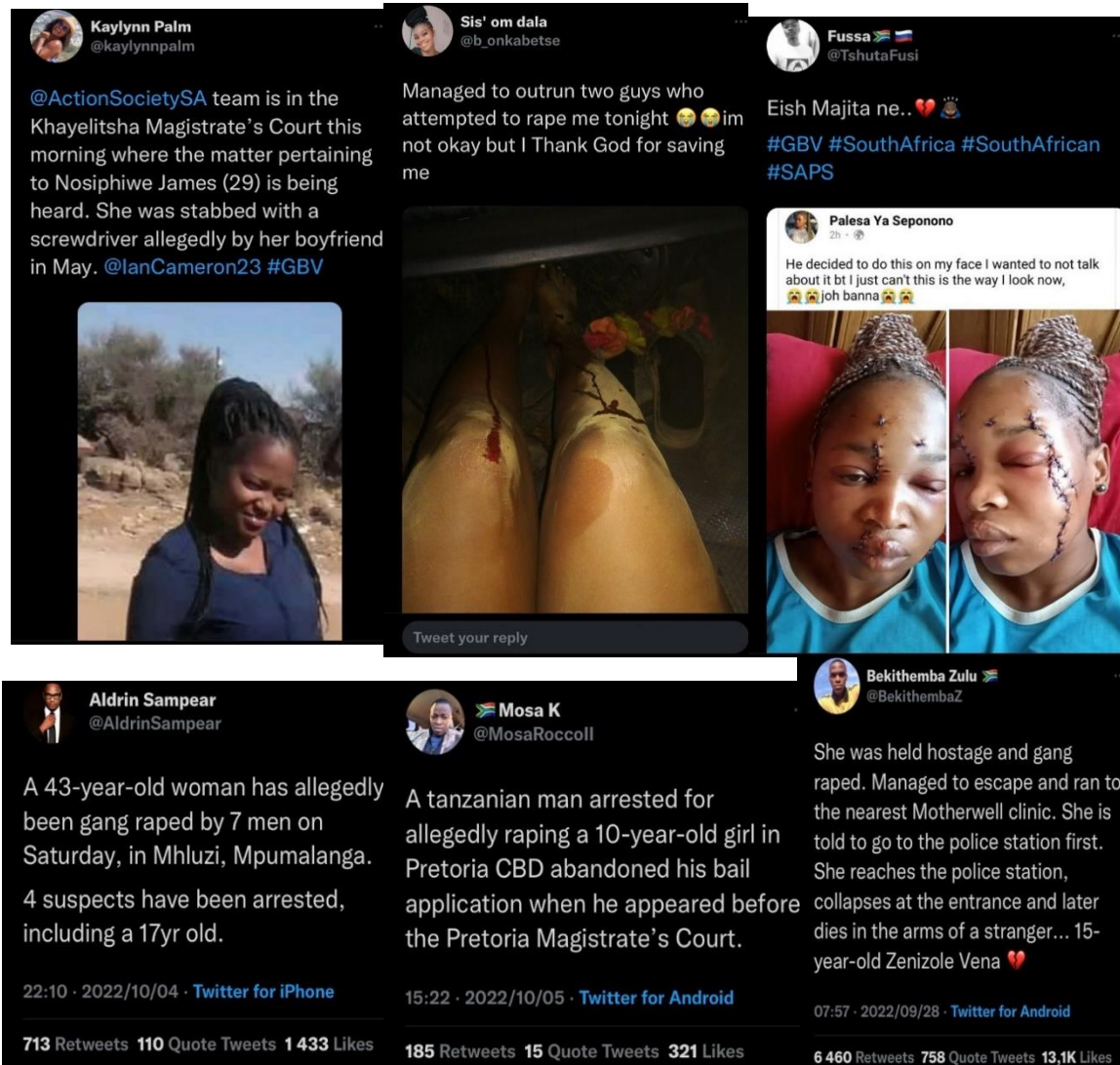
Figure 3. Exposing gender-based violence crimes

Data presented in Figure 3 shows the role of Black Twitter in exposing crimes of gender-based violence. These tweets narrate stories of victims of gender-based violence from different perspectives. One tweet narrates the story of a 43-year-old woman whom seven men allegedly gang-raped, and another tweet is about a story of a 15-year-old girl that was held hostage and gang raped. In another tweet, we see a story of a lady that claims that she escaped an attempted rape. These stories reveal the potential of Black Twitter as a platform for the voiceless and to expose societal wrongdoings.

From these tweets, the paper puts forth an argument that Black Twitter is used to spread the rage against gender-based violence in South Africa. The tweets are a demonstration that some South Africans are angry at the gendered violence, are angry against the police's response to gender-based violence crimes, and are angry at the government for not doing enough to fight gender-based violence.

Moreover, as Okech (2021) claims, digital platforms can also be used to build resistance. In this case, the tweets are a resistance mechanism against the silencing of the victims of gender-based violence. These tweets are also mobilizing against gender-based violence and the discourses that justify it. Okech (2021) maintains that digital platforms can be used to build feminist dialogue and communities and challenge the violent logic of heteropatriarchy. In these tweets, we are seeing Black Twitter generating debates around gender-based violence in the country, challenging the government and the police to act.

Black Twitter builds a community of virtual activists who are not affiliated with formal structures of organizations to

fight against the surge of gender-based violence. Through tweets, retweets, hashtags, and tagging government officials, Black Twitter is a powerful strategy for connecting female struggles nationally. As Okech (2021) alludes, digital counterpublics can channel social media for political change by recentering gender-based violence and influencing political actors to act.

5.2 Political Responsibilities

Within the framework of citizen empowerment, no one can underestimate the role of social media as a powerful tool for communication and socialization. Studies have highlighted the standard features of social media, such as participation, openness, conversation, connectivity, and engagement (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). Social media is a platform to boost citizen engagement through communication, discussion, and coordination of public and social activities (Warren et al., 2014). Bonson, Perea, and Bednarova (2019) also argue that even governments worldwide use Twitter as a communication tool to engage with citizens. In Figures 4, 5, and 6, I present findings of Black Twitter's role in enhancing active citizen political participation.
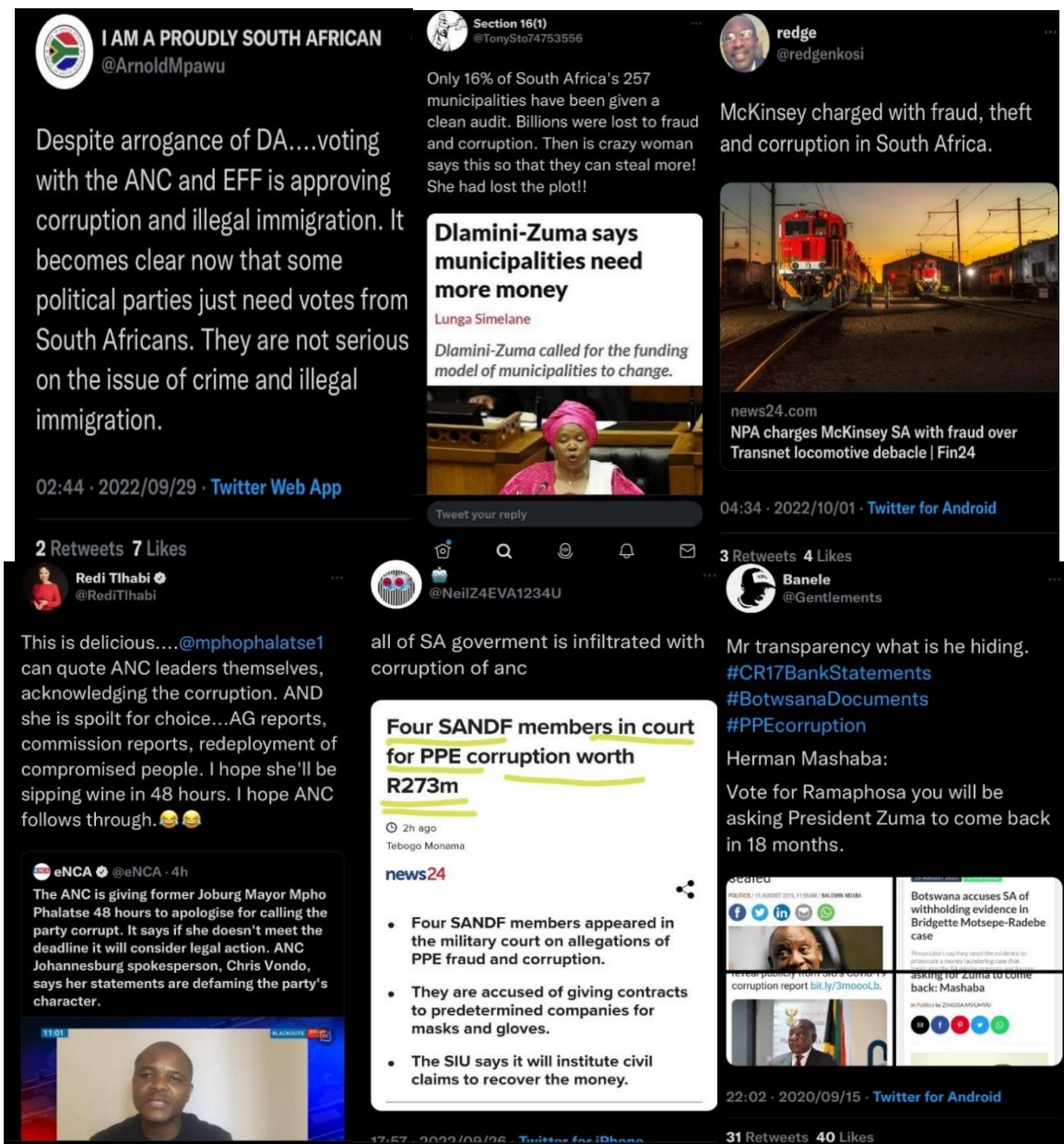

Figure 4. Exposing corruption

Corruption is one of the thorny issues in Africa. In 2016, South Africa scored 45 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International (Georgieva, 2017). Figure 4 reveals that Black Twitter is

actively exposing government wrongdoing. There is a tweet about the role of the Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in promoting illegal migration. In this tweet, Black Twitter is accusing the DA of promoting corruption and illegal immigration by voting with the African National Congress (ANC) and the EFF. Another tweet shared a newspaper article about South African Defence Force members in court for Covid-19-related corruption. We also see a tweet that shared four newspaper articles about President Ramaphosa's alleged corruption dealings. These tweets show that Black Twitter allows South Africans to express their political views and hold the elites accountable without fear or favor.

Bohman (2004) explains that with political contexts constantly changing worldwide, online spaces have different meanings for specific spaces and times in democratic institutions. In other words, political dynamics are changing in countries such as South Africa, the rise of the EFF, the emergence of coalition governments, the ANC's loss of voters, and allegations of media capture. These changes guarantee shifts in the means of political expression. The relationship between social media and politics become an essential one. People resort to various means of expression. Moreover, social media has become the simplest form of expression that people use.
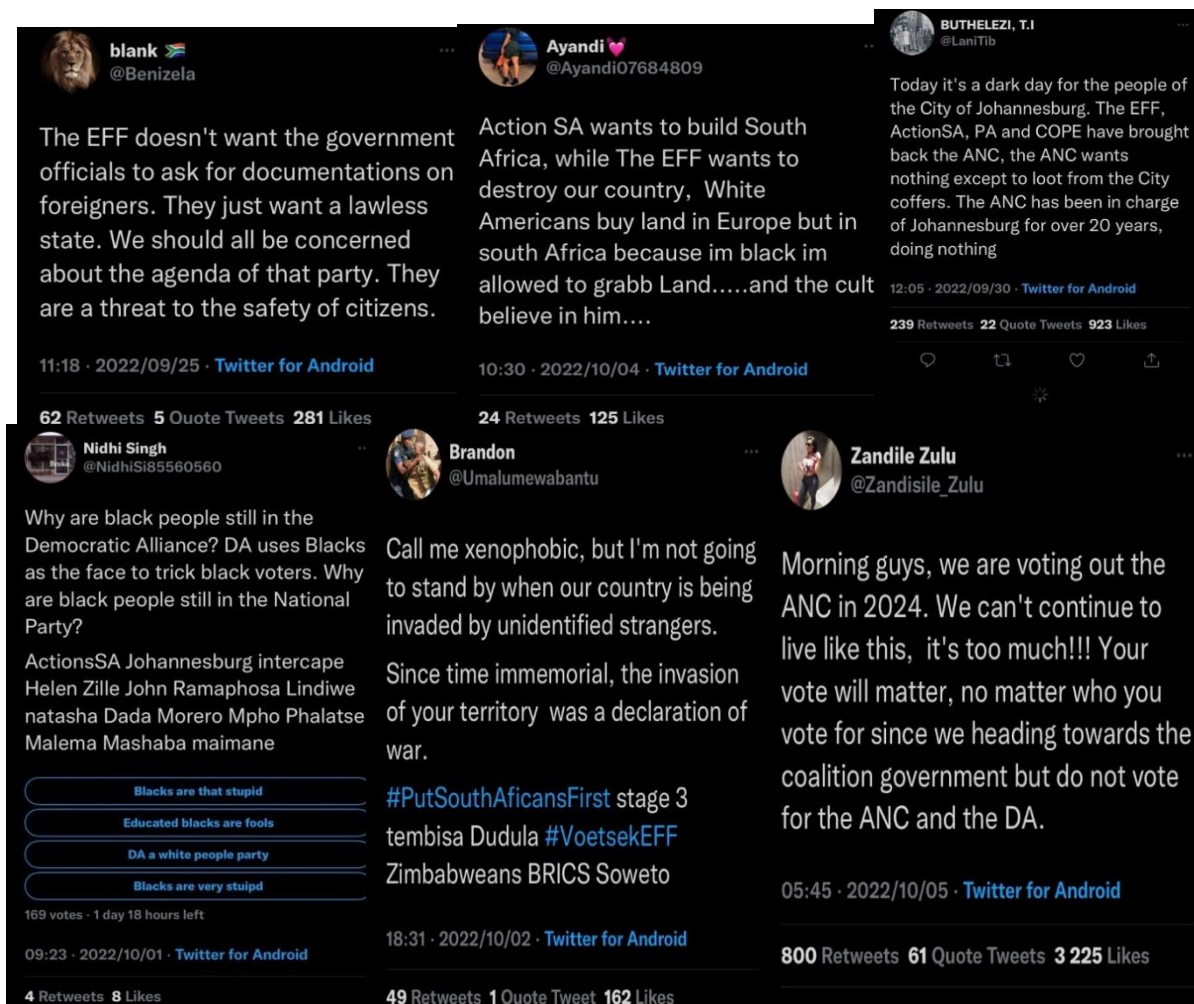

Figure 5. Political mobilization

Black Twitter in South Africa also criticizes politicians, political parties, and party policies. To do this, Black Twitter relies on memes and hashtags as political critique and commentary (Mpofu, 2019). Data presented in Figure 5 shows how Black Twitter expresses dissatisfaction with politics in South Africa. The tweet has two hashtags in the bottom right corner: #PutSouthAfricansFirst and #VoetsekEFF. The two hashtags and the tweet show anger against the EFF's open-border policy, and it also seeks to promote one of the popular stands in South Africa, the idea of putting South Africans first over foreign nationals, especially ones from other African countries. However, other tweets also show disillusionment with political parties such as Action SA, DA, and the ANC. In these tweets, Black Twitter is encouraging people to vote out the ANC in the next elections. It is also questioning the membership of black people in the DA, as the party is accused of being "anti-black." These tweets resonate with Sampedro and Avidad's (2018)

argument that social media platforms can be used to question political centers.

It is inevitable from Figure 5 that Black Twitter will also be used for political purposes. It is used to comment on specific events such as elections, political party conferences, policy issues, migration problems, and failures of political parties. Papacharissi and Oliveira (2012) argue that this role of Twitter results in a stream of information, opinions, and emotions related to current events and issues. The more people tweet about migration issues facing South Africa, the more the story can travel far and attract the attention of other South Africans.
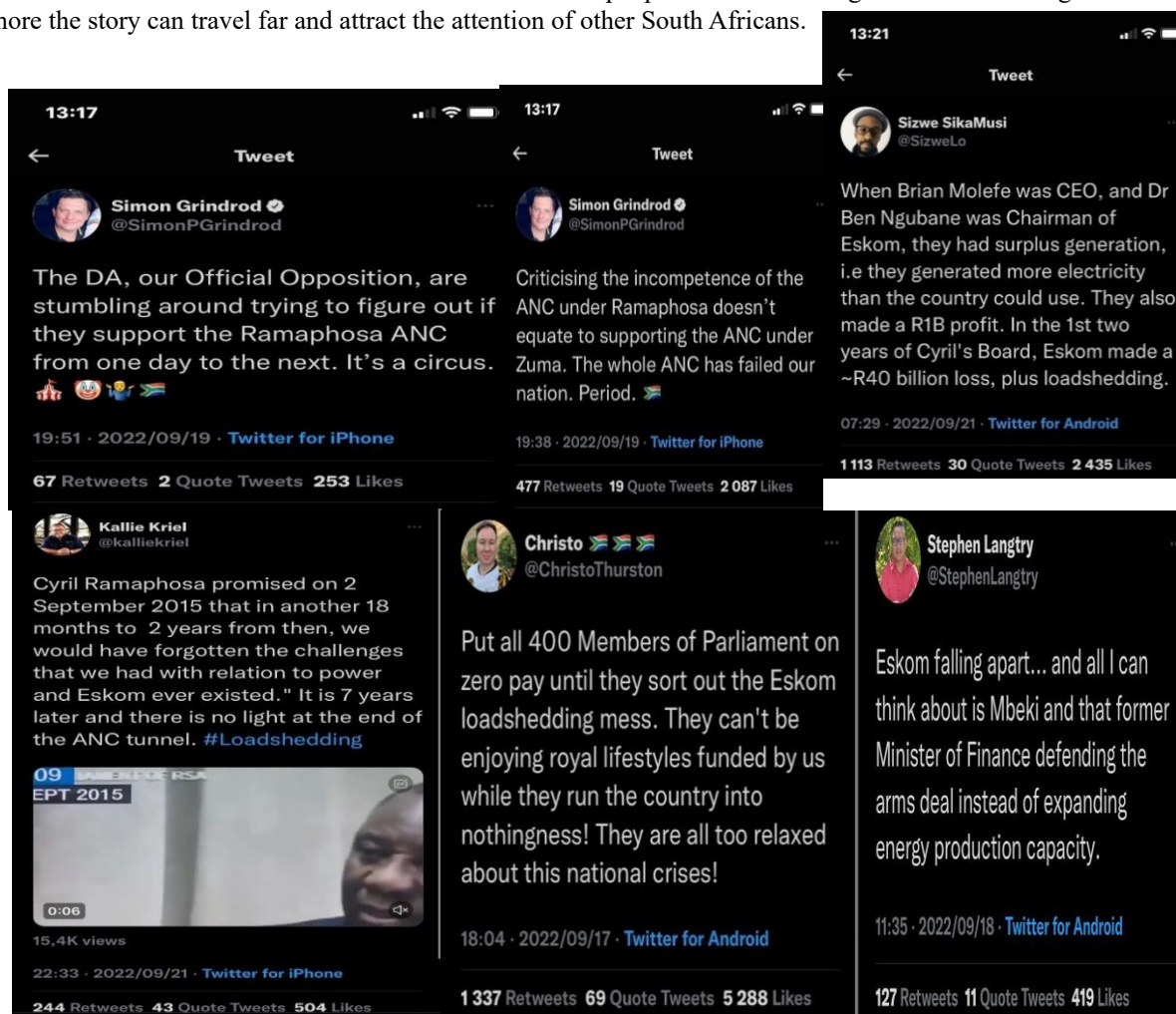

Figure 6. Holding the elites accountable

The dominant theme in Figure 6 is the current electricity crisis in South Africa. Black Twitter is expressing frustration and rage against Eskom (the power utility), the ruling party, the ANC, parliament, and the current president, Cyril Ramaphosa. In these tweets, we see white users and black users collectively criticizing the government for its role in the power crisis. The users are expressing their feelings against the government's incapacity to provide electricity in South Africa.

Black Twitter reveals that democracy should be de-naturalized and transformed to allow free expression and criticism against the elites. Sousa et al. (2013) stress that citizens these days participate less and less in formal democratic mechanisms like elections, thus showing a political withdrawal or disengagement. However, Black Twitter is inevitably re-energizing citizens and making them politically active. These are new forms of political participation; they go together with the transformation of contemporary societies.

Black Twitter also challenges the notion that politics can only be debated in the corridors of the party headquarters, parliaments, or ministerial offices. Black Twitter widens political debates by including ordinary citizens, allowing them to have one-on-one conversations and debates with government leaders or political leaders. Black Twitter also allows citizens to debate political matters among themselves. They do not need to send letters or emails to government offices or form physical forums to discuss issues that affect them. They can use this virtual forum to discuss their frustrations against the government.

Studies have shown that social media can facilitate online actions and political dissent (Christensen, 2011), which

essentially serves the counter-hegemony power in digital counterpublics. As Sampedro and Avidad (2018) state, digital media tools are opportunities for challenging power worldwide. The tweets in Figure 6 indicate that Black Twitter is a space where ordinary citizens can challenge the state, express their political dissent, and offer counter-hegemonic expression.

5.3 Economic Responsibilities

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the Internet has established a paradigm shift in communications, transforming interactions by enabling communication between dispersed and decentralized individuals and entities. There is sufficient research documenting the role of Twitter in economic matters. Curran et al. (2011) argue that the advertising sector is one of the most significant growing sectors due to changes in communicative technology. Similarly, Cripps et al. (2020:587) contend that "Twitter facilitates building relevant business relationships through the exchange of new, expert and high-quality information within like-minded communities in real-life, between companies and with their supplies, customers and also their peers." In Figures 7, 8, and 9, I present findings of Black Twitter's role in creating economic opportunities in South Africa.
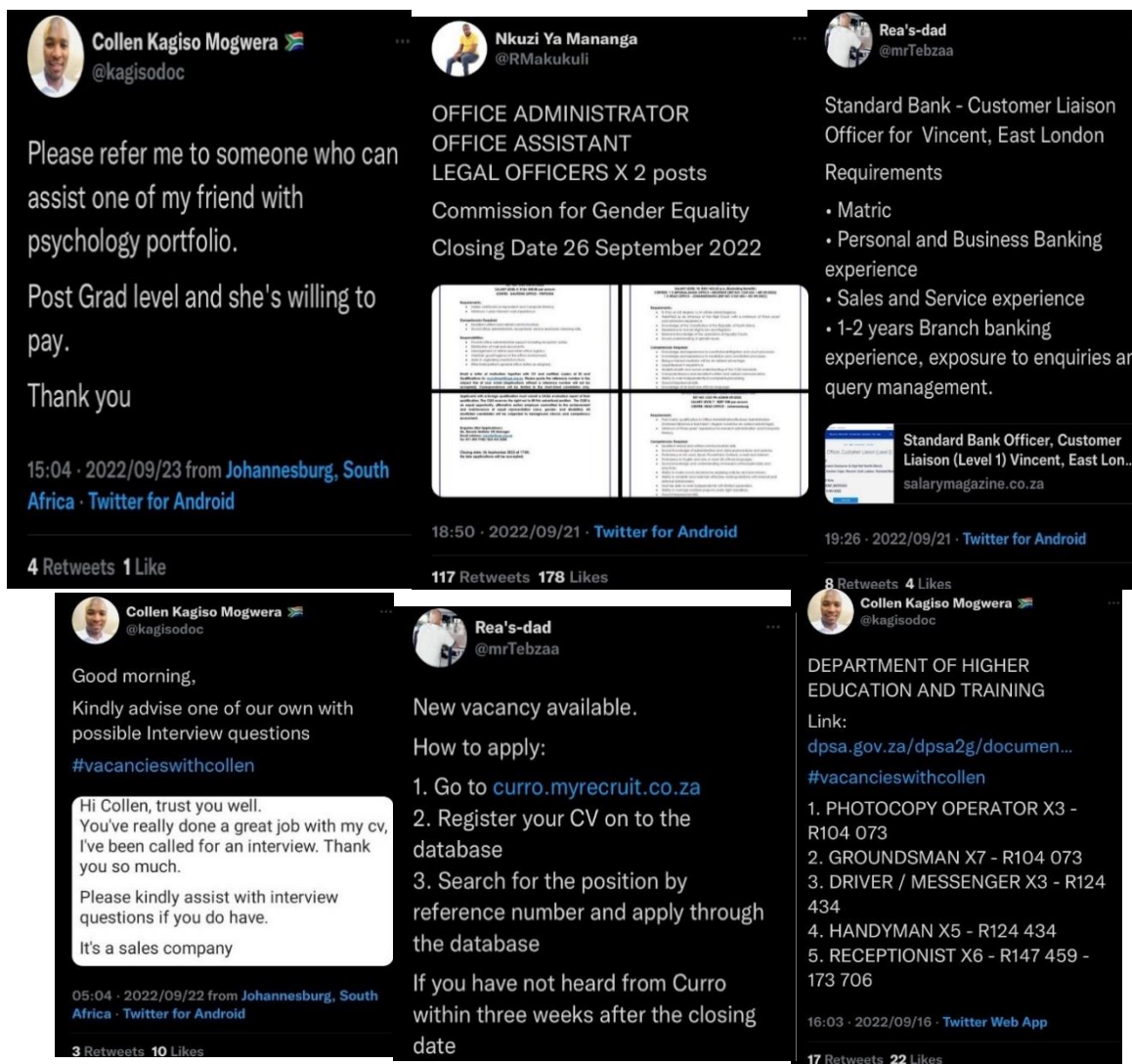
Figure 7. Sharing employment opportunities

Youth in South Africa continue to be disadvantaged in the labor market, with unemployment statistics indicating that the unemployment rate was 63.9% for those aged 15-24 and 42.1 for those aged 25-34 in the first quarter of 2022 (Statistics South Africa 2022a). These numbers paint a dark picture of the youth of the country. The data presented in Figure 7 demonstrates that some users utilize Black Twitter to share employment opportunities. Those needing jobs can find multiple job opportunities and advice on applying in these tweets. The first tweet in the top right corner is from a user promoting a job opportunity his friend offers.

Stopfer and Gosling (2013) state that job-seeking and online networking have become two primary reasons people join social networking platforms. These are sites for job seekers to become visible in the online labor market. The data in Figure 8 shows that Black Twitter has opened new paths for engagement and revolutionized recruitment. Sharing job opportunities on Twitter widens access, and more people can know about them.
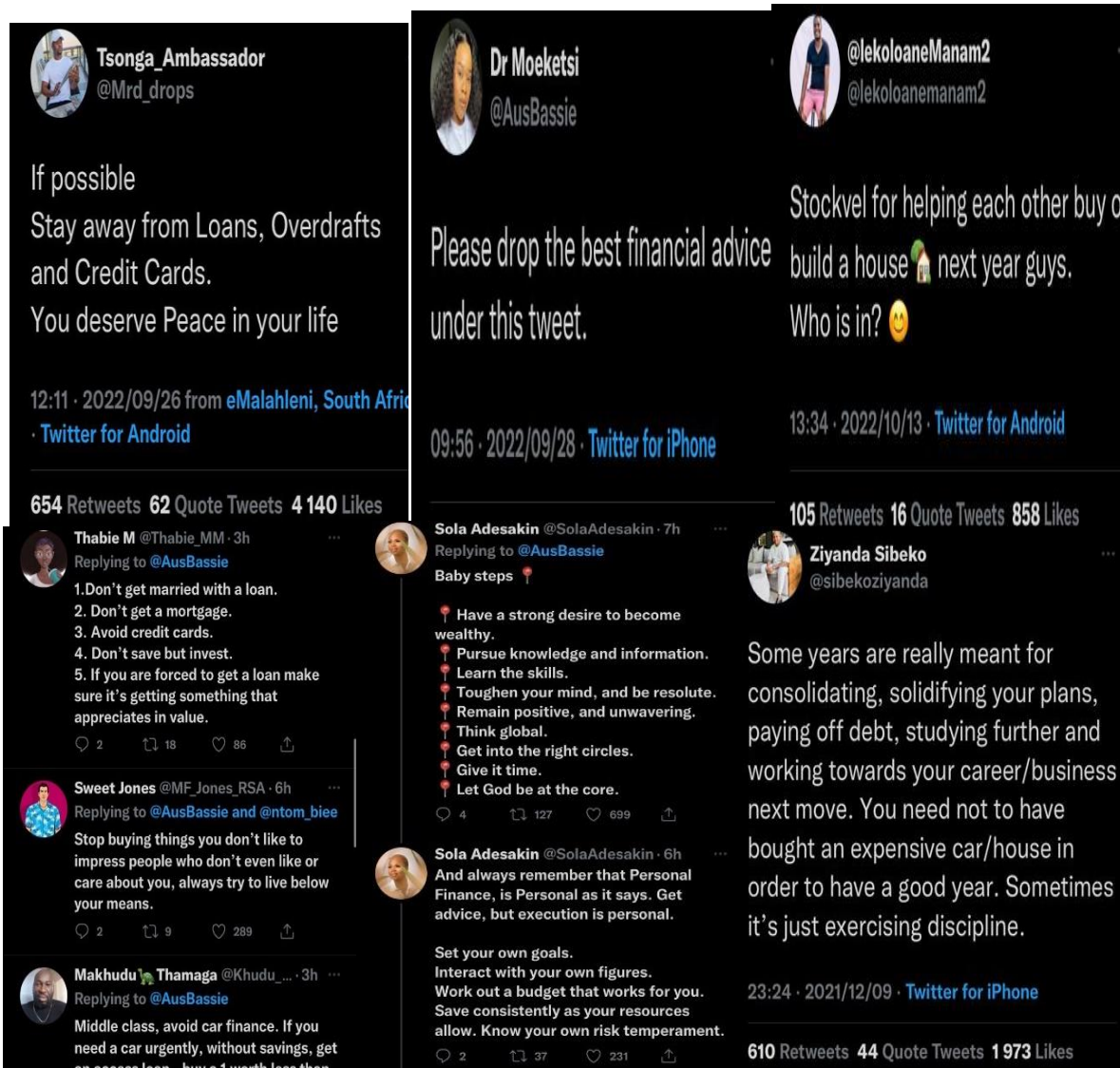

Figure 8. Growing financial literacy

The findings of this figure also revealed that one of the active roles of Black Twitter in South Africa is building or promoting financial literacy. Some activities under Black Twitter aim to teach people how to use money wisely, what to invest in, and how to buy one's first car. The data in Figure 8 has tweets that aim to teach people all these issues. One tweet advises people to avoid loans, overdrafts, and credit cards. Another tweet asks people to share any financial advice they might have. Black Twitter promotes the culture of saving, investing, spending wisely, and building wealth for South Africans.

Research suggests that in South Africa, like in many other parts of the world, financial literacy skills are essential yet underdeveloped among a large share of the population (Sibanda & Sibanda, 2016). Figure 8 indicates that Black Twitter provides users with information necessary for their financial well-being and the stability of the country's financial market functions.
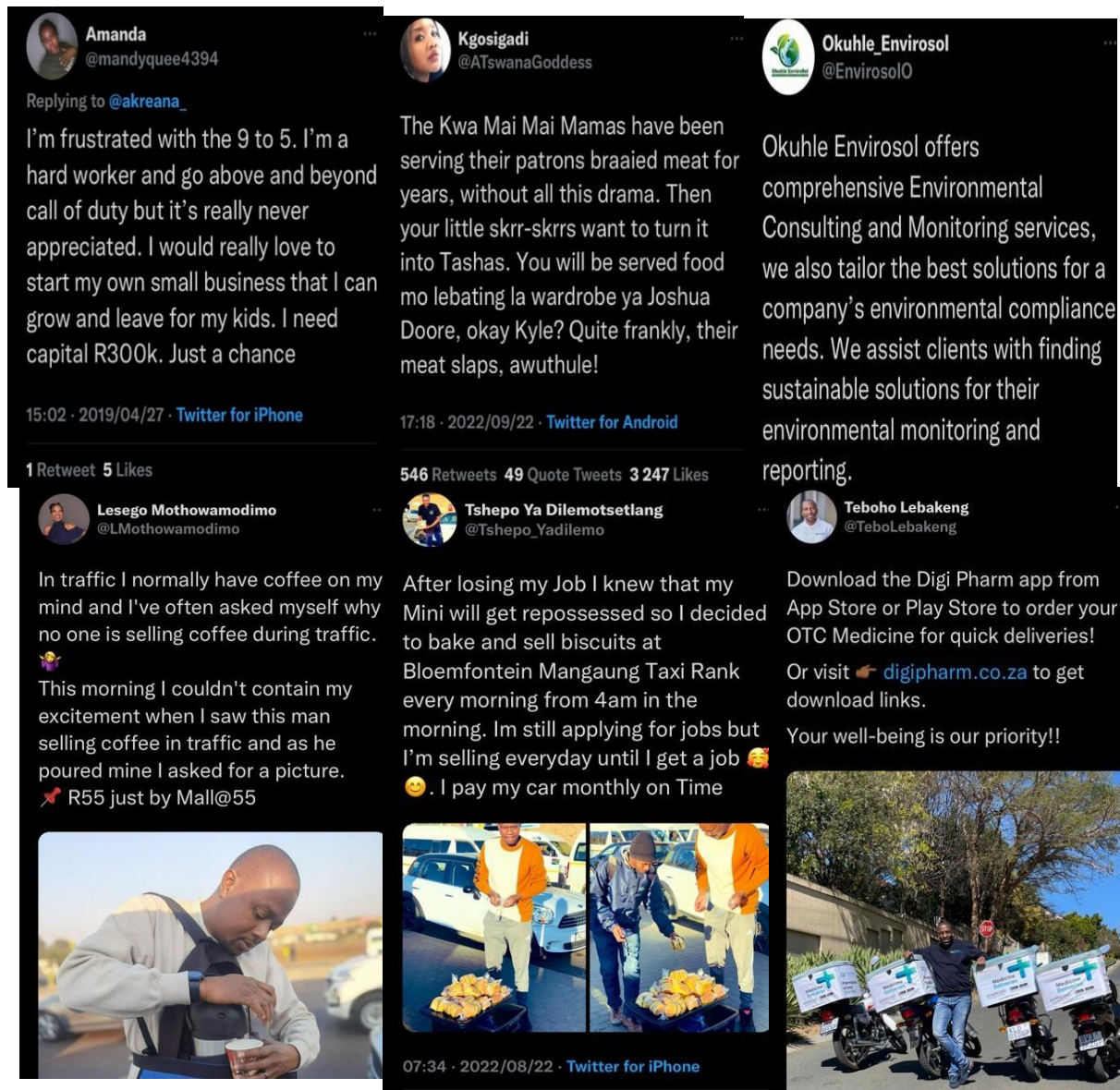
Figure 9. Building business networks

The data presented in Figure 9 shows that Black Twitter also promotes social business networks. All the tweets in Figure 9 promote small- and medium-sized business enterprises. In a country like South Africa, where the economy is growing slowly, with the actual gross domestic product (GDP) decreasing by 0.7% in the second quarter of 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2022b) and the high unemployment rate, the significance of small-medium enterprises cannot be underestimated. We see people using Black Twitter to grow each other's businesses, promote entrepreneurship, and attract customers for those not even using Twitter. Black Twitter is used as a tool to grow the country's economy.

Research shows that even governments worldwide use social media to promote and grow their countries' economies. One such example is the Indonesian government, which uses social media as part of the strategy for tourism development (Azhar & Fauzan, 2019). The use of Black Twitter by ordinary South Africans to share each other's businesses is an attempt by the local people to use Twitter effectively and not just for entertainment.

This study has presented findings on how Black Twitter is a digital counterpublic in South Africa. These findings resonate with studies done elsewhere on social media and counterpublics. Similarly, as Mpofu et al. (2022) assert about Facebook's abilities as an alternative counterpublic sphere for Zimbabwean diasporic communities, Black Twitter serves as a digital space where Black voices converge to discuss, amplify, and challenge narratives related to the Black experience. This targeted focus

creates a sense of community and shared identity that may be less pronounced on other platforms like Facebook.

The findings above also demonstrate that Black Twitter in South Africa also compares to other identity-orientated digital counterpublics such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) or feminist online spaces. This is because these spaces emphasize intersectionality within these communities. However, Black Twitter stands out for its multifaced engagement with race, encompassing discussions on opportunities and empowerment for Black communities. The intersectionality within Black Twitter encapsulates a broad spectrum of identities and experiences, contributing to its dynamic and diverse nature.

The following section presents arguments on the opportunities and limitations of Black Twitter as a digital counterpublic in South Africa. These opportunities and limitations shape Black Twitter's role in fostering community, activism, and discourse.

6. Opportunities and Limitations of Black Twitter as a Digital Counterpublic in South Africa

6.1 Opportunities:

6.1.1 Free Expression

Through Black Twitter, political issues, economic challenges, and social struggles affecting black people in South Africa are locally and globally distributed without sanction, political interference, or mediation from traditional media or law enforcement institutions. This opportunity allows South Africans to practice their active citizenship without fear of intimidation. Rather than merely being an object of the ruling class, a mere form of entertainment and communication, Black Twitter allows citizens to practice their democratic rights, hold the elites accountable, and raise alarms for issues of social injustice, such as gender-based violence in the country. This view aligns with Fuchs (2021), who argues that digital media platforms can make a democratic and educational contribution to the world if given the necessary material and legal means. In Black Twitter, we also notice from the above figures that public opinion can be formed without restrictions. Technology is used to unite private citizens and create a new form of public participation (Shao & Wang, 2015).

6.1.2 Access

Another opportunity offered by Black Twitter as a digital counterpublic is accessibility. Access to Black Twitter is universal; South Africans can use it, and people worldwide can also claim this space and actively participate in it. Also, it does not exclude others based on skin color. Black Twitter allows anyone to participate in its hashtags if they contribute to the cultural development of Black people. In South Africa, as the findings above indicate, not only do Black people share content and discuss issues about Black people, but even people from other races are participating.

6.2 Limitations:

6.2.1 Spread of Prejudices

However, it has also been reported that digital tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are rife with gendered and symbolic violence targeted at women and minority groups (Lumdsden & Morgan, 2017). Acts of aggression such as trolling, threats of hate crimes, xenophobia, cyberbullying, revenge porn, and stalking have infiltrated Black Twitter. These issues make Black Twitter an unfriendly space for some users. This ultimately affects its role as a counterpublic space welcoming to all.

6.2.2 Political and Economic Infiltration

Scholars have argued that digital media platforms lead to digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2020). Platforms such as Twitter shape politics and culture, influence decision-making and power and are also used to acquire reputation (Fuchs, 2021). This suggests that some of the content accessed on social media platforms has been mediated. Even though people may use Black Twitter to express themselves and express their frustrations against social, political, and economic issues, their frustration can be used in the accumulation of power (capital and political), and it can also be used to create and maintain class struggles, hegemonies, and commodification of their struggles. This is because trending topics can be used as hosts to advertise and sell products and can be used for political campaigns. Politicians can use trending topics to score political points and spread their messages.

6.6.3 Spread of Misinformation

Another prominent limitation of Black Twitter revolves around the potential for the spread of misinformation. While the platform is a powerful tool for mobilizing and disseminating information, the rapid circulation of unverified or inaccurate content poses risks (Li & Su, 2020). Instances of false narratives, rumors, or manipulated information can contribute to the amplification of misinformation, challenge the integrity of discussions, and potentially perpetuate narratives, rumors, or manipulated information.

6.2.4 Polarization

Polarization is another critical concern (Masroor et al., 2019). While Black Twitter is recognized for a sense of community and shared identity, it also faces the risk of internal divisions. Intra-community disagreements, ideological clashes, or the amplification of extreme viewpoints can contribute to polarization (Kligler- Vilenchil et al., 2020). This challenges the notion of Black Twitter as a unified digital counterpublic, as diverse perspectives within the Black community may clash, hindering the platform's ability to serve as a cohesive force for social change.

7. Conclusion

Black Twitter promises favorable conditions for digital counterpublics. It is relatively accessible; in theory, anyone can distribute information in this space, freeing participation and information acquisition from outside influence. Therefore, Black Twitter can challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives, and allow people to share their opinions.

These arguments reveal that Black Twitter has the function of a counterpublic space responsible for breeding agitational activities. Some of the benefits of Black Twitter, a digital counterpublic discussed in this study, are political. Black Twitter brings politics to the people; this improves citizens' ability to obtain and access political matters. As Mpofu (2019) argues, Black Twitter is a part of South Africa's news menu. Black Twitter feeds people news about entertainment, celebrities, politics, business, and scandals.

The study also revealed that Black Twitter faces some challenges. Fuchs (2021) argues that public service platforms like the Internet are owned, operated, and maintained by public service media. Hindman (2008) pessimistically argues that digital media platforms exclude ordinary citizens and empower those who have already gained an advantaged social status in the real world. Even though many people are actively involved in Black Twitter in South Africa, it is not a true reflection of the country. Moreover, this is due to multiple reasons: economic, gender, geographic, social, and technological. These challenges ultimately curtail the ability of Black Twitter to serve a democratic mandate.

The study has revealed that Black Twitter has undergone notable trends, shifts, and changes in sentiments over time, contributing to its intricate evolution. A significant trend observed is utilizing Black Twitter as a hub for activism and the pursuit of social justice. The research findings indicate that Black Twitter has consistently wielded considerable influence in South Africa. It has served as a potent vehicle for aiding individuals in distress, advocating moral principles, shedding light on instances of gender-based violence, uncovering corruption through Twitter, fostering political engagement, and ensuring accountability among the elites. Moreover, ordinary South Africans leverage Black Twitter to disseminate job opportunities, enhance financial literacy, and establish professional networks. These studied incidents have become symbolic of Black Twitter's role in addressing systematic issues, reflecting a shift towards more organized and impactful activism within the digital space. However, it is essential to note challenges brought by Black Twitter, such as the potential for performative activism and the presence of trolls or hate speech that can impact the community's sentiments. Navigating these challenges is an ongoing aspect of Black Twitter's evolution.

This study has demonstrated emerging trends on Black Twitter, highlighting its increasing impact on offline activism and the potential longevity of positive changes observed within and beyond the digital space. The platform has evolved from primarily a space for online discourse to a catalyst for real-world actions.

Continued activism, community organizing, and collaboration with other social justice movements contribute to the lasting impact of Black Twitter. As the platform adapts to emerging challenges and evolves as a force for change, its role in shaping both online and offline narratives is visible, and it is likely to continue influencing societal perceptions and fostering positive transformations in South Africa and elsewhere.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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