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South Africa's Role in the African Union: An analysis of South African Citizen Perspectives

By

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviation

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
ANC	African National Congress
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
EAC	East African Community
EG	Egypt
EU	European Union
EPA	Economic Partnership Agreements
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
Mzansi	An informal name for South Africa
KE	Kenya
NEPAD	New Economic Partnership for African Development
NG	Nigeria
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PMI	Purchasing Managers' Index
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
SA/RSA/ZA	Republic of South Africa
SAn	South African
SADC	Southern African Development Community

Originality of Authorship

The doctoral dissertation titled "South Africa's Role in the African Union: An analysis of South African Citizen Perspectives" represents original work, with all ideas and findings attributed solely to the author. No part of this dissertation has been previously submitted for any other academic qualification or degree.

Signed:……… Siphesihle Nene**……**

Date:…………..…………..

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background & focus of the research

This chapter serves as an overview and introduction to the dissertation, outlining the motivation behind the research and providing a comprehensive discussion about the research problem. Commencing with a background on the African Union (AU) and South Africa's AU membership, the chapter addressed key issues related to the study about how regional integration impacts national development, exploring the frameworks employed by the Republic of South Africa[1] and the AU to enhance regional integration on the continent. Additionally, the chapter established the relevance of the research area, articulated the rationale for the dissertation, defined the research problem, and presented the aims and objectives.

In 1963, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Charter and the African Union's Constitutive Act in 2000 highlighted the importance of African countries working together. They wanted to join forces in aspects of trade and politics. The Lagos Plan of Action and the Abuja Treaty provided detailed plans for how to achieve regional integration. A more recent plan called the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) also sees working together as a key part of improving Africa (Cilliers, 2008). Now, Africa is working on its biggest project yet, the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which started in January 2021. Fifty-four out of fifty-five African countries have agreed to this plan. This initiative aims to address previous shortcomings and promote economic integration across the continent (United Nations Africa Renewal, 2023). Regional integration in Africa holds the potential to diversify economies, reduce dependence on a limited range of mineral exports, ensure food and energy security, create employment for the growing youth population, contribute to poverty alleviation and shared prosperity (Moyo, 2009). Despite efforts that have been made towards regional integration in Africa, progress has been hindered by political rather than economic motives, resulting in protectionist policies, excessive public investment, and ineffective regional commitments.

Since 1994 after the end of apartheid, South Africa emerged as a significant player in global affairs, participating actively in international negotiations and forums. South Africa's development is interconnected with its neighbours; conflicts or economic challenges in nearby regions directly affect its stability and growth. Recognised globally as it holds substantial economic and political influence in Africa (ETU, 2008), South Africa's progress hinges on broader African development, emphasising the need for collaborative efforts and investment in regional stability and prosperity.

As the current chair of AU during this research, South Africa had a crucial leadership role. The country served as a key gateway for foreign direct investment to developing countries. Despite regional integration efforts by the South African government there is lack of research into

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[1]In this dissertation, "South Africa" refers specifically to the Republic of South Africa. I will be referring to the country as South Africa throughout the dissertation and the people of the country as South Africans.

[2] Throughout the dissertation, I will use the abbreviation "SADC" to refer to the Southern African Development Community and the term "Southern African region" will represent the geographical southernmost area of Africa.

regional integration and South Africa's role within it. This study aimed to address a gap in existing literature. Previous works have focused on aspects like peacekeeping and conflict settlement, overlooking South Africa's broader impact on regional integration. Adejumobi & Kreiter (2020) asserted that the scarcity of literature on effective regional approaches to development programs reveal the need for further research in this area. One aspect of this research is to fill this gap by examining South Africa's unique position as both a hegemon and a catalyst in the regional integration process. By providing a comprehensive analysis of South Africa's contributions to regional integration, it seeked to advance understanding of this complex phenomenon and its implications for Africa's development. Few researchers have studied several areas in South Africa's role in regional integration (Adedeji 1996), (Simon 1998), (Dzinesa et al., 2012), (Mangu et al., 2020), South Africa's role in integration of peoples (Bah, 2020), developmental regional integration in South Africa (Zondi, 2020).

While South Africa's influence within the AU is notable, ongoing debate among citizens questions its role in regional integration. This aspect connects to the research aims of exploring South Africa's impact on AU integration efforts.

1.2. Research Aims & Objectives

Recognising the ongoing debate on the role of integration for growth and development, my research investigated both theoretically and empirically the relationship between regional integration and national development, using South Africa as a case study.

To explore this relationship, this study investigated the perceptions and perspectives of South African citizens. Considering the unique historic background of the country, diverse population, and its political and economic contribution to the African Union, I believed that the selected country was a fitting and interesting example as a case study.

To achieve the research aim, these are the objectives of the study:

1. To analyse perceptions of the African Union to comprehend the prevailing attitudes towards the organisation.
2. To explore and describe South Africa's multifaceted role within the African Union, focusing on its leadership, diplomatic engagements, economic influence, and political contributions, with the aim of understanding its impact on regional integration and governance in the African continent.
3. To assess whether South Africa is the best country in the continent to lead integration in the African Union.
4. To develop practical recommendations for the policymakers of the AU on facilitating growth and development via regional integration.

1.3. Research Questions

Following the discussion of aims and objectives, the study is guided by the following primary research questions:

1. What is the role of regional integration for a country's growth and development?
2. How do South Africans perceive the African Union?
3. What is South Africa's role in the regional integration processes in Africa?
4. Is South Africa the hegemon in Africa?
5. What can African Union policymakers do to stimulate bigger growth and development results for its member states?

1.4. Hypotheses

Based on the analysis of regional integration and its impact on national development, particularly in the context of South Africa and the AU, the following hypotheses can be proposed for the study:

1. H1: The lack of social cohesion and national integration within AU member states, including South Africa, impedes the political and economic benefits of regional integration.
2. H2: Despite the need for a regional hegemonic power to drive regional integration and maintain relevance in Africa and in the global arena, South Africa is perceived as lacking the assertive leadership required for such a role.
3. H3: Regional integration efforts within Africa, despite the establishment of various institutions and initiatives, have not significantly improved economic conditions or increased intra-regional trade due to challenges such as inadequate financial resources and inefficient operation of regional cooperation.
4. H4: South Africa's consideration to leave or stay in regional integration efforts such as the African Union may be influenced by migration.

Regarding whether other African countries should leave or stay in the AU, is a complex decision that would depend on a multitude of factors, including political, economic, and social considerations unique to each country. The AU seeks to nurture cohesion and collaboration among African countries, expedite the political and socio-economic union of the continent, and advance peace, security, and stability. The benefits of being part of such a union generally include collective bargaining power, access to a broader market, and shared resources for development and conflict resolution. However, the decision to leave or stay would ultimately depend on whether membership aligns with a country's national interests and development goals and if country sees benefits.

1.5. Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation comprises seven chapters. Chapter one served as the introduction, presenting an overview of the entire dissertation. It outlined the topic's core understanding, problem nature, research objectives, questions, and thesis structure.

Chapter two conducted a literature review, exploring motivation for regional integration, integration's benefits and costs for member states and citizens, and the research setting,

focusing on South Africa. It provided insights into the geography and socio-economic conditions of South Africa, with discussions on regional integration issues such as economy, crime, politics, and social cohesion. This review established a strong conceptual framework for the study, aiming to examine existing theories of regional integration and national development while identifying literature gaps.

Chapter four detailed the research methodology and framework, providing the research administration, data collection procedure, philosophical assumptions, and analytical methodology.

Chapter five presented the research findings and analysis, utilising graphs, and tables.

Chapter six concentrated on the discussion and conclusion, summarising key findings, their theoretical and practical implications, and suggestions for future research actions.

Chapter seven summarised the whole dissertation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Conceptual Framework

2.1.1. Background to regional organisations in Africa

There is a need to find African solutions to African problems. Post-independence Africa remains burdened with various developmental challenges that hinder any progress towards development for any individual state (Ngang, 2018). Current efforts are being made in Africa towards implementing development governance models however if these efforts are not homegrown and specific for Africa, the potential of Africa will still not be realised for decades to come (Akokpari, 2018). Africa as a region has not been able to equally adapt or transform their policy processes to respond to the prevailing challenges (Foray, 2018).

Regional integration in Africa was deemed as fundamental by many of the continent's policymakers (Draper, 2012; Akwetey, 2008) and as a result, there was growing support for regional integration in Africa amongst the continent's international development partners and African elites (Draper & Nene, 2015). In Africa, this idea has been around for a long time. It originated with Pan-Africanism, a movement advocating for the abolition of colonialism and slavery. Kwame Nkrumah[2] called for integration post-independence. In the 1970s and 1980s, steps were taken to integrate economies. Africa's cooperation in trade and money is among the oldest in the developing world. In the 1990s, efforts towards integration increased after apartheid in South Africa. Africa has been working on economic integration for more than fifty years (Gwala, 2015). The success of regional integration, development & cooperation and social policy are dependent on multilateral regional associations of nations (Draper et al., 2015). Decades of studying regional integration in Africa has prompted new policy thinking within policymakers considering the present mission oriented and new industrial policies. This includes prioritisation and bottom-up approach rather than a neutral and horizontal approach, decentralisation, self-discovery, and suppleness rather than central planning, and transformative activities instead of sectoral priorities (Foray, 2018).

2.1.2. The establishment of the African Union and the development agenda

The matter of Africa's regional divisions and policies holds inherent significance, prompting critical inquiries central to the broader African agenda. These inquiries touch upon fundamental aspects such as democracy, decolonisation, development, economic and political integration, and the conceptualisation of the African identity (Burke et al., 2019). The re-invention of the AU has resulted in a more structured entity with new programmes for socio-economic recovery

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[2] Kwame Nkrumah was a Ghanaian freedom fighter and later president, who was at the forefront for fighting for Ghana's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. As one of the key figures in the Pan-African movement, Nkrumah's leadership and advocacy were instrumental in Ghana becoming the first sub-Saharan African nation to gain independence in 1957. He served as Ghana's first prime minister and later as its president, advocating for socialist policies and Pan-African unity. Nkrumah's legacy continues to inspire generations of Africans in their fight for freedom, equality, and self-determination.

and democratic reform among states (Ogunnubi & Akinola, 2017). The AU is regarded as the most comprehensive and well-defined regional venture on the continent since its adoption in 2002. It was adopted and replaced the OAU which established in 1963 (Velde, 2011). The OAU was birthed and rooted in Pan-Africanism as rebellion against colonial powers that fragmented the continent (Fawcett et al., 2010).

Development will amplify the diversity of Africa's regions and accentuate critical issues related to redistribution, making them more prominent and controversial. Even with the adopted development approaches by the AU (Karuri-Sebina, 2019), what is important to note about the integration and regional agenda, is that they will move at different paces within countries and regions (Dosenrode, 2016). This could be because of many barriers such as underdevelopment, poor infrastructure and other deficiencies or means to alleviate poverty and empower the least developed countries to contribute more effectively to regional trade. Additionally, what may be beneficial for business may not benefit the community as a whole (Swatuk, 1997). What Africa needs is to promote political commitments within regions that will facilitate the integrated regional agenda (Karuri-Sebina, 2019). Although, this is seen in the EU, it does pose several questions (Kösler, 2007). For instance, the governments need to see practical and realistic benefits that would flow if they "surrender" some of their autonomy to regional institutions. On the contrary, this also depends on creating and achieving a level of overall legitimacy, public support and involvement from the people and non-governmental institutions (Ogunnubi & Akinola, 2017).

Yeates (2017) emphasises the crucial role played by national, local, and international development partners in enhancing regional governance for creating fair policies for everyone in society. These partners contribute by:

1. Leading regional initiatives to align context-specific priorities with global objectives.
2. Coordinating development partners within the region based on well-defined priorities.
3. Supporting intra-regional collaboration through activities like capacity building and cross-border cooperation.
4. Conducting periodic regional monitoring and reporting to assess progress toward identified goals (Yeates, 2017: 6).

Member states need to adapt their approaches to suit their specific circumstances and needs. They should focus more on involving various actors in decision-making processes, such as local, national, regional, and international partners (Mbaku, 2019). This requires using methods that consider how interconnected social and economic issues are within and between member states (Draper, 2012). The challenge arises when regional integration frameworks ignore important social and public policy issues while pushing for deeper international economic integration. This can hinder their ability to meet agreed-upon goals and address global challenges effectively. (Yeates, 2017; Muntschick, 2018; Van Langenhove, 2012). Strong regional- level action is wholly dependent on member governments effectively working together to pool and channel resources to achieve socially equitable policies. The biggest

question then becomes, are these African member governments willing to unite and achieve any degree of sovereignty (Asare-Nuamah, 2017; Mlambo, 2019).

The trajectory of regional integration in Africa is characterised by different modes of engagement between national elites and transnational actors and this shapes policy recommendations and/or regulatory frameworks on regionalism in Africa (Fagbayibo, 2017). The path Africa has taken in adopting new development approaches reveal a broader awareness of understanding Africa's development prospects. Outdate models of national and international governance that are embedded in Africa's governance strategies need to be replaced to make room for innovative development models (DeGhetto et al., 2016). Current efforts are being made in Africa towards implementing development governance models however these efforts are not homegrown and specific for Africa, the potential of Africa will still not be realised for years to come (Ngang, 2018).

Agenda 2063 highlights people-centred development however it is unclear what the governance model will be best suited for achieving these goals. This needs to be researched to help future governance strategies. I believe that Africa needs to develop governance models that will ensure that the goals of Agenda 2063 materialise, and human rights are protected through equity and justice. This research highlighted how the shortcomings of the existing institutions and agendas prevents any meaningful progress towards a deepened integrative agenda between countries thus leading to South African citizens not seeing benefits of continued membership in the AU for South Africa.

2.1.3. Agenda 2063

Agenda 2063 was adopted initially at the 50th Anniversary of the Organisation of African Unity. The agenda was rooted in the Constitutive Act, the AU Vision, and the 50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration. It builds on existing national, regional, and continental priorities and frameworks (Witt, 2019). This agenda highlights the need to go beyond economic development but to encourage transformational change, transparent governance, and collective prosperity. To achieve this, there needs to be capacities and capabilities to effectively manage longitudinal, multilevel transformational change (Vincent, 2019). At the forefront of learning from previous experiences and lessons, is changed behaviour at individual, group, organisational, institutional, and societal levels. This was the biggest challenge to manage as it requires a unique set of capacities and capabilities to oversee changes within and between all 55 Member States (Sule et al., 2019) as tabulated in Table 1. Agenda 2063 poses a challenge towards effectively managing Africa's future, especially across generations in terms of politics, business, and society as a whole (DeGhetto et al., 2016).

Table 1. Seven aspirations of Agenda 2063.
Source: African Union website, 2023.

Agenda 2063 Aspiration
1. A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development
2. An integrated continent, politically united, based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa's renaissance
3. An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law
4. A peaceful and secure Africa
5. An Africa with strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics
6. An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children
7. Africa as a strong, united, and influential global player and partner

Agenda 2063 is comprehensive, this is evident based on the focus placed on issues around gender inequality, climate & environment, youth development, technology, and education to name a few (Sule et al., 2019). The agenda's goals are ambitious yet feasible, addressing Africa's needs through meticulously crafted priority areas with detailed and quantified targets, ensuring effective progress toward its goals. Agenda 2063 stands as an important policy framework for Africa, aiming to drive transformative change based on distinct principles of people-centeredness, scalability, and enhanced governance for improved outcomes and citizen impact (DeGhetto et al., 2016). Comprising seven aspirations, 20 goals, 39 priority areas, and 256 targets, this agenda is outlined in 10-year Implementation Plans (Figure 1), with the initial phase spanning from 2014 to 2023 (AUC, 2015). Drawing from past development agendas, Agenda 2063 seeks to avoid previous pitfalls. It has short- (10 years), medium- (10-25 years), and long-term (25-50 years) goals, and includes strategic, implementation, and Monitoring and Evaluation Framework components (Tella, 2018). Notably, it advocates for vigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to enhance development management, accountability, integration, participation, and ownership.

Figure 1. Structure of Agenda 2063.
Source: African Union website, 2023.

Agenda 2063 aims to uplift Africa by fostering economic transformation, job creation, agricultural modernisation, and sustainable communities. Achieving these objectives poses research inquiries on managing economic shifts, enhancing agriculture, exploiting natural resources, and combating climate change. It also involves inquiries into private sector involvement, governance, and societal support. Perspectives on Agenda 2063 vary among African nations based on size, development level, and stability. Larger economies like South Africa, Nigeria or Egypt may differ from smaller or less developed nations like Swaziland (eSwaitini) or Burundi (Njie, 2019). Addressing Agenda 2063's multifaceted goals requires diverse research methods and interdisciplinary approaches across various fields.

2.1.4. Challenges of regional integration

In Africa, regional integration initiatives face significant challenges due to political instability, corruption, economic fragility, poverty, limited human capital development, and inadequate infrastructure (Madyo, 2008). Despite numerous commitments, Africa's intra-regional trade remains the lowest globally at 12%, compared to 25% in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and over 60% in the European Union (EU) because of trade barriers, poor infrastructure, and reliance on primary commodities (African Development Bank, 2020; Ko, 2013). High transactional costs, arising from overlapping regional memberships and insufficient infrastructure, also hinder business operations. While regional integration efforts encounter obstacles, Africans persist due to the belief that collective action is more impactful than individual efforts. Weak economic growth rates in African nations make regional integration an opportunity for substantial economic growth. Given the weak economies, regional integration becomes a vital mechanism, as African states lack negotiation power with

more influential economic blocs. Challenges such as overlapping memberships impede regional integration success. In East Africa, the early attempt at regional integration with the establishment of the East African Community (EAC) in 1967 dissolved in 1977, showcasing historical difficulties in sustaining integration initiatives. The obstacles faced by regional integration in Africa emphasise the need for addressing geopolitical complexities and economic weaknesses to achieve successful and sustainable regional integration (Gwala, 2015).

2.1.5. Benefits of regional integration

The objective of regional economic integration is to unite markets, fostering enhanced trade and unhindered movement of production factors. Countries pursue regional integration to achieve efficiency gains, exploit economies of scale, and diminish border barriers (de Melo & Tsikata, 2014). Regional integration acts as a crucial mechanism for income, trade, and bargaining power development. Governments engage in regional blocs for various reasons, including market access, security, democracy promotion, foreign investment, economic growth, and trade liberalisation. Regional integration agreements yield both traditional (trade gains, increased competition, Foreign Direct Investment attraction) and non-traditional benefits (lock into domestic reforms, signalling, insurance, coordination, bargaining power, security). The renewed interest in regional integration across Africa is evident as leaders voluntarily aim for a free trade area that commenced in 2021. Regional integration provides member states with collective power, enhancing their international influence. While Regional integration may limit national sovereignty, the perceived benefits outweigh drawbacks globally, exemplified by entities like the EU. Regional integration is a phenomenon not exclusive to Africa but extends to the global community (Gwala, 2015).

2.1.6. Who is the African regional hegemonic power?

Some scholars believe that Africa needs a regional hegemonic power to keep pace with global trends, maintain relevance, and compete globally. This power would provide structure to the continent's current state of disarray. Having this hegemonic status, originating from political or economic power, it grants exceptionally significant influence over other countries. This influence is deemed conducive to developing strong regional integration agreements with clear rules adhered to by other member states (Gwala, 2015).

A hegemonic power is fundamental in setting and enforcing the rules of engagement both regionally and globally, establishing institutional frameworks for leadership. Historically, hegemons have borne the costs of creating such institutions, provided leadership, and persuaded others to align with their vision (Mohammed, 2020). Flemes (2007) identifies regional hegemons through the use of four key measures, these are: claim to leadership, power resources, employment of foreign policy instruments and an acceptance of the leadership role. The debate over Africa's hegemonic position involves both state actors and scholars. Besides South Africa, several countries like Nigeria, Egypt, Algeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, and Morocco are contenders. Scholars argue that Nigeria and South Africa stand out as potential hegemonic powers (Flemes, 2009; Nolte, 2010; Ogunnubi, 2014; Seteolu & Okuneye, 2017).

South Africa is seen as a hegemonic power because it is one of the region's largest economies with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of USD 405.71 billion and key trading partner (African Development Bank, 2023). In 2021, South Africa USD 40.9 billion remained the largest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) recipient, with notable investments in clean energy and infrastructure projects. South Africa stands out as a major economic player in Africa, ranking 38th among global economies with a well-developed infrastructure, substantial mineral exports, and a strong stock market. In 2022, it's GDP per capita reached USD 6.78 billion contributing significantly to the Southern African Development Community (SADC)[3] with an annual contribution of ZAR[4]11.2 billion (Stats SA, 2023). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that South Africa's hegemonic position is not universally accepted by all (Ogunnubi, 2013). This is because Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, boasts a GDP of USD 477.38 billion as of 2023 and is a major oil producer. The country has a population of 225 million people. Its military strength historically elevates its influence in African affairs. With abundant oil and gas reserves, Nigeria has the potential to bolster its economy, alleviate poverty, and enhance social services. Its economic dominance in West and Central Africa highlights its critical role in regional stability and peacekeeping efforts.

Critics of South Africa's economic and political hegemony point to specific cases where the country has fallen short. The prevailing scepticism towards South Africa's leadership in the AU's regional integration efforts arises from perceptions of it as a hegemonic force. Critics argue that South Africa, facing internal challenges like crime, inequality, and poverty, lacks the capacity to effectively lead regional integration. Those holding this stance mainly citizens emphasise the importance of resolving domestic issues before assuming a leadership role on the continent. Instances of xenophobic attacks in 2008 and 2015 are cited as evidence of South Africa's inadequacy to lead regional integration. The perceived inconsistencies in South Africa's foreign policy further contribute to doubts about its suitability for leading AU's regional integration initiatives.

While Nigeria is often termed the 'military giant' of Africa, scholars like Osaghae (1998) view it as a 'crippled giant.' Internal conflicts, including struggles for control over oil resources, a vast population, and diverse ethnicities, hinder its prospects for continental hegemony. Challenges like corruption and poor leadership impede Nigeria's ability to manage these issues effectively. Despite comparisons with global powers, Nigeria's regional hegemonic potential is marred by insecurity, violence, poverty, and corruption. Since 2009, the persistent threat posed by Boko Haram[5] has highlighted governance deficiencies. Over 10,000 individuals have lost their lives, and countless others have been displaced by the activities of Boko Haram, raising doubts about Nigeria's capacity to address internal conflicts and ensure security (Dauda et al., 2021). In recent years, Nigeria has experienced a significant emigration trend. In the first

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[3] The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is an intergovernmental organization established in 1980 with the goal of promoting socio-economic development, peace, and security among its 16 member states in Southern Africa. South Africa is part of SADC.

[4] ZAR" is the currency code for the South African Rand, the official currency of South Africa.

[5] Boko Haram is a militant Islamist group based in north-eastern Nigeria. It has been responsible for numerous attacks, kidnappings, and other acts of violence in the region, aiming to establish an Islamic state governed by Sharia law.

quarter of 2023, the number of Nigerians relocating to Canada reached a nine-year high. A 2021 survey by the Africa Polling Institute indicates that 7 out of 10 Nigerians would opt to leave the country if given the chance. Concerns about safety drive this desire to migrate, leading citizens to seek countries with more tough security measures. Nigeria's low ranking on the 2023 Global Peace Index, at 144th out of 163 countries, reflects high crime rates and insecurity.

Using African GDP as a benchmark for identifying the regional hegemon on the continent, it can be contended that Nigeria possesses the necessary attributes to assume a hegemonic role in Africa. However, South Africa remains influential in the continent, particularly in the SADC region, evident through its infrastructure, GDP, diverse economy, and political stability. History highlights South Africa's integral role in regional dynamics, as attempts to isolate it during apartheid faltered due to member states' dependence on it. Hence, South Africa's involvement is crucial for regional integration efforts in the AU, given its historical significance and contemporary influence.

2.1.7. Should South Africa leave or stay in the African Union- Debate

South Africa has solidified its trade dominance in Africa. It's a full member of BRICS since 2011 (DIRCO, 2023). EU remains South Africa's biggest trade and investment partner (EU Commission, 2024). Beyond economic activities, South Africa actively participates in peacekeeping and peacebuilding initiatives across the continent, contributing significantly to the AU and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

While South Africa holds significant influence within the AU, there exists a discourse among citizens regarding whether South Africa should continue to spearhead regional integration efforts within the AU or withdraw from the organisation altogether. Advocates for South Africa's leadership in regional integration within the AU contend that the nation has made substantial contributions and assumed a crucial role in peacekeeping and peacebuilding across the African continent and has contributed to the growth of the AU and attracts foreign investment to the continent. 12.67% of the net GDP of the AU comes from South Africa (Statista, 2023). While those that oppose the continued membership do not see any tangible benefits of this membership. Arguing that South Africa lacks the capacity to lead regional integration in the AU due to its failure to effectively address internal issues such as crime, inequality, and poverty. Additionally, South Africa struggles with an influx of economic migrants from neighbouring regions, due to the failure of the AU and ineffective governance by African leaders. This influx has fuelled resentment towards the AU as a regional organisation that does not have its house in order, prompting calls to withdraw from regional agreements that burden South Africa with the economic consequences of other countries' failures.

While the criticism is valid, the question becomes: if South Africa leaves the African Union, what does that mean for the country? Which country will become the regional hegemon, and would it be capable of providing economic and political assistance to the region at a level equal to or surpassing that of South Africa? Even more importantly will leaving the African Union

stop the influx of economic migrants and improve the economic situation of the country that seem to be the biggest issue for South Africans? The answer to the latter question is no. Therefore, despite the current challenges facing South Africa, there is enough evidence to suggest that leaving the AU is not going to improve the dire economic situation of the country because South Africa grapples with a challenging future as its industrialised economy falls short in generating sufficient employment for both native and foreign-born residents, intensifying existing inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. Economic struggles contribute to a shifting political climate, with the African National Congress (ANC) losing support, as evident in the 2021 local elections where it secured less than half the national votes. Rising parties advocate for enhanced border security and selective immigration, framing their stance in economic terms. This trend is anticipated to persist in the May 2024 national government elections as politicians capitalise on anti-migrant sentiments to secure votes.

The SADC lacks a strong regional framework for coordinating labour migration, hindering progress despite bilateral agreements allowing visa-free travel. Implementing a formal system for regulating foreign worker arrivals could benefit South Africa, migrants' home countries, and communities. However, most importantly addressing governance quality and political accountability in Africa is essential beyond mere concern. Holding corrupt leaders accountable is important and building economies in Africa and incentivising young people to stay. This perspective isn't anti-migration but acknowledges the loss of energetic youth from Africa. South African's frustration over these issues is evident, emphasising the need for substantial action beyond rhetoric.

2.1.8. Economic performance & development of Africa and South Africa

Africa's economic growth, estimated at 3.8% in 2022, slowed from 4.8% in 2021 due to various factors including the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, high global food and energy prices, and supply chain disruptions. Despite this, growth is projected to stabilise around 4.0% during 2023-24, supported by policy measures and global economic recovery efforts. While, twenty-three African countries, including the two biggest economies, Nigeria and South Africa, experienced weaker growth in 2022. Persistent structural weaknesses hinder economic activity in resource-rich economies. In South Africa, power shortages disrupt various sectors, including retail, manufacturing, and mining. Nigeria faces challenges from low oil production due to insecurity and aging infrastructure, impacting both oil and non-oil sectors. Additionally, global food and fertiliser price hikes worsen inflationary pressures (African Development Bank, 2023).

However, Libya saw the most significant decline. Nonetheless, the top five performing economies pre-pandemic are expected to grow over 5.5% on average. Despite this, Africa's growth outlook remains stable, with projections averaging around 4.0% for 2023-24, supported by policy measures and Asia's growth prospects. Africa's top-performing economies pre-pandemic are expected to rebound, but risks persist, notably from oil price fluctuations due to geopolitical tensions. Despite lagging behind Asia, Africa's growth surpassed Europe's and the world average (Figure 2). However, global economic slowdowns, particularly in Europe,

China, and the United States, pose significant challenges to Africa's export demand and investment inflows, potentially impacting economic growth (African Development Bank, 2023).
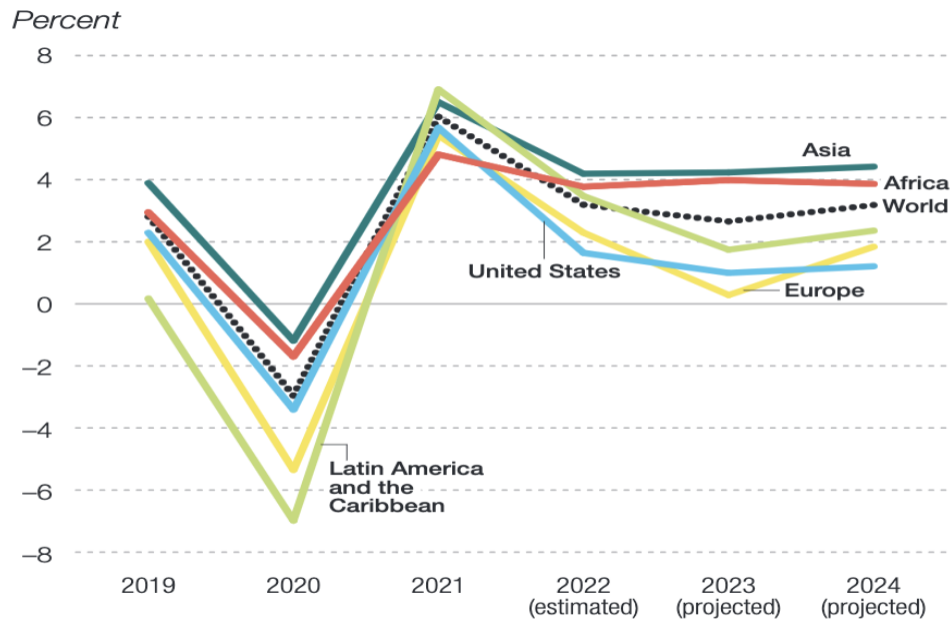
Figure 2. Real GDP growth, by region, 2019–24.
Source: African Development Bank statistics and the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook, 2023.

In 2022, Africa experienced subdued economic growth, leading to weak per capita income growth, which poses challenges for poverty reduction and reversing income losses from the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 3). Per capita income growth decreased from 4.5% in 2021 to 1.7% in 2022, placing Africa at the bottom among all regions. This trend, coupled with external factors like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, may further delay socioeconomic development and poverty reduction efforts especially as 24 countries are classified as low-income (African Development Bank, 2023).
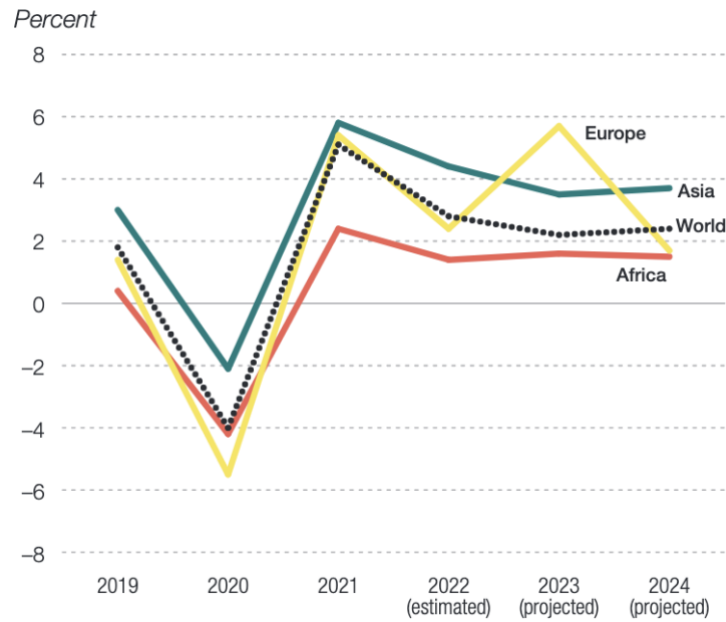
Figure 3. Real GDP per Capita growth, by region, 2019-24.
Source: African Development Bank statistics; the International Monetary Fund's
World Economic Outlook, 2022; and United Nations Population Division estimates.

Key economic indicators like the Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI)[6] reveal sluggish economic performance in four significant African economies. Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, which account for a substantial portion of the continent's GDP (Figure 4), have all experienced consistent declines in PMI values since March 2022. This downward trend suggests a prolonged period of reduced economic activity, reinforcing the observed slowdowns in their growth trajectories (African Development Bank, 2023).

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[6]The Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) is an economic indicator used to gauge the economic health of the manufacturing sector within a country.

Purchasing Managers' Index

Figure 4. Purchasing Managers' Index values, of RSA, EG, NG, KE, 2017–November 2022. Source: Haver Analytics & IHS Markit, 2023.

The growth forecast for the whole Southern African region indicates a slowdown by 1.1 percentage points, dropping from 2.7% in 2022 to 1.6% in 2023. However, targeted policy measures offer the potential for a rebound to 2.7% in 2024. This decline is primarily attributed to persistent economic challenges posed by elevated interest rates and persistent power shortages, which have dampened economic performance in South Africa, which holds the position of the largest economy in the region, and key trading partner (African Development Bank, 2023).

The Agenda 2063 of the AU set out a set of objectives aimed at elevating Africa to a prominent position on the global stage, emphasising inclusive socio-economic advancement, continental and regional cohesion, as well as democratic governance and security imperatives. The AfCFTA seeks to enhance intra-regional trade within Africa, fostering greater product diversity and sophistication in traded commodities. This emphasis on regional and continental integration over global trade stems from the growing trend of African nations engaging in progressively diversified and high-value exchanges among themselves (AUC/OECD, 2023).

At present, African exports to the EU predominantly comprise primary commodities like food, beverages, raw materials, and energy, often with minimal processing and value addition occurring domestically. Moreover, African nations exhibit limited integration into global value chains, typically undertaking lower value-added activities such as component assembly (AUC/OECD, 2023). Within global value chains, Africa demonstrates the lowest level of integration, primarily confined to South Africa, and select North African countries. While governments have advocated for the establishment and growth of regional value chains, these

initiatives encounter challenges in achieving scalability, resulting in their limited expansion (Lejarraga, 2023)

The EU and Africa maintain significant trade relations. The EU experienced a 20% increase in its overall trade with Africa from 2016 to 2019, reaching a total of EUR 280 billion. This accounted for 28% of Africa's total trade in 2019 (Eurostat, 2020). The EU holds the position of Africa's primary trading partner, surpassing China, India, and the United States. Trade interactions between the two regions are relatively balanced, with a slight surplus favouring the EU, amounting to EUR 8 billion. In North Africa, the EU maintains its role as the primary trading partner for both exports and imports. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the EU ranks as the second-largest trading partner, following China. Africa stands as the EU's fourth most significant trading partner, trailing behind the United States, China, and the United Kingdom. Notably, the EU engages in trade with Africa at a volume nearly one and a half times that of Latin America and more than double that with Japan (European Commission, 2019). Exports of cars from South Africa to the EU experienced an increase, marking an impressive growth of nearly 250%. In the year 2019, the automotive sector constituted a noteworthy 31% share of South Africa's overall exports to the EU (European Commission, 2019).

Following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Africa saw a significant increase of about 20% in external financial flows in 2021. FDI more than doubled, reaching USD 83 billion, indicating the continent's appeal to global investors. Europe, with EUR 212 billion, remained the primary source of FDI, constituting 50% of total investment inflows to Africa, led by the United Kingdom (USD 65 billion) and France (USD 60 billion). The United Stated ranked third, with USD 45 billion in assets, representing 13% of total FDI. While countries like China, Russia, India, Germany, and Turkey increased their investments in Africa, their contribution remained relatively low. Major destinations for FDI included South Africa, Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, as reported by the African Development Bank in 2023 (African Development Bank, 2023).

South Africa (USD 40.9 billion) remained the largest FDI recipient in 2021, with notable investments in clean energy and infrastructure projects. Despite economic challenges, Nigeria (USD 4.8 billion) saw a shift in FDI focus on electric power and manufacturing. Egypt and Mozambique both each attracted USD 5.1 billion in FDI inflows. Ethiopia also recorded significant FDI growth, primarily in renewable energy projects (AUC/OECD, 2023). However, in 2021, there was a big decrease in investments, with USD 27 billion leaving Africa. This shows that a lot of assets were sold after the worst part of the pandemic. Even though some African countries made up for their investment losses in 2021, it's still hard for them to get money from investors because the world's financial situation is not stable. In 2022, Africa is expected to lose even more money from investments, about USD 22.5 billion. This shows that it's still difficult for African countries to attract money from investors (African Development Bank, 2023).

With a population estimated at 1.34 billion, Africa presents an increasingly appealing and expanding market for trade and investment from the EU. EU exports to Africa have generally

followed an upward trajectory since 2009, with a minor decline noted in 2016. In 2019, EU exports to Africa reached EUR 145 billion, representing nearly 7% of the EU's total exports to the global market (European Commission, 2019). This upward trend is particularly notable in EU exports to North Africa and West Africa. Notably, the initiation of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with countries in these regions, starting in 2016, has significantly contributed to the growth in EU exports. As EPAs and similar trade liberalisation initiatives continue to solidify and evolve in the forthcoming years, they are anticipated to further facilitate EU exports to African trading partners. This is especially relevant for sectors that promote industrial development and value addition in African countries, such as machinery, automotive components, and medical equipment (European Commission, 2019). While services contribute to over half of Africa's GDP, their share in total African trade remains relatively low at 22%, indicating an untapped potential. Enhancing trade in services offers a promising opportunity for both African and EU service providers, particularly considering their geographical proximity (Lejarraga, 2023). Therefore, discussions surrounding services could feature prominently in the modernisation of existing EU-Africa Trade Agreements, opening avenues for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Since around 2007, the value of intra-African food and agricultural trade (in current USD dollars) increased steadily until its peak in 2013. SADC and COMESA are the major contributors, comprising 46% and 31% respectively of intracontinental agricultural exports (Figure 5).
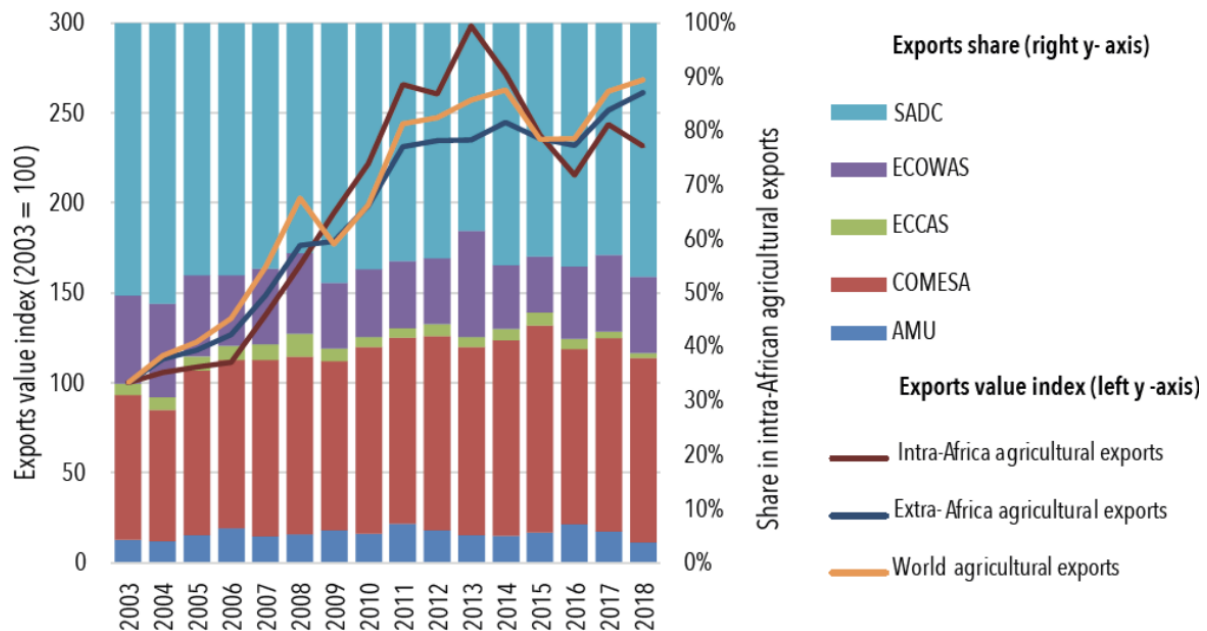

Figure 5. Intra-African agricultural exports by Regional Economic Community, 2003-2018. Source: AATM Database, 2020 & Jemimah Njuki.

The primary intra-African exporters, constituting 70% of the formal market, are led by South Africa, which exports approximately one-third of intra-African formal exports and imports about one-tenth of agricultural goods (Table 2).

Table 2. Top 10 intra-African exporters of agricultural products, 2005-2007 and 2016-2018. Source: AATM Database, 2020 & Jemimah Njuki.

	2005–2007		2016–2018	
	Export share (%)	Rank	Export share (%)	Rank
South Africa	29.8	1	32.2	1
Egypt	5.6	4	8.7	2
Uganda	3.6	8	6.4	3
Kenya	5.3	5	6.2	4
Côte d'Ivoire	6.3	3	4.6	5
Zambia	4.1	7	3.8	6
Tanzania	2.2	10	3.1	7
Namibia	6.5	2	2.8	8
Tunisia	4.4	6	2.6	9
Ethiopia	2.8	9	0.5	10
Total	70.6		71.0	

Despite significant potential for enhancing intra-African trade, Africa's global imports and exports composition lacks alignment, hindering the initiation of a process for import detachment from the rest of the world (Njuki, 2023). Intra-African trade comprises a mere 18% of Africa's total trade, with over 60% being diversified. Unlike Africa's global trade, which predominantly revolves around commodities such as minerals and fossil fuels, intra-African trade largely comprises manufactured goods (45%) and foodstuffs (20%). These formal figures overlook informal trade across contiguous borders, estimated at 7-16% of formal intra-African trade, primarily involving food and basic consumer goods. Informal trade reflects widespread poverty and exhibits a gender imbalance, notably driven by women (Luke, 2023).

Luke (2023) asserts that trade dynamics between Africa and the world exhibit asymmetry, where Africa exports raw commodities and imports predominantly manufactured goods. This imbalanced partnership displaces Africa's own production capabilities. Additionally, major trading partners, particularly the EU, have distinct agreements based on geographical and developmental factors, creating trade barriers within Africa, and hindering efforts for unified trade rules. This situation discourages the development of intra-African supply chains. Post-Brexit, the UK's emulation of the EU's approach exacerbates these challenges. Connecting trade with job creation is crucial, particularly in Africa, where approximately 252 million young people aged 15-24 need employment (Luke, 2023). Addressing this demographic challenge is essential for development and understanding the economic impact of trade on job opportunities and income generation.

Establishing uniform trade regulations throughout Africa is essential to leverage the vast potential of the continent's combined market size. This initiative aims to foster diversification, attract investment in unconventional sectors, and achieve economies of scale, aligning with the goals of the AfCFTA Agreement initiated by the AU in 2019. Trading with neighbouring countries reduces costs, making it a longstanding principle in commerce.

Intra-Africa trade presently constitutes a modest 14.4% of total African exports, but UNCTAD forecasts project a potential 33% increase and a 51% reduction in the continent's trade deficit with the execution of the AfCFTA. Celebrating its second anniversary, the goal of the AfCFTA is to establish a continent where tariffs are eliminated, fostering increased trade and investment within Africa, support local businesses, drive industrialisation, and address youth unemployment. The initiative is in line with the AU's Agenda 2063 and the UN's SDGs, focusing on poverty reduction, gender equality, and inequality reduction. Despite progress, certain areas, such as visa-free entry, show slow development, with only Benin, Gambia, and Seychelles allowing unrestricted entry for all Africans. The African Development Bank notes improved travel openness in 2022, albeit with remaining restrictions (United Nations Africa Renewal, 2023).

In regional economic communities like SADC and COMESA, formal trade across borders makes up to 90% of official trade and adds 40% to overall trade. According to UNCTAD data, Africa's unexploited export capacity is valued at "USD 21.9 billion, with an extra USD 9.2 billion possible through partial tariff cuts under the AfCFTA. To unlock this potential and encourage inclusive growth, it's vital to tackle non-tariff barriers and promote ongoing cooperation in investment and competition policies (United Nations Africa Renewal, 2023). Regional integration is fundamental for overcoming trade barriers and facilitating movement across borders, ultimately shaping the success of the AfCFTA.

The AfCFTA was ratified in March 2018, plans to get rid of taxes on 90% of goods and allow trade in services to form one market with a GDP exceeding USD 3 trillion. This will make Africa the biggest free trade area in the world and presents substantial opportunities for agricultural goods, with estimates suggesting a 20-30% rise in trade within Africa by 2040. The agreement is expected to improve access to markets, boost government earnings, raise farmer incomes, and support investment in modernising agriculture. Furthermore, it is likely to increase demand for African food exports, particularly benefiting sectors led by women (Songwe, 2019). Furthermore, diversification of exports is expected to lead to greater product sophistication, increasing productivity and export value.

Unlike East Asia, where exports have diversified and improved in quality over the last thirty years, African exports have generally remained limited in diversity and quality. The AfCFTA seeks to address this by bringing more countries into regional and global value chains, thereby raising the standard of exports. Southern African countries, particularly Botswana and South Africa, are leading in exporting more sophisticated goods compared to other regions. However, quality improvement has been sluggish in other regions, suggesting the need for tailored

strategies to enhance competitiveness. Richer and more open countries like South Africa and Morocco may need to explore new markets to sustain growth and innovation (Songwe, 2019).

2.2. Study setting: South Africa

2.2.1. Location description

South Africa is located in the most southern part of Africa (Figure 6 and 7). It has a long shoreline that goes from the desert borderline with Namibia on the Atlantic coast all the way along the very southern edge of Africa and then north to the boundary with tropical Mozambique on the Indian Ocean. According to the 2022 census, South Africa had an estimated population of about 60.6 million people, about 49.1 million Black Africans, making up the largest part of the population. Among them, approximately 51.1% are female (around 30.75 million) and approximately 48.9% are male (around 29.39 million). The ethnic makeup of South Africa includes 81.4% Black Africans, 8.2% Coloured[7], 7.3% White, 2.7% Indian/Asian, and 0.4% other ethnicities, as estimated in 2022 (Statista, 2022). About 70% of foreigners in South Africa come from neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Lesotho, while the remaining 30% come from countries such as Malawi, the United Kingdom, Namibia, eSwatini (formerly Swaziland), India, Nigeria, among others. The country is estimated to have around 3.6 million migrants (Gao, 2022).

Figure 6. Map of South Africa within Africa. Source: Google Maps, 2024.

Figure 7: Map of South Africa. Source: Geology.com, 2024.

Gauteng remains the most populated province in South Africa, with around 15.81 million people, which accounts for 26.3% of the country's total population. Following closely, KwaZulu-Natal is the second most populous province, with an estimated 11.5 million people, constituting approximately 19.1% of the total population.

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[7]In South Africa, the term "Coloured" is used in the national census to describe people of mixed-race heritage who have developed a distinct cultural identity over many years.

2.2.2. Historical background (Pre 1994)

In 1948, the National Party came into power and introduced apartheid, a policy aimed at segregating racial groups. This policy favoured Whites while oppressing Blacks and other non-White communities. The ANC spearheaded the resistance against apartheid, leading to the imprisonment of prominent ANC figures, including Nelson Mandela. Internal protests, insurgency, international boycotts, and pressure prompted the regime to eventually lift the ban on the ANC and engage in negotiations for a peaceful transition to a democratic South Africa (Official Guide to South Africa, 2024).

The inaugural democratic elections held in 1994 marked the end of apartheid and established majority governance under an ANC-led administration. Since then, South Africa has grappled with addressing inequalities in wealth, housing, education, and healthcare inherited from the apartheid era, persisting through successive administrations. Cyril Ramaphosa secured re-election as ANC leader in 2022, positioning himself for the upcoming national elections in May 2024 (South Africa Government, 2023).

2.2.3. Democratic South Africa (Post 1994)

Six democratic have been conducted in South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994 (SA Government, 2024). The ANC emerged victorious in all of them. The president serves for five years, and the National Assembly is entitled to change the president at any moment. Normally, presidents can only be in office for a period of two terms, five years each (Freedom House, 2024). The National Assembly chose Cyril Ramaphosa to serve as the interim president in 2018, after Jacob Zuma had succeeded him as the ANC's leader. The most current national elections were in May 2019, and the ANC obtained 57.5% of the vote. Afterwards, the National Assembly chose Ramaphosa to be president for a full term of office (Freedom House, 2024). However, being a democratic country, the ANC government faces opposition from the Democratic Alliance (DA) and recently the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The DA is traced back to the anti-apartheid Progressive Party, founded in 1959, and John Steenhuisen is presently the head of the party. He was named the new leader on November 1, 2020, following the party's Federal Convention (Orderson, 2023). The EFF was founded by Julius Malema, former president of the African National Congress Youth League, in July 2013. The EFF positions itself as a leftist and radical political movement advocating for economic and social justice, Pan-Africanism, land redistribution, and the rights of marginalised communities. The party has gained attention for its outspoken leaders and its focus on issues related to economic inequality and the empowerment of the disadvantaged and open border policies within Africa (Official Guide to South Africa, 2024).

2.2.4. South Africa's presidents' involvement in the African Union

In June 1994, South Africa joined the OAU, which later became the AU. The AU's inaugural session occurred in Durban, South Africa, on July 10, 2002 (African Union, 2023). The AU chair is elected annually by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, rotating among

the continent's five regions. The Chairperson oversees the AU, acting as its global spokesperson and ensuring the implementation of AU decisions (SAHO, 2023).

Thabo Mbeki, who was born on June 18, 1942, and was President of South Africa from 1999 to 2008 (SA Government, 2024). He was appointed as head of the AU from 2002 to 2003 (da Costa, 2023). An influential figure in the fight against apartheid, Mbeki was also a key player in the nation's transition to democracy. He made significant changes to the economy while he was president, but some people disagreed with his leadership because of some of his policies, including how he was hesitant to adopt antiretroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS in South Africa. Mbeki's approach to international affairs built the foundation for South Africa's active participation in global affairs, focusing on collaborations with international entities like the United Nations, G77, AU, World Economic Forum, and G-8 meetings. Notably, South Africa played a critical role in reshaping the continental structure of government relations, facilitating the transition from the OAU to AU during his tenure (Geldenhuys 2008). While he was AU chair, he played a key role in mediating conflicts in different African regions. One of his significant efforts was mediating the peace talks that led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan in 2005, which ultimately paved the way for the independence of South Sudan. As a strong advocate for NEPAD, Mbeki worked to promote this strategic socio-economic development framework in Africa. NEPAD aims to eradicate poverty, encourage sustainable growth, and foster Africa's integration into the global economic system (da Costa, 2023). However, his "quiet diplomacy" approach to the Zimbabwe crisis faced criticism for its perceived ineffectiveness in addressing human rights abuses and electoral irregularities under President Robert Mugabe.

Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, a diplomat and anti-apartheid campaigner who was born on January 27, 1949 (SA Government, 2024). For seven years, from 2012 to 2017, she was the first female to be Chairperson of the AU Council (da Costa, 2023). Before becoming chair of the AU commission, Dlamini Zuma held several ministerial roles in the South Africa administration such as the minister for women and youth. During her time at the AU, she was instrumental in the formulation and promotion of Agenda 2063, advocated for the empowerment of women and gender equality. Under her leadership, the AU initiated programs to enhance the role of women in various sectors, including politics, business, and peacekeeping. She played a role in coordinating AU responses to conflicts in countries such as Mali, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic. Also championed the idea of the unrestricted movement of people across the region to promoting intra-Africa trade and regional integration. She emphasised the need for policies that facilitate easier movement of people and goods. Mobilizing financial resources for AU initiatives and operations remained a challenge during Dlamini-Zuma's tenure. Insufficient funding affected the AU's capacity to enforce its programs effectively. The AU faced difficulties in addressing ongoing security challenges in Africa, such as the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and surrounding regions. The AU's reaction was seen by some as insufficient to contain the security threats (Louw-Vaudran, 2023).

Cyril Ramaphosa, an entrepreneur, and trade union head from South Africa born on November 17, 1952 (SA Government, 2024). He was the AU Chair from 2020 to 2021 and is currently

the President of South Africa since 2018. He is often linked to attempts to fight corruption and boost South Africa's economy. As Chairman of the AU, he was hailed the "Covid19 Champion" for leading the continent's fight against the pandemic and changing the way the AU views trade by advocating the formation of a single market for commodities on the continent (Louw-Vaudran, 2023). Covid-19 diverted Ramaphosa and the AU from their original agenda, even though the pandemic cannot be blamed entirely; Ramaphosa faced challenges in advancing the AU's 2020 theme, "Silencing the Guns," and failed to influence online platforms for critical discussions on issues like Libya and South Sudan. Critics point out that he did not address governance abuses and democratic challenges on the continent (Diatta et al., 2020). Ramaphosa's endorsement of flawed elections in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire raised concerns about his commitment to democratic values. As AU chair, South Africa underplayed its role in addressing pressing SADC issues, including the crises in Zimbabwe and northern Mozambique, falling short of the chair's mandate to advocate for discussions on key regional matters (Louw-Vaudran, 2023).

2.2.5. Post-Apartheid era South African foreign policy orientations (1994-2023)

Mandela's presidency shaped South Africa's foreign policy around a unified, non-racial country "Rainbow Nation." Pillars like human rights, democracy, and regional cooperation defined Mandela's approach post-apartheid. Initiatives aimed to end isolation, re-joining international groups. Mbeki's government maintained these principles but introduced an 'African Renaissance,' emphasising African roots and cooperation. South-South Cooperation and increased peacekeeping marked Mbeki's tenure. Zuma's administration linked foreign policy to development, addressing economic challenges through international partnerships and infrastructure projects like NEPAD, promoting South Africa's integration globally in ensuring South Africa's membership in the BRICS group, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, and China (Louw-Vaudran, 2023).

South Africa distinguished itself as the inaugural African country to centre its foreign policy on the foundation of African identity: Ubuntu (ubuntu means "I am, because you are"). This incorporation of Ubuntu endowed the foreign policy document with an African essence, contributing to partial normative and intellectual leadership. South Africa's participation in African Union Development Agency-NEPAD (AUDA-NEPAD) projects shows its dedication to Africa. It highlights South Africa's role in creating and supporting initiatives like the AU and Agenda 2063. South Africa aims to gain global recognition and support initiatives it helped start. Additionally, it wants to improve the AU's institutions and make sure they remain important for the continent's future. South Africa actively defends these organisations and works to make them more effective and relevant across Africa (Louw-Vaudran, 2023).

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has become a prominent regional power. It has helped expand the topics the AU focuses on and has made important advancements in AU and AUDA-NEPAD initiatives. South Africa has also worked on its own Agenda 2063 projects, contributing to the development and progress of the continent.

2.2.6. Migration & Xenophobia

After apartheid ended in 1994, South Africa became more welcoming to people of all backgrounds, but it also tightened its immigration rules. Even with challenges like mine closures and more people without jobs, migrants from different African places saw South Africa as a good place to find work. Instead of getting temporary work permits, more of them entered illegally or with visitor permits, which helped grow trade and informal jobs. In recent years, there have been more Asian migrants, especially those starting small businesses. Meanwhile, many skilled white workers left due to concerns about the political situation, crime, and poor services. Although there have been efforts to attract skilled foreign workers to fill job gaps, it's been difficult because of regulations. South Africa still needs more skilled workers, especially in areas like healthcare and technology. Despite some problems, South Africa's stability and economic growth have attracted refugees and asylum seekers from nearby countries, even though there have been cases of discrimination and violence against them. For example, many Mozambicans fled to South Africa during their country's civil war in the 1980s. Similarly, people from Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia have sought refuge. However, most Zimbabweans who applied for asylum were considered economic migrants and not given refugee status (Newham, 2017).

Between 2016 and 2021, Gauteng and Western Cape provinces were expected to have the most migrants, around 1,564,861 and 470,657 respectively. During this time, South Africa saw occasional and sometimes violent attacks on African and Asian foreigners living in the country, including refugees, asylum seekers, and people with and without legal documents. Originating in 2021 in Soweto and expanding its presence nationwide, Operation Dudula was initiated by South African youth activists to combat crime and drug abuse in the Gauteng province's communities. However, the movement has gained notoriety for advocating mass deportation of undocumented migrants, obstructing their access to healthcare, conducting raids on businesses owned by foreign nationals, and pressuring them to shut down. The isiZulu term "Dudula," translating to "to push out," symbolises the movement's goal of expelling foreigners from South Africa to their countries of origin. A resounding message from the movement's members suggests that, from their viewpoint, foreign nationals are the primary cause of South Africa's economic challenges and difficulties in delivering essential services (Newham, 2017).

Soon after the South African government implemented a national lockdown on March 26, 2020, there was a rise in anti-migrant messages on social media. On platforms like Twitter, hashtags like 'All foreigners must leave,' 'We want our country back,' or 'Clean up SA' became popular. Surprisingly, 'Put South Africa First' was used over 16,000 times in just one day, ironically on Freedom Day 2020. Groups like Put South Africans First and Operation Dudula organise what campaigns across different parts of South Africa. They've established branches throughout South Africa, employing social media to disseminate their messages.

Contrary to this perspective, South Africa's constitution, safeguarding the rights of both citizens and non-citizens, affirming that every individual possesses the entitlement to liberty and

personal safety, encompassing protection "from all forms of violence from either public or private sources." It is imperative for South African authorities to uphold these principles, vocally condemn xenophobia, pursue accountability for attacks and mistreatment against foreign nationals, and actively foster inclusivity and social (Newham, 2017).

The AU has condemned such violence and emphasised the importance of African nations collaborating and backing each other. South Africa initiated a Five-year National Action Plan to tackle xenophobia, racism, and discrimination, which is a significant move toward addressing the widespread human rights violations caused by xenophobic and gender-based violence and discrimination in the country.

2.2.7. Economy & Crime

The economy and infrastructure of South Africa are well developed compared to other African countries, with the country ranking 38th among the major economies (World Bank, 2022). The country is one of the biggest exporters of minerals such as gold and platinum in the world. It additionally has Africa's biggest stock market and resilient legal, economic, communications, energy, and transport industries. According to the World Bank (2022), South Africa's GDP amounted to USD 6,78 per capita. Every year, South Africa sends about ZAR 11.2 billion to SADC (Finmark, 2023). In addition, South Africa places a 0.2% tax on eligible goods to help cover expenses associated with the African Union (AU, 2023).

In 2019, most households in South Africa relied on salaries or government grants as their main source of income. About 10.7 million households earned regular wages, while 7.9 million received social grants from the government (Statista, 2019). The official unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2023 was 31.9%, with higher rates among Black South Africans (36.8%) compared to other racial groups. The number of employed persons increased to 16.7 million in the same quarter. South Africa has the highest unemployment rate globally (29.83%), with about 55.5% of its population living in poverty (ACMS, 2020). Foreigners make up 5.3% of the country's workforce, and they are more likely to be employed than South Africans. Many foreign-born workers do informal jobs due to exploitation by employers and hopes of transitioning to formal employment. They work mainly in construction, retail, agriculture, domestic work, mining, hospitality, education, health, and related trades (Stats SA, 2023).

Crime is a major concern in South Africa (Figure 8). Household offences such as housebreaking, home burglary, and vehicle theft increased in 2022/23 relative to 2021/22 (Stats SA, 2024). The incidence of crimes against individuals also rose, with the exception of vehicle hijackings and consumer fraud, which declined in 2022/23. An approximate total of 1.6 million occurrences of housebreaking took place, which accounted for 5.7% of all households in the country. In 2022/23, 51.4% of households were involved in reporting incidents to the police, a drop from 2021/22's 59.2% (Stats SA, 2024). Coloureds and Blacks, due to lower standards of living, commit more crime. Moreover, the distribution of crime in South Africa, based on urban-rural distinctions, aligns with patterns observed in numerous other countries. With

68.6% of South Africa's population residing in urban areas, a substantial 78% of all crimes occur in these urban areas. In South Africa, cities like Pretoria, Durban, and Johannesburg have the highest crime rates on the continent. This rise in violent crime is caused by problems like corruption, poverty, unemployment, and the absence of public services. Additionally, Newham (2017) reported that a mere 7.5% of incarcerated individuals in South Africa are non-citizens, indicating that the majority of criminals throughout the nation are South Africa citizens.
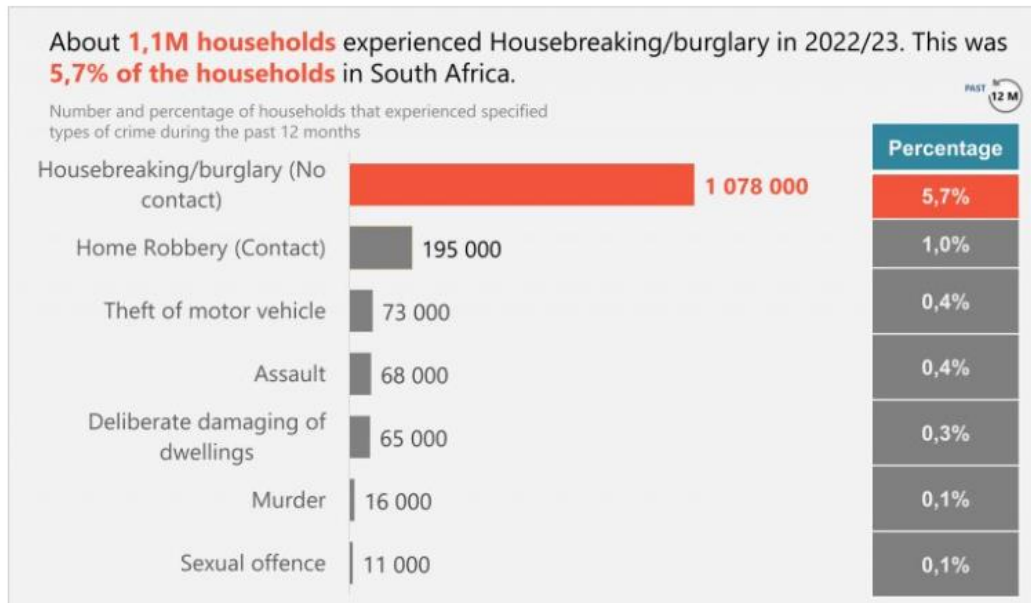
Figure 8. Crime statistics in South Africa 2022/23.
Source: Stats South Africa, 2023.

The United States says that South Africa's government isn't fully doing what it should to stop trafficking, but it's trying hard to improve. They're convicting traffickers, even government workers involved in trafficking. South Africa didn't get downgraded to Tier 3 under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, but it stayed on Tier 2 Watch List for the third consecutive year. The government continues to enforce anti-trafficking laws, with strict penalties for sex and labour trafficking. Over the past five years, reports show that both local and foreign victims are trafficked within South Africa and abroad. Traffickers often target vulnerable individuals, including unemployed people and those struggling with addiction, using tactics like fake job ads on social media (USA Gov, 2022).

2.2.8. Online users in South Africa

According to McInnes (2023), a total of 43.48 million people in South Africa (72.3%) of the population utilise the internet. Most residents (82.9%) reportedly relying on the internet mainly to find information and communicate with friends. Despite the large tally of internet users, about 25.8 million of them are engaged on social media sites, amounting to 42.9% of the entire population (McInnes, 2023). Given that there are 112.7 million cellular mobile lines in South Africa, many people use multiple devices. According to Kemp (2023), 97.6% of people who

use the internet in South Africa do so on their cell phones. As a result, cell phone social media applications and sites are more commonly used in the country (Figure 9).
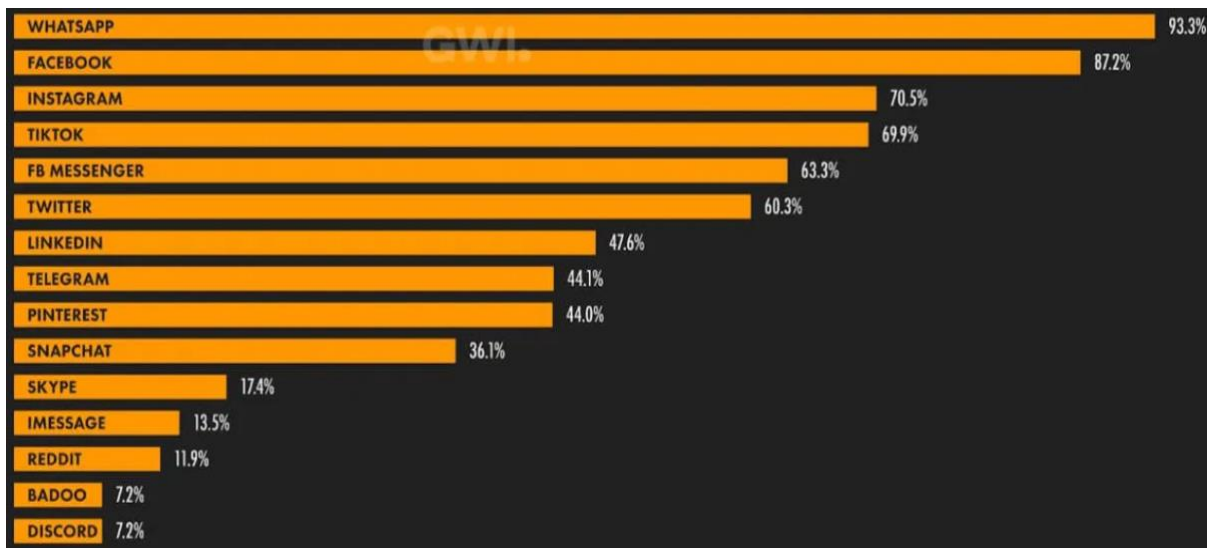
Figure 9. Social media platform preference.
Source: McInnes, 2023.

Social media users in South Africa aligns with the overall gender split in the population. Female users constitute 51.1%, slightly outnumbering male users at 48.7%. Regarding age groups, many users fall within the 18 - 24 range, making up 27%, and the 25 - 34 age group, which comprises 29.6% of the total. Social media has seamlessly integrated into the daily routines and cultural fabric of South Africans. Utilising social media platforms as the primary means to connect with friends and family, as well as to stay informed about the latest news stories and articles, has become a widespread practice (Figure 10). Keeping in touch with friends and family (61.9%), Keeping up with news and current events (46.5%), Seeing what people are talking about (43.5%) (Melwater, 2023).

In South Africa, WhatsApp is the most popular social media platform, which is different from the worldwide trend where Facebook is the most popular. Facebook is the second most used platform, with 87.2% of internet users using it. Instagram and TikTok have slightly lower usage rates, with 70.5% and 69.9% of internet users engaging with them, respectively. TikTok has experienced a significant increase in users over the past year, with an additional 5.4 million users, representing an 83.6% increase. Beyond mere entertainment, TikTok and other social media platforms serve as quasi-search engines, enabling users to seek information and conduct product research. Twitter ranks at 6th position (60.3%) with 3.65 million users in South Africa in early 2023. In 2020 there were (2.99 million), in 2021 (3.48 million) and in 2022 there were (3.93 million) users (Statista, 2024).
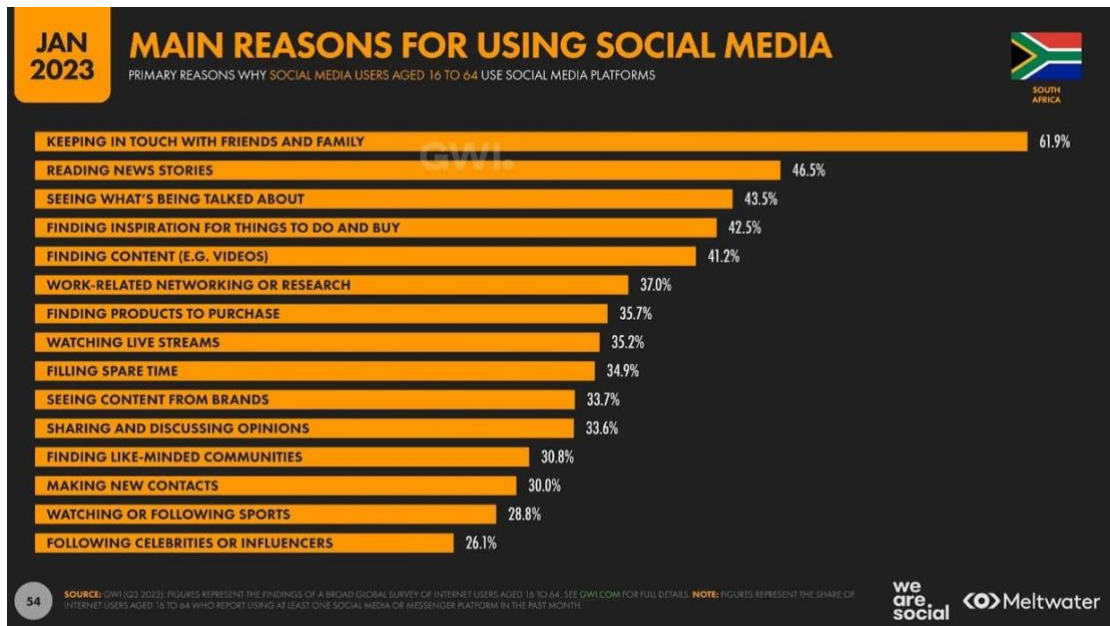
Figure 10. The primary factors driving social media use among South Africans.
Source: Meltwater, 2023.

This shows that Twitter users in South Africa have been gradually increasing in recent years and this platform is best suited to conduct research on breaking news and seeing what others are talking about as Bossetta (2017) states Twitter is a more objective social media site that asks a more objective question when you open it "What's happening?". Twitter positions itself as a site sharing breaking news. On Facebook, the prompt "What's on your mind?" suggests a discussion and opinion-sharing platform, Perrin (2015) argues that while Facebook has a diverse user base, Twitter users are often more interested in politics compared to Facebook users.

2.2.9. Rationale for the selection of online South Africans as target population

Therefore, it's important to for regional integration studies to focus on public opinion and perspectives. In a country like South Africa with a divisive past, studying public opinion is crucial to identify potential sources of conflict or disagreement related to regional integration. Furthermore, public opinion informs effective communication strategies. Knowing how to frame messages and relay the benefits of regional integration in a manner that resonates with the public is crucial for successful implementation. This helps policymakers understand and address concerns related to the perceived loss of national autonomy. Including public perspectives in decision-making processes enhances the democratic nature of regional integration, and with social media becoming a widely used and accessible tool, social media platforms provide a wide reach, allowing researchers to collect opinions from a diverse range of individuals, including those who might be geographically dispersed. It's important to study and gather research on public sentiment on social media because various demographics are represented and respondents have sense of anonymity, encouraging more honest and candid responses which will have both academic and practical relevance.

2.3. Theoretical framework

This study investigated regional integration and its impact on national growth using South Africa as a case study. This chapter conducted a comprehensive review of existing literature relevant to the research topic. It indicated that the topic has received considerable attention in various academic fields such as economics and politics suggesting its complexity and depth of analysis (Kim and Dennis, 2019; Luhmann, 1995; Couldry, Stephansen, Fotopoulou, MacDonald, Clark & Dickens, 2014; Manzuoli et al., 2019; Lin, 2021; Van Der Linden, 2022; Wollebæk et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2017; Li et al., 2020). This section intended to explain the process of regional integration, with a focus on how the idea of regional cooperation has evolved over time. Additionally, it examined how integration related to economic growth and development (Heinonen, 2006; Mutharika 1972; Mapuva & Mayengwa-Mapuva, 2014; Eder, 2021; Hartzenberg, 2011).

Regional integration is a process where states in a defined geographical area willingly cede some sovereignty to conduct transactions, aiming to achieve common goals or benefits collectively (Fye & Senghor, 2015). Integration is about the amalgamation of individual countries into a unified whole (Mutharika, 1972), giving some of the power to make decisions to a new international group (Schmitter, 1970). Regional Integration Agreements are vital in achieving regional integration, as countries enter agreements to unify their social, political, or economic structures, regardless of their geographic location. The motivation for countries to engage in regional integration is driven by pull and push factors. Nations are either attracted to regional bodies for promised benefits or seek solutions to internal challenges. Voluntary participation is important for successful regional integration, as any forced integration would likely fail (Gwala, 2015). This broader context framed the conceptualisation of regional integration in the African region, as explored in this study.

2.3.1. Method of literature review

To understand the main idea of the research topic and its characteristics, a thorough review of academic literature was conducted. I followed three steps to choose and assess possible research articles. Firstly, the articles needed to focus on regional integration in Africa and South Africa. Secondly, they had to be published in peer-reviewed journals from 2000 and 2023, considering the evolution of regional integration in this timeframe and the emergence of modern technology like Twitter. However, earlier research and definitions relevant to the research topic were also added. Thirdly, empirical, and theoretical studies addressing political motivations were considered if they contributed to the discussion.

To retrieve relevant literature, databases like Web of Sciences, EBSCO, Scopus, Science Direct, Emerald, and Google Scholars were searched without restricting publication years. Using keywords like "regional integration in Africa" and "economic integration." The snowballing method, as suggested by Hart (2018), was employed to identify additional relevant research papers. After reviewing titles, abstracts, and keywords, 365 articles were initially identified, of which 243 were selected for thematic review, primarily focusing on political,

economic, sociological, and psychological perspectives: *Journal of Monetary Economics, Economic Journal, Journal of International Economics Annual Review of Sociology, African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, Journal of African Elections, African Security Review, Journal of Contemporary African Studies, Annual Review of Political Science, Political Science Quarterly, Political Science Quarterly, International Organization, Journal of Political Economy, Review of Economic Studies, American Economic Review and Quarterly Journal of Economics.*

Official statistics were gathered from national and international sources like Stats SA, the World Bank, and the U.S. Department of State. While discussions on regional integration date back to the 1950s, there's been a rise in publications on this topic in the context regrading Africa between 2003 to 2023. Research articles that were selected had a solid foundation from reputable journals. In the end, 243 articles were studied for the literature review. Figure 11 shows how research articles are distributed across publication years.
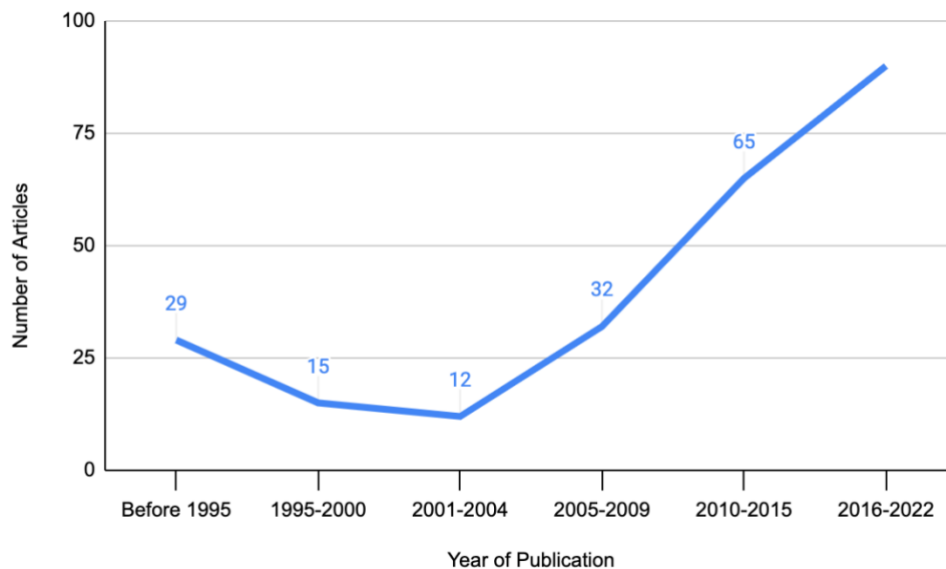
Figure 11. Distribution of reviewed articles by the year of publication.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

2.3.2. The concept of regional integration

Regional integration is not a new concept, tracing back to involuntary forms before the Cold War ended (Mattli, 1999). Since then, numerous integration organisations have emerged or been revitalised, indicating a shift towards voluntary integration (Heinonen, 2006). The concept gained traction in the 19th century in Europe and has since garnered global attention and popularity, particularly in the realms of politics, economics, and trade. Despite its widespread recognition, a precise definition of regional integration remains elusive, with scholars like Haas (1971) struggling to formulate a clear definition even after years of study.

Mutharika (1972) defines integration as the process of bringing disparate parts together into a cohesive whole. Regional integration, therefore, entails the development of a shared sense of community, institutions, and practices among a group of people within a specific territory, fostering expectations of peaceful change over time (Hartzenberg, 2011). This process typically involves two or more national economies forming formal agreements on trade conduct. Regional economic integration aims to unite various economies within a region into a single unit to promote economic development, facilitating improved trade and the unrestricted movement of production factors (Mapuva et al., 2014; Mutharika, 1972). Smaller economies within a region may find themselves marginalised if they operate independently rather than participating in regional integration initiatives (Wentworth et al., 2013; Soomer, 2003). The integration process can manifest in political, social, and economic forms, with regional integration arrangements being the primary method for regions to achieve integration goals (Madyo, 2008). Overall, regional integration represents a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that holds significant implications for regional development and cooperation (Madyo, 2008).

The new approach examines the structural changes resulting from regional integration and explores how socio-economic effects can be optimised. Scholars now see regional integration as dynamic rather than static, as proposed by earlier customs union theories. Despite extensive analysis, there's no single, comprehensive definition of regional integration due to its multidimensional nature and constant evolution. Economists, political scientists, and others emphasise different aspects, making a universal definition challenging. Regional initiatives are ongoing processes responding to both internal and external changes, with conceptualisation approaches evolving over time. In the 21st century, regional integration has shifted from purely economic to socio-economic development, according to Doidge (2007). Recent global events like the pandemic and geopolitical tensions may lead to new aspects of regional integration experiences.

2.3.3. Regional economic integration

Concept of economic integration

Regional economic integration, much like other socio-economic phenomena, has seen various attempts to understand it. Initially, scholars primarily saw it as a political tool for ensuring peace, particularly in Europe (Haas, 1958; Mitrany, 1966). However, the economic side gained prominence with the European project, leading to research on its evolution and impact on international trade (Viner, 1950; Meade, 1955). The earliest theories on economic integration focused on expanding market economies, often associating regional initiatives with customs unions and free trade areas. The neoclassical debate on "integration by the market" laid the groundwork for modern theories on international trade (Balassa, 1961). Later research in regions like Africa and Latin America challenged the neoclassical approach, introducing alternative models that examined structural changes and socio-economic effects, portraying regional integration as a dynamic process (Aron, 1953; Ropke, 1959).

Despite extensive analysis, a universally accepted definition of regional integration remains elusive due to its multidimensional and dynamic nature. Various disciplines, including economics, politics, social sciences, and international relations, emphasise various dimensions of integration, complicating the formulation of a comprehensive definition (Pomerlyan, 2022). Furthermore, regional projects adapt over time to both internal and external shifts, fostering ongoing conceptual advancements. In the present era, regional integration has expanded beyond its initial economic focus to encompass socio-economic dimensions and serve as a catalyst for progress. Recent global occurrences like the COVID-19 pandemic and disruptions in global production and financial systems have also influenced this evolution, and heightened geopolitical tensions may further shape the landscape of regional integration, introducing new dimensions to the discourse (Doidge, 2007). As such, approaches to conceptualising regional integration continue to evolve in line with emerging challenges and opportunities on the international stage.

According to Nye (1968), regional integration means combining different parts to make one whole. There are three main types:

- "Economic integration" is about creating a cross-border economy.
- "Social integration" is about building a cross-border society.
- "Political integration" is about developing cross-border political connections.

The thesis focused specifically on economic integration, opting for a more nuanced analysis rather than a broad understanding of integration as a whole. This approach aimed to yield more meaningful insights.

Balassa (1961) says economic integration is both a process and a situation where discrimination between economies is removed. Haas disagrees (1968), saying it's just a process towards unity. Nye (1968) sees it as making countries more reliant on each other, which reduces their independence a bit. Other scholars have their own ideas, like Santos-Paulino et al. (2019) who thinks it's about countries working together because they have different strengths. Grimwade (2013) says it's countries close to each other teaming up to make a single region by making it easier to move goods and sharing power. Shishkov (2001) believes it's when countries become very connected, merging their markets, and having the same rules for money and trade inside and outside their borders. Liventsev et al. (2001) asserts that it's like slowly joining different countries' economies to create a new, unified one. They say this creates new ways for countries to work together economically. Butorina (2005) describes how regional integration is connected to globalisation. Seeing it as countries choosing to be a part of the global system, where they play a role in how wealth and power are spread around the world.

From the explanations given above, it can be inferred that economic integration includes the following aspects:

- Getting rid of barriers and discrimination.

- Happening between countries that have things in common like geography, economy, history, or special connections.
- Resulting in the creation of shared institutions to make integration stronger.
- Trying to make sure that the different parts involved work well together, with important political players from the countries cooperating.

For the AU, which is the focus of this study, economic integration goes beyond just getting rid of trade barriers. It's seen as a strategic way to boost economic growth and development. The goal is to reduce dependence on developed countries and strengthen the region's ability to negotiate collectively (Eder, 2021). This involves the delegation of authority and political control from individual countries to supra-national entities tasked with implementing the integration agenda.

2.3.4. Rationale for participating in integration initiatives

Economic integration goes beyond just getting rid of trade barriers. Many countries see it as a powerful way to boost their growth and development. For developing nations, it's also a way to kickstart industrialisation and change their economies for the better. This subchapter looked into why countries opt for integration endeavours and what it could mean for their growth and development.

Impacts of economic integration on growth and development

The conventional theory of integration, as outlined by Viner (1950) and expanded upon by Rivera-Batiz & Romer (1991), challenges the notion that regional integration uniformly benefits global welfare. Viner's seminal work questioned the assumption that integration always leads to increased world welfare, emphasising the need to consider both trade creation and trade diversion effects. Trade creation is getting rid of trade barriers in a region making trade between countries in that region increase because they start buying things from each other instead of from other places. Trade diversion is when countries in the group start buying more expensive things from each other instead of cheaper things from outside the group. Meade (1955) further elaborated on Viner's work, highlighting how integration affects what people buy. This includes lower prices resulting from tariff elimination, which stimulates demand and increases consumption levels, particularly in markets with positive demand elasticity. Grimwade (2013) argues that considering consumption effects enhances the potential welfare gains from regional economic blocks.

Considered beyond immediate static effects, the formation of regional trade blocs may also induce dynamic effects, contributing to more efficient domestic resource utilisation and incentivising capital movement, fostering domestic capital formation. This falls under the purview of the new integration theory, which explores dynamic consequences. Dynamic effects, as suggested by various scholars, encompass: 1) economies of scale (Corden, 1972; Balassa, 1961); 2) increased efficiency due to more competition among businesses (Marinov, 2014); 3) sharing technology and knowledge between countries (Rivera-Batiz & Romer, 1991; Ventura, 2005); 4) more stable markets for buying and selling goods (Venables, 2001); 5)

Attracting more investment from other countries (Baldwin et al., 1995); 6) improving the quality of institutions (Dollar & Kraay, 2002; Hadhek & Mrad, 2015; 7) creating more opportunities for businesses to operate internationally (Plummer et al., 2010); and 8) Strengthening a country's position in the world and boosting development prospects (Moravcsik, 1998). These dynamic effects highlight the multifaceted and evolving nature of the consequences associated with economic integration, extending beyond immediate trade considerations to encompass broader economic, technological, and institutional dimensions.

Corden (1972) explored into what happens when markets get bigger because of economic integration. Arguing that, beyond conventional trade creation, regional integration could yield cost reductions by lowering prices of existing supply sources, particularly when production exists in multiple countries within the regional group. This could lead to the initiation of new production not previously feasible, as the elimination of trade barriers makes domestic production economically viable. Baldwin (1989) emphasised that regional integration is important for making economies grow. Suggesting that when trade becomes freer, it can help economies in the medium and long term. Believing that if regional integration helps to allocate resources better, it could lead to more production. Arguing that growth in the medium term depends on building things like factories and infrastructure. The rise in output stimulates higher savings, fostering increased investment rates and cumulative output growth. For sustained growth in the long term, Baldwin said we should consider technology as something that grows from within, helping the economy grow faster and for longer.

Integration yields intangible benefits like macroeconomic stability, enhanced investment rankings, and institutional quality improvement. It fosters political and international stability, fostering trust and guarding against trade conflicts. Venables (2001), addresses issues of unilateral liberalisation, fostering strong institutions. The complexity of the institutional aspect of integration poses a challenge, involving both deregulation and re-regulation. It necessitates the adoption of unified rules and delegation of authority to supranational bodies (Hix, 2010). Wisely designed delegation enhances decision-making, establishes checks, and balances, and advances collective interests (Pollack, 2003). This contrasts with the neoclassical view that markets are naturally efficient; in reality, institutions and legislation rectify market failures. Delegating authority reduces potential power abuse and mitigates negative market externalities.

Economic integration for welfare and development

In recent decades, economic integration has transcended its initial role as a market tool and has become a development instrument. Its scope now encompasses infrastructure investment, regional problem-solving, logistics enhancement, and the establishment of unified standards and regulations (UNDP, 2011). Additionally, poverty reduction and equity-related concerns have been incorporated into the economic integration agenda (Yeates, 2014). While existing literature primarily approaches integration effects from an economic standpoint, overlooking social considerations, several scholars contend that poverty reduction is an indirect outcome of regional integration, driven by enhanced economic efficiency, trade-led growth, and increased

employment opportunities ('t Veld et al., 2006). However, this perspective neglects the potential socio-political benefits of closer cooperation between integrated states and fails to explore how integration can contribute to human development, equality, health, and education.

There hasn't been much research on how regional integration impacts social policies, but some studies have looked at the EU's rules for aligning rights and policies. They've also explored how different countries coordinate efforts in areas like employment, food security, and education (Threlfall, 2003; Madeira, 2014; Vigevani & Aragusuke, 2013). But with the recent concept of "developmental regionalism" (Doidge, 2007), which focuses on how regional cooperation can help improve people's lives, recently, scholars have started to pay more attention to the social aspects of regional integration, especially its impact on well-being and reducing poverty (Riggirozzi, 2017). This new perspective on development considers not just economic growth but also improvements in people's lives, covering aspects like health, education, income, and security (UNDP, 2011).

The concept of "developmental regionalism" in economic integration implies a comprehensive collaboration between states, extending beyond mere trade facilitation to encompass diverse areas such as research, industrial and infrastructure development. This approach prioritises non-economic benefits, emphasising local processing, building connections between nearby places to make products, and supporting industries in the region that are good at what they do. Additionally, developmental regionalism wants to make businesses stronger and encourage people to start their own businesses while fostering economic linkages to establish "development corridors" in key sectors (Akinkugbe, 2020). In response to policymakers' demands, this research has investigated on the impacts of regional integration on reducing poverty, spending on social programs, health, and factors beyond economics, like forming collective identities and ensuring security. The discussion about how regional integration relates to poverty started with Schiff & Winters (2003) and In 't Veld (2019). Their analysis highlighted how expanding markets and labour movement impact regional policies, stressing the importance of these policies in fairly distributing the effects of integration. They suggest that economic growth should ultimately lead to overall well-being.

Gasiorek and colleagues (2016) suggest that the impact of regional integration on poverty can differ depending on the region's specific rules and how deeply integrated they are. When countries join together, it can change how they deal with social issues and spend money in three main ways. Firstly, it might make it easier for people and money to move around between countries, which can make member countries richer. However, it could also cause problems like job losses, and to deal with this, governments might increase social spending to help people who are struggling. Caporaso and Tarrow (2009) argue that European integration made social protections better because the EU's Court of Justice protected workers' rights. Also, joining together might make countries change how they spend money on social issues. However, it could also lead countries to cut back on social programs and change tax laws to attract businesses. Pierson (1996) says that sometimes governments might blame the integration for cutting social programs.

If regional integration doesn't consider social aspects, it might not affect social policies within individual countries. Social policy changes are more likely to happen due to domestic factors like population growth or economic shifts (Huber & Stevens, 2001; Mosley, 2005). Regarding employment, regional integration yields mixed outcomes. Some studies suggest it can improve labour rights and conditions, while others argue it may shorten employment due to increased market competition (Deacon, 2008). Krueger (2000) says that when markets become more open, there's a greater need for social safety nets. Managing job markets well is key to getting the most out of economic integration's positive effects on employment. Regional organisations might be able to make sure that labour policies are put into practice effectively, especially in places like Africa that are still developing (Eder, 2021). A suggestion by Acharya (2011) is that regional integration institutions must ensure 'normative congruence' by aligning international norms with local contexts.

Apart from just being involved with institutions and policies, regionalism helps shape people's sense of identity, strengthening "human security." Unlike traditional security approaches, human security includes protection from diseases, hunger, and repression (Lawson, 2005). Regional integration initiatives protect minority rights and enhance human and societal security (Thiel, 2007). Drawing from the discussion on the correlation between integration and growth as well as the objectives stated in Agenda 2063, it is evident that the AU aims for economic integration with several motivations in mind. These motivations include enhancing the economies of member states, fostering economic advancement through bolstering business operations, promoting trade, and encouraging healthy competition. Furthermore, the AU aims to create a structure that supports the growth of people's professional skills, social and cultural connections, and economic opportunities in the region.

2.3.5. Utilitarian approach & Personalistic approach

The theory that supports the idea that for regional integration to succeed, participating member states must see the benefits is the utilitarian approach, which focuses on the greatest good for the greatest number and emphasises the benefits and outcomes of integration for collective well-being. This approach can be used to support the idea that citizens member states will only support continued participation in regional integration pacts if they perceive tangible benefits such as economic growth, improved social services, and enhanced regional stability. The utilitarian approach is supported by the concept of regionalism, which is characterised by an emotional connection to the values or elements of a specific area. It includes activities that benefit the region, focusing on preserving and developing its unique values across different aspects of human life (Gocko, 2021; Jordaan, 2014). The utilitarian approach to regional integration, focuses on maximising happiness or utility for the most people. It follows utilitarian criteria, which consider pleasure and pain as the main factors influencing human lives, reflecting ethical hedonism. In this approach, the goodness of a situation is assessed by considering the total happiness or utility it generates, and decisions are made based on what will result in the best overall outcome (Renouard, 2011).

In contrast, the personalistic approach to regional integration is characterised by a focus on individual motives and personal interests. This approach is anchored in duty ethics, which argues that the morality of actions hinges on the motivations of the individual performing the action (Ketola, 2008). It emphasises acting purely from duty and considers a good will as the only intrinsic good (Blackburn, 2001). The core outcomes of the personalistic approach include the development of virtue and character, good judgment, justice, courage, and self-control (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2012). The personalistic approach to regional integration, as discussed by Larceneux et al., (2015) emphasises the influence of individual leaders and their personal interests in shaping the integration process. This approach often leads to decisions that prioritise personal gains over collective benefits, potentially hindering the advancement of regional integration. The implications of the personalistic approach are significant for regional integration efforts, as it can impose financial burdens on the integration process and hinder the achievement of collective benefits.

The implications of these contrasting approaches for regional integration are significant. The utilitarian approach prioritises the collective well-being of the population, aiming to maximise overall outcomes. In contrast, the personalistic approach can hinder the progress of regional integration by prioritising individual interests and imposing financial burdens on the integration process. These differing perspectives have implications for policymaking, resource allocation, and the overall societal impact of regional integration efforts. The success of regional integration in Africa may hinge on the ability to demonstrate clear benefits to member countries and the respective citizens, as well as the inclusion and participation of diverse communities within the integration process.

2.3.6. Summary

This chapter explored existing literature on regional integration, focusing on economic integration and the activities of the South Africa and the African Union. It analysed secondary data to understand the AU's impact on trade and investments within Africa and its perception by other African nations. The chapter also discussed South Africa's history and its role in regional integration efforts. Overall, this literature review enhanced understanding of the research topic, relevant theories, and ongoing debates, which are essential for achieving the dissertation's objectives and filled in existing knowledge gaps.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter introduced the research questions and hypotheses, along with the methodology. It also explained the methods used to gather data, outlining why these methods were chosen. The rationale behind selecting these research methods is based on the belief that they offered a unique viewpoint and address the research questions effectively. Due to the specific goals of the research, a qualitative research approach mixed with data science was chosen as the most suitable methodology using social media as the key element was employed to access a vast and varied array of individuals and the content they produce, and a comprehensive discussion is presented on the utilisation of social media using data scraping methods. This approach was employed to identify voices that might remain unheard through conventional means, such as semi-structured interviews and internet surveys incorporating open-ended questions. The last part of the chapter outlined ethical considerations and summary.

After reviewing existing literature and theoretical concepts in chapter two, the study created a series of research questions to direct its analysis. These questions were designed to explore into specific areas of interest identified in the literature review and theoretical frameworks. The analysis then focused on addressing these research questions to better understand the topic under investigation.

3.2. Research Design

The research design of the study outlined the path I followed during each stage of the study. According to Knowles (2006:123), the research design focuses on goals, uses, purposes, intentions, and plans, considering practical constraints like location, time, budget, and staff availability. Understanding the study's design, methods, and locations provides a framework for interpreting its outcomes. In the social sciences, research designs are crucial for addressing study questions clearly. They help organise research and define key components like samples and methods. Most importantly, they ensure that these elements are integrated cohesively to effectively address the research questions.

Research design refers to the plan of research methods and techniques selected by a researcher. This dissertation investigated if South Africa has benefitted from its AU membership based on public opinion. Qualitative research methods enabled a thorough exploration of a subject without being constrained by the rigid variables associated with only quantitative research techniques.

Pistrang & Barker (2012) states that social scientists use qualitative methods to understand how people see and experience the world through detailed descriptions., and the advancement of social media and the internet has enabled the emergence of innovative data collection methods. Social media platforms are useful in allowing users to generate content, interact with other users and create a space where anyone can have a say or an opinion about "any topic". Not only is social media rich in content production, but there is vast and dynamic data sets created

by millions of users voluntarily and naturally. This allows researchers the ability to explore, process and analyse data sets that would be difficult using conventional qualitative methods (Andreotta et al., 2019). This study also employed the benefits of using qualitative content analysis of social media data to study South African role in regional integration in Africa and its perceived benefits.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Data Collection Tool: Talkwalker

Talkwalker Quick Search, a tool for monitoring and analysing social media in real-time, to find relevant tweets was utilised. Talkwalker, created by a company in Luxembourg, can examine the actions and habits of anonymous groups or individuals on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. It searches for important information on specific topics, gathers news from anonymous sources, and provides links along with post timestamps. Additionally, it tracks brand appearances and detects new trends as they appear on social media, using artificial intelligence to collect the necessary data. Specifically, Talkwalker was used to gather current information on public perception and opinion regarding South African commentary on African Union-related topics on Twitter (Li et al., 2022).

Talkwalker allowed the identification of major themes in South African discussions based on customised search criteria, offering insights into ongoing conversations. The tool also monitored trending hashtags, providing a nuanced understanding of online dynamics and trends (Talkwalker, Luxembourg). Moreover, Talkwalker's capabilities extend to demographic insights, helping analyse the engagement of individuals on social media. This feature enhances the understanding of the target audience and their characteristics. Additionally, the sentiment analysis feature aided in identifying negative and positive posts related to South Africa's contributions and interactions within the AU.

3.3.2. A framework integrating computational and qualitative text analyses

This study used a framework developed by Andreotta et al. (2019) to analyse data in four phases, combining data science with qualitative analysis. By automating parts of data collection and organisation, this method helps manage the large volume of social media data. The framework builds on existing methodologies, such as those by Collins and Nerlich (2015), McKenna et al. (2017), and studies by Lewis et al. (2013) and Newman (2016), with inspiration from Marwick's (2014) approach. Marwick's method involves collecting, organising, and analysing social media data subsets qualitatively. The framework in (Figure 14) adds formal relevance considerations and uses quantitative techniques to guide data subset extraction. The steps of this research framework include harvesting social media data, compressing it based on relevance using data science, extracting a relevant subset, and conducting qualitative analysis on that subset.
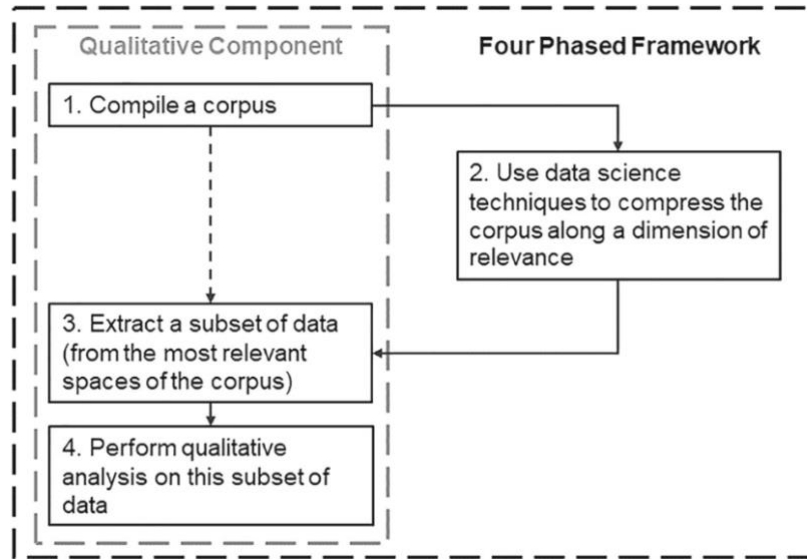
Figure 12. Schematic overview of the four-phased framework.
Source: Andreotta et al., 2019.

Phase 1: Harvest social media data and compile a corpus

In this study data was captured through a diagnostic query to capture content containing specified terms (Sharma et al., 2018). Through this diagnostic query, it was geotagged for location (Hoppe, 2009) and content posted in a particular time frame (Procter et al., 2013). Boolean operators were used to join the words "AND" operator combines two keywords; "OR" means that a least one of the terms which are linked by an OR have to be mentioned in the same article/sentence.

Below is the exact query:

("South Africa" OR Mzansi OR NDZ OR Ramaphosa OR "Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma" OR Mbheki OR Zuma) AND ("African Union" OR AU OR "African Union Commision" OR AUC OR "Agenda 2063" OR "African Union policy") AND lang:en AND sourcecountry:za

Further Boolean operators and filters from Talkwalker were used in the process to filter down to authentic human voices to ensure that the data set does not include news articles or spam, this was the filter used to clean up the data set. "AND NOT" excludes a word of an entry.

AND NOT ((++"RT")) AND pornlevel:0 AND NOT sourcetype:ONLINENEWS_NEWSPAPER AND NOT sourcetype:ONLINENEWS_OTHER AND NOT sourcetype:BLOG AND NOT sourcetype:MESSAGEBOARD AND NOT sourcetype:ONLINENEWS_TVRADIO AND NOT sourcetype:ONLINENEWS_MAGAZINE

The purpose of this research was to distinguish and gather data from human voices and not media, political voices, and civil society organisations (CSOs). This filter that I applied ((++"RT")) also removed Retweets so that I did not code the same tweet again.

Tweets containing the keywords "African Union", or "AU" combined with the names and nicknames of past South African AU chairs posted between 1 December 2020 and 1 December 2022 were identified by TalkWalker Quick Search (Talkwalker, Luxembourg, Luxembourg).

Talkwalker archives data for two years, from this archive, the tweets had to meet three conditions: (1) they must be geotagged to South Africa, (2) they must be posted between 2020 and 2022, and (3) they must discuss the African Union and South Africa's membership. Tweets were downloaded as a CSV file as shown in Figure 13, which is the interface of Talkwalker showing the total results and trendline that resulted in a total of 1373 tweets from a total of 15,657 if we did not include all the filters to get the authentic human voices. The orange arrow shows that the data was downloaded.
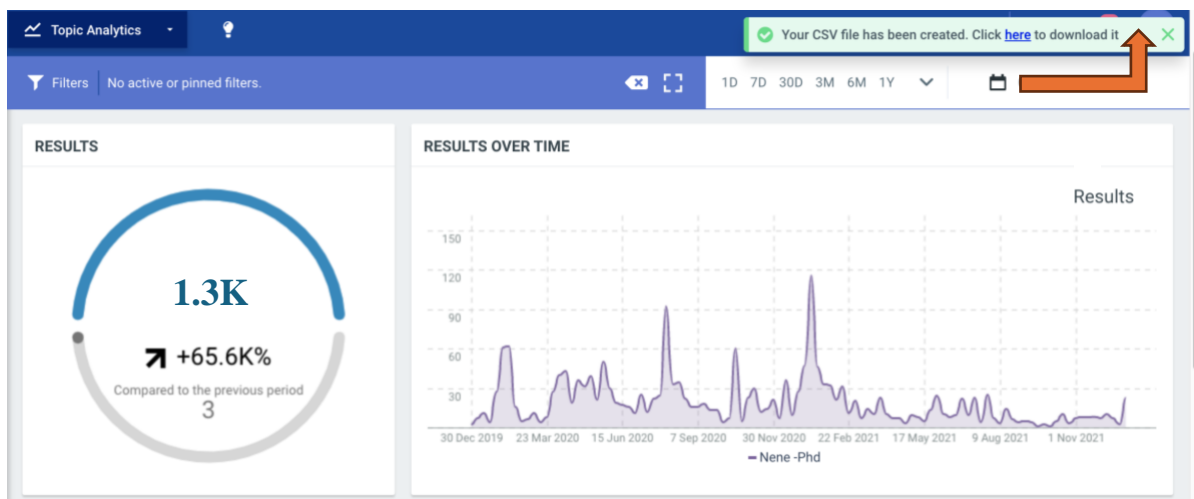
Figure 13. Data cleansing and data downloading.
Source: Talkwalker, 2023.

Phase 2: Use data science techniques to compress the corpus along a dimension of relevance (Selection of eligible tweets)

Examining the whole dataset can be enticing to researchers, but focusing on a subsample is more manageable and practical (Karami et al., 2020). This process is done by sorting out the data along the dimensions of relevance, and choosing a sample that will be useful to address the research questions that are being addressed. Relevance as described by (McKenna et al., 2017), is content that is helpful for answering the research questions and suitable for the intended qualitative analysis.

I acted as a reviewer to check if the identified tweets met the criteria. Tweets were selected for analysis if they were written in English and relevant to South Africa and its membership with the AU. For example, tweets concerning South Africa leaving the AU or users or tweets where

people talk about the influence or role of past South African AU chairs in the AU were included. Tweets were excluded if they: 1) were advertisements, marketing efforts, or identical posts from various user accounts, 2) were unrelated to South Africa's role or involvement in the AU.

I conducted a content analysis of Twitter posts using a coding scheme aligned with a detailed typology. Quality assessment involved human evaluation to identify problematic topics. Initially, I acquainted myself with 50% of the included tweets to create initial codes and definitions in a code frame (Appendix), searching for potential themes. Codes and themes underwent continuous review and refinement until all tweets were analysed. The code frame aided in categorising tweets into specific themes, and each tweet was iteratively evaluated for consistent coding. A second reviewer (LL) independently confirmed the classification of tweets and themes. For ambiguous tweets, I looked at the original tweets and related sources or websites to get a clearer understanding. Any disagreements between the researcher and the reviewer were discussed over three 2-hour sessions until we reached an agreement. To measure how different topics were from each other, I used Talkwalker to automatically compare each topic within the same group after identifying three distinct topics based on sentiment as seen in results of Figure 14 below and the results in Figure 22.

Figure 14 shows the AI Classifier interface feature of Talkwalker that I manually trained for the sentiment analysis after data has been cleansed. In Figure 14, one can see that it showed the original tweet, sentiment emoji face, how many times the tweet was mentioned/retweeted, the author's followers, when it was published and location. Talkwalker provided me with options between Positive (green emoji), Negative (red emoji) and Neutral (orange emoji). For this study I classified any negative SA mentions in AU as negative, positive comments as positive, and neutral as factual (meaning where users concretely stated information that I could back up with secondary information and was not opinion). After clicking on my selection, it would go onto the next tweet, as they classify more, the progress bars filled up on the "overall progress bar". Once full, I clicked "train now". This ensured that the results were accurate. I could train the AI countless number of times or undo last selection at the bottom of the page. The Talkwalker AI Engine trains in a matter of seconds, and then applies the classifications across the entire data in real-time. I could apply this model to back data too.
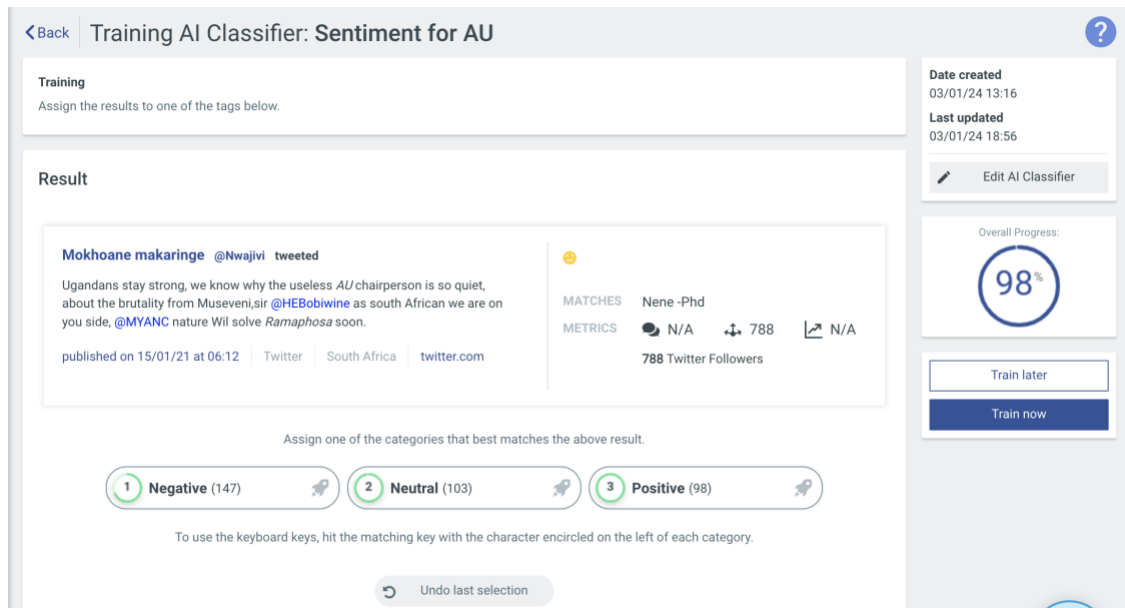
Figure 14. Talkwalker AI Classifier training process.
Source: Talkwalker, 2023.

While training the AI, I could check for accuracy of the classifier by checking if it coded the tweets correctly (Figure 15) by going to the data set and randomly choosing any date on the trendline and it would bring up tweets. The arrows in blue show the emoji face (sentiments) on the right of the sentiment after the first attempt which was successful. This helped me categorise my tweets into predefined topics and themes relevant to my research.
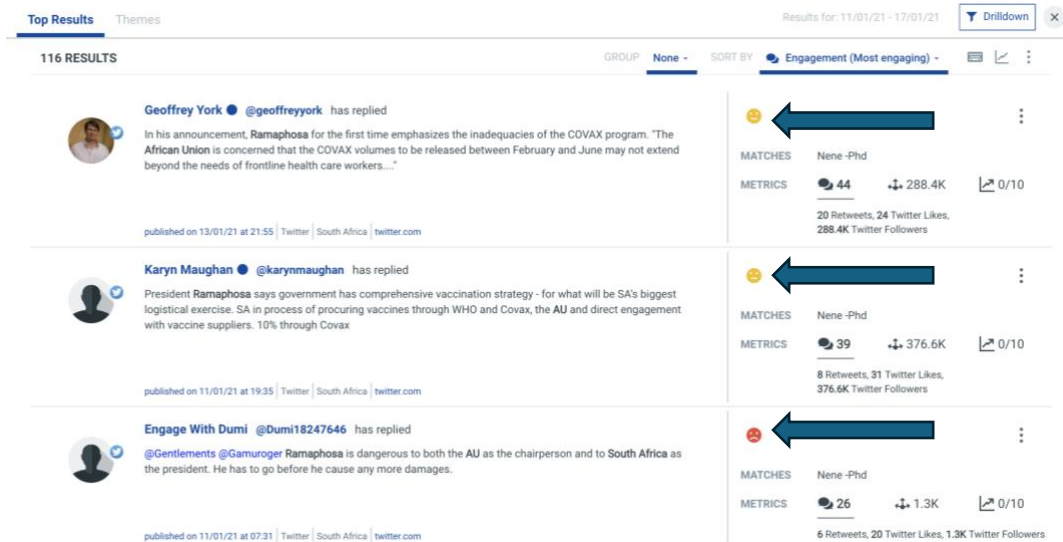
Figure 15. Validating coded data using machine learning algorithms based on sentiment.
Source: Talkwalker, 2023.

Identifying topics most relevant for answering the research question

To identify key topics, clusters of topics, and other concepts as outlined by Andreotta et al., 2019, a list of definitions is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Glossary of terms for methodology.
Source: Andreotta et al., 2019 and adapted by Author, 2024.

Concept	Defintion	Process for derivation
Topic	An abstract representation of semantically related words and concepts	Topic Modeling
Group of topics	A collection of similar topics from different batches	Topic Alignment
Prevalent topic groupings	Groups of topics which contain at least three topics	Topic Alignment
Theme	A patterned meaning of tweets that distinctly answers our research question: what the common topics of South African tweets about AU and South African's growth and development because of AU membership	Thematic Analysis

Extract a subset of data from the most relevant spaces of the corpus

After sorting the corpus by relevance, the most pertinent data was selected to address the research inquiries. This ensured that I dealt with a manageable amount of content for qualitative analysis. As a result, the data set for qualitative examination decreased from 1764 tweets to 1373 tweets that I coded and reviewed as seen in Figure 13.

Phase 4: Perform a qualitative analysis on this subset of data

The last step was conducting a qualitative thematic analysis to tackle the research questions. Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen because it's flexible and can accommodate various qualitative approaches. It's effective in identifying commonalities and disparities among units of analysis, such as tweets, making it ideal for identifying topics (Andreotta et al., 2019). Thematic analysis is typically used for longer texts like interviews, not short texts like tweets. For this study, the regular thematic analysis process (illustrated in Table 4) was adjusted as follows.

Table 4. Stages of thematic analysis for qualitative data collection.
Source: Andreotta et al., 2019.

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

In the first two phases of thematic analysis, I began by reading through tweets within each main topic group in order. This approach capitalises on the fact that tweets within the same topic are usually quite similar in content. When encountering unclear tweets, I referred to the topic of the tweet (and other related topics from the same group) to help understand its meaning. By using this framework of topic groupings, it made it easier to interpret the data, create initial codes, and identify themes.

Next, the main topic groups were employed to generate initial codes and identify themes (TA phases 2 and 3). For instance, these groups outlined content related to Stay in AU: AU membership as a good thing (group 1), South Africa is not the best hegemon for the AU (group 2), Leave AU: No benefit from AU membership (group 3). Keywords representing these topics were utilised as initial codes (e.g., "leave," "stay," "benefit," "leader/ship"). Overall, this approach provided an initial set of codes and insight into the topic structure, revealing important aspects of the data set.

This augmented thematic analysis was performed to generate themes, following that process the themes were applied to the data and a reviewer (LL) agreed on the main theme of each tweet.

3.4. The rationale behind the selection of this research methodology

During my doctoral studies being based in Hungary, compounded by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, obtaining primary data through interviews or questionnaires became logistically challenging. Consequently, I opted for a methodological approach wherein I could analyse public comments and opinions without the need for personal interaction with respondents.

Throughout my studies, attempts were made to engage in discussions with individuals regarding the topic at hand. However, it became apparent that the subject matter was sensitive, prompting restraint among participants to discuss it openly and candidly, particularly in a written format such as a doctoral thesis. Consequently, I opted to employ the Talkwalker methodology, which removed the need for direct engagement with individuals. This approach allowed for the exploration of perspectives without placing individuals in potentially uncomfortable or compromising situations. The study corroborated the validity of the Two-Step Flow Theory, demonstrating that the anonymity afforded by social media platforms enables individuals to express their opinions without fear of social repercussions, aligning with Noelle-Neumann's (1974) theory of the "spiral of silence". Participants were able to articulate their views freely, utilising both personal and anonymous accounts.

Talkwalker is a powerful tool for checking social media. It helps users find specific information on various online platforms, like social media, blogs, and news sites. Users can customise their searches by setting date ranges and choosing specific sources (Talkwalker, Luxembourg).

When researchers analyse a subset of tweets using a qualitative thematic analysis, they generate themes that answer their research questions (Li et al., 2022). These themes, unlike those

generated by computers, come from human coders interpreting content and are tailored to the researcher's specific questions. This method allows for including important information, like the broader context of discussed events or terms and an understanding of the hidden meaning of tweets, which can sometimes be unclear.

Scholars like Freelon et al. (2018) have used social media and tools like Talkwalker to study people's voices on platforms like Twitter. They looked at the activity of different groups, like 'Black Twitter', 'Asian-American Twitter', and 'Feminist Twitter', by checking hashtags used in tweets from 2015 to 2016.

Gathering data from social media platforms is becoming more adaptable than traditional methods. Researchers can now harvest data without using a lot of resources if they have the tools to access and process the data. This approach differs from interviews and surveys that is dependent on the participation of respondents which can be time-consuming and require effort. Lastly social media analysis offers a more ecological approach to research. Social media data comes directly from real-life interactions online, involving many different people, without researchers asking questions beforehand unlike other approaches where participants are prompted in artificial settings (laboratory-based interviews, focus groups). When comparing this to traditional research methods, participants can behave however they want without much influence from the researchers (Andreotta et al., 2019).

Table 5. Benefits of qualitative analysis using social media.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

Benefits	Explanation
Extensive data gathering	The use of qualitative content analysis has enabled the gathering of massive amounts of data in real time from social media sites like Twitter, Facebook.
In-depth analysis	Scientists can analyse the data in greater depth, picking out previously unnoticed themes and trends, establishing the historical context in which the data was generated, and finding the underlying emotions.
Study of subjective data	Qualitative content analysis shines when applied to research into inherently elusive concepts like values, attitudes, and feelings.
Economical	Qualitative content analysis is a method that's not too expensive for academics to use, even if they have limited funds.

Twitter over other social media platforms

Twitter is a social media platform where people communicate online (Karami et al., 2020). It's ranked as the 14th most popular site worldwide, with 1.3 billion accounts and 368 million active users every month (Melwater, 2023). Users can share short posts called "tweets" of up to 280 characters, which can include text, videos, photos, and links. Profiles can be private, but most tweets are public. Users can interact with tweets by sharing them (retweeting), liking them, mentioning other users, or replying to the author (Tech target, 2023).

Twitter's own Application Programming Interface (API)[8] stands out as the most powerful instrument accessible for the collection of data stemming from the engagements among Twitter users. Encompassing various demographic classifications, the diversity inherent in Twitter data renders it a comprehensive and meaningful source of information for researchers and policymakers. Twitter is the forum for 'breaking news' and instant access to world events and broad indexing through hashtag (Bossetta, 2017). The broad nature of this global data source has attracted the attention of numerous research studies seeking to investigate a vast number of research questions spanning diverse topics, including but not limited to health and politics.

South Africa has about 60.14 million people, and around 72.3% of them use the internet, which is about 43.48 million people. Out of those, about 25.8 million are on social media. A study by Meltwater in 2023 found that most South Africans use social media to stay updated on news and articles. Twitter is the 6th most popular social media platform in South Africa, with 60.3% of internet users active on it. In 2023, there were about 3.65 million Twitter users in South Africa (Figure 16). 34.7% females and 65.3% males. Even though, the demographic composition of Facebook is more varied and reflective of the broader population. Equally, the typical Twitter user displays a greater inclination towards political engagement than their Facebook counterpart (Perrin 2015).
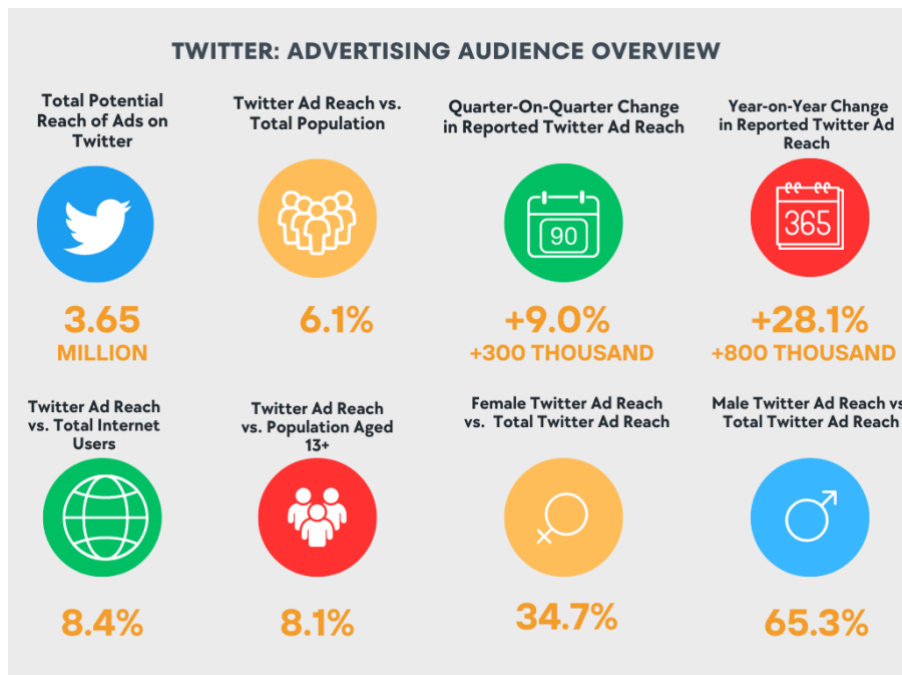
Figure 16. Twitter overview in South Africa in 2023.
Source: CSA Sha-Izwe, 2023.

Twitter data is readily accessible to researchers, as majority of tweets are part of the public domain and can be obtained through freely available APIs. The platform's features are conducive to data analysis, as evidenced by existing literature detailing computational

[8]Twitter's API allows developers to access Twitter's data and features, like posting tweets or searching for tweets, so they can build apps that interact with Twitter.

techniques and considerations in interpreting Twitter data. This approach was guided by insights from previous empirical studies; for instance, I applied knowledge from the literature to the task of identifying tweets associated with climate change and election polling.

3.5. Ethical considerations

People who tweeted or posted tweets were not engaged or contacted for further information. To safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of these users, references to their usernames were substituted with the generic term "user." This anonymisation process was employed to protect the identity of the individuals and maintain a level of confidentiality in the analysis of the study.

3.6. Research limitations

The comprehensive examination of this subject presents a challenge due to its intersection with both economic and political dimensions, as a result, my primary research approach introduces a unique methodology, although it heavily relies on secondary research and data analysis.

When conducting research on social media, using qualitative content analysis has a number of advantages, but there are also some constraints that researchers need to take into consideration. One of the disadvantages is that there is no control over the information. Data from social media platforms is frequently unstructured, making it challenging to handle (Andreotta et al., 2019). Because researchers are unable to control who writes online or what they post, it may be difficult for them to collect a sample of data that is representative of the whole. As a result, the likelihood of individuals to share only the information they feel confident disclosing online, the data could be biased or incomplete.

The difficulty of data interpretation is yet another drawback of qualitative content analysis. To effectively analyse data from social media platforms, researchers need to have a comprehensive knowledge of both the platforms and the people who use them. Users of social media platforms frequently communicate with sarcasm, emoticons, and abbreviations, all of which can be challenging to understand. It is possible that the researchers will also need to acquire an understanding of the social and cultural settings in which the data was compiled. Being South African and using a reviewer from South Africa with a comprehension of the cultural and social environment bridged the gap to better understand the data.

When accumulating and analysing data from social media platforms, ethical considerations are something that must be considered. There is a possibility that individuals will not be conscious that their data is being used for research, and there is also a possibility that they will not have provided informed consent. Before collecting data from social media platforms and conducting analyses of that data, researchers need to ensure that they are being transparent about their research and receive ethical approval. The researcher did not include data from accounts that were locked or deleted posts.

Utilising data from social media platforms brings with it a number of additional challenges when conducting research into how people in South Africa feel about their country's participation in the African Union. For instance, it is possible that social media platforms do not adequately represent the opinions of the South African population as a whole. In addition, the algorithms and filters utilised by the social media platforms themselves have the potential to have an effect on the data that is gathered from those platforms, which could result in the data being distorted.

An accurate detailed analysis of demographics is impossible to provide, because Talkwalker uses an artificial intelligence algorithm to generate gender and occupational information. This limits generalisability.

Lastly, although during the research period, the social media platform under investigation was referred to as Twitter, it was renamed to X by Elon Musk on July 23, 2023. In my study, I refer to the platform as Twitter.

Table 6. Limitations of qualitative analysis using social media.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

Limitations	Explanation
Lack of control over data	Researchers struggle to gather a representative sample of data due to the impossibility of controlling who writes online and what they post. There could be bias or gaps in the statistics.
Data interpretation	Researchers need a deep understanding of social media and its users, including slang, symbols, and acronyms, to comprehend the data. It's important to think about the societal and cultural setting as well.
Ethical considerations	Before gathering and analysing data from social media platforms, researchers should ensure they are open about their study and have received appropriate ethical approval.
Potential for data distortion	The views expressed on social media sites might not be those of the whole general public. It is also possible that the platforms' own algorithms and censors are skewing the results.

3.7. Summary

This chapter outlined the research paradigm and strategy selected for this study, considering the diverse paradigms, research strategies, and data collection methods identified in the literature review. The choice of employing qualitative research with a focus on social media data aimed to explore the perceptions of South African citizens regarding African Union regional integration and its impact on South Africa's development. To ensure a broader reach and access to diverse perspectives, the study utilised the four-phased framework proposed by Andreotta et al., (2019). The framework involved harvesting tweets in South Africa from December 2020 to December 2022 to create a corpus (phase 1). Subsequently, a topic modelling technique organised the corpus into distinct topics, emphasising persistent themes over transitory ones (phase 2). The research then identified reoccurring topics using topic alignment to group similar themes throughout the two-year period (phase 2). This process led

to the extraction of a manageable subset of data comprising 1373 tweets (phase 3). The final phase involved a qualitative thematic analysis of this subset, enabling the inductive derivation of themes to address the research questions (phase 4). The measurement scales for each construct in the conceptual framework were informed by an extensive literature review. Additionally, the chapter addressed research ethical considerations, potential data analysis bias, and ethical concerns.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESULTS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presented the research analysis, driven by two primary objectives centred on theoretical perspectives. Firstly, it aimed to ascertain the impact of the AU as a regional integration entity and evaluate the perceived value of South Africa's continued membership in the AU among South African citizens. Following the introduction, the chapter began with an examination of the socio-demographic characteristics of the social media respondents. It explored the demographic and geographical profiles of respondents based on data obtained from Talkwalker. The subsequent section of the chapter conducted an analysis of various topics pertaining to the perception of the African Union, South Africa's contributions to and interactions with the AU. Topics addressed included South Africa's influence and impact within the African region, its contributions to the AU, and the nature of the AU-South Africa relationship. While these categories are not exhaustive, they serve as representative indicators of AU-South Africa interaction from the perspective of citizens, forming the foundation for policy and academic discourse. The chapter concluded with a discussion of research findings derived from the data analysis.

4.2. Results

A total of 1764 tweets were identified from Talkwalker with 1039 unique authors[9]. Three hundred and sixty-three tweets were excluded. Specifically, these excluded tweets contained the term African Union and South African but were tweets that were advertisements (e.g., RT from user accounts from new articles or using the terms as hashtags to boost engagements of a post). Through TA, three distinct themes were generated. Every tweet was categorised into a single theme. However, there was a level of ambiguity in categorising tweets into themes, and twenty-eight tweets were considered too vague to fit into the thematic structure. The remaining 1373 tweets were then categorised into one of three themes, as outlined in Table A provided in the Appendix 1.

4.2.1. Geographical Characteristics

The sample of 1764 tweets that were extracted for this study, the most were concentrated in the province 3 of the 9 provinces (Figure 17): the Western Cape (n=828), Gauteng (n=654), and Kwa-Zulu Natal (n=94). According to Stats SA, 2021 Gauteng, Western Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal have the highest populations in South Africa.

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[9] In Talkwalker, the term "Unique Author" refers to an individual user or account that has generated content related to a specific query or topic within the collected social media data. Each Unique Author represents a distinct source of content, such as a social media user, influencer, or organisation, contributing to the overall conversation or discussion tracked by Talkwalker. Counting Unique Authors helps to measure the breadth of engagement and the diversity of voices within a given social media dataset.
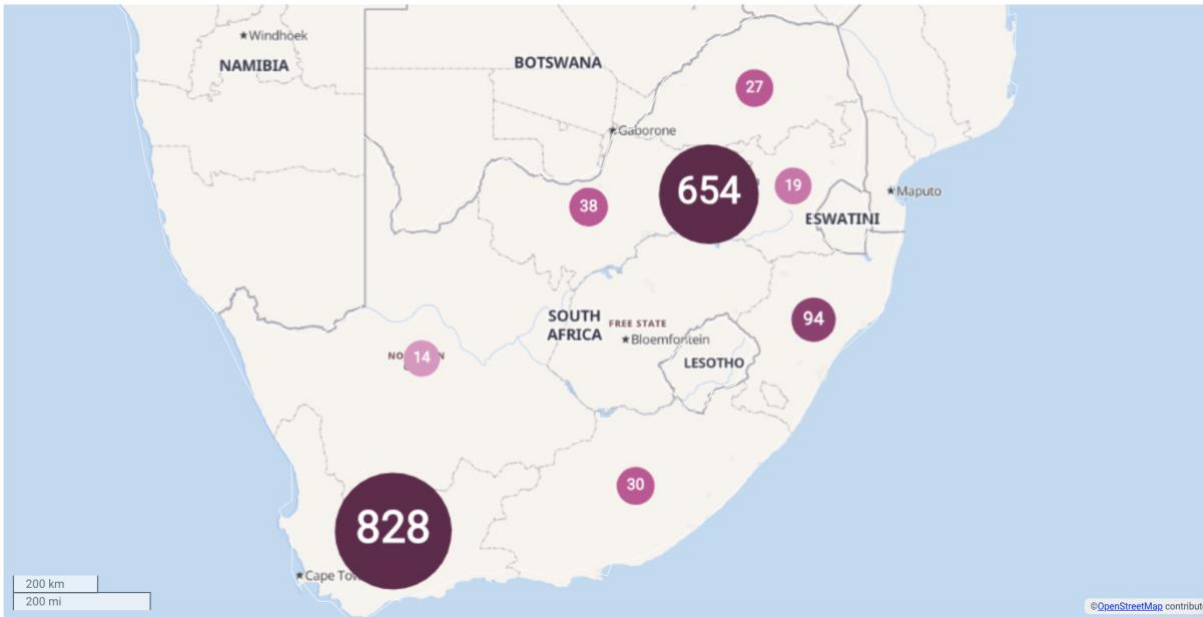
Figure 17. Map of where sample of tweets originated from in South Africa.
Source: Author's compilation from Talkwalker, 2024.

4.2.2. Socio - Demographic Characteristics[10]

A total of 1373 tweets were identified from Talkwalker with 1039 unique authors. These authors represent a diverse socio- demographic characteristics in terms of gender, age group, marital status, education, employment, and income based on their biographies and profile pictures captured by the Talkwalker AI. The Talkerwalker AI is able to scrape data based on what individuals state on their profiles (e.g. names and broader activity in their profile). Based on the AI capabilities of Talkwalker, out of the 533 that the AI was able to distinguish, the majority (67.90%) were male (n=397), and the minority (32.10%) were female (n=136). The gender distribution among respondents is comparatively fair, since South Africa has 34.7% female and 65.3% male Twitter users (Data Reportal, 2023).

Male 71.5%

Female 28.5%

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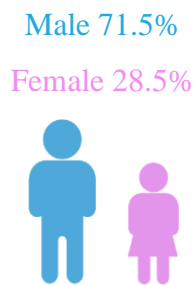
[10] The data comes from AI driven analysis, which relies on information an algorithm can extract from the user's social media profiles.

The age group of authors in this discussion ranged from 18 to 65. The most active age group in this discussion was 25 to 34 (47% / n=250) (Figure 18). A quarter of them (25%) were between 18 to 24, and less than a quarter (22%) between the ages of 35 to 44, and then 6% was less than 45 to 54%. The distribution of ages among the respondents is relatively equitable, since South Africa has a young population and the age groups 25 to 34 (17.9%), 18 to 24 (10.6%), and 35 to 44 (15.3%) being the highest age groups in the population (Data Reportal, 2023). Females aged (18-24) and (25-34) dominated conversations (Figure 19).

Figure 18: Respondents' age group.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

Figure 19. Respondents' age group and gender.
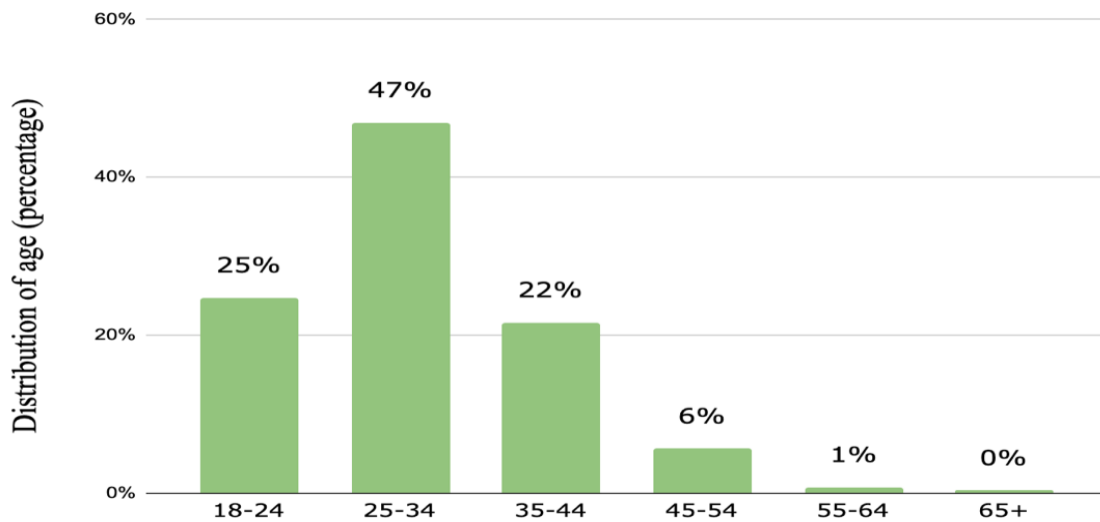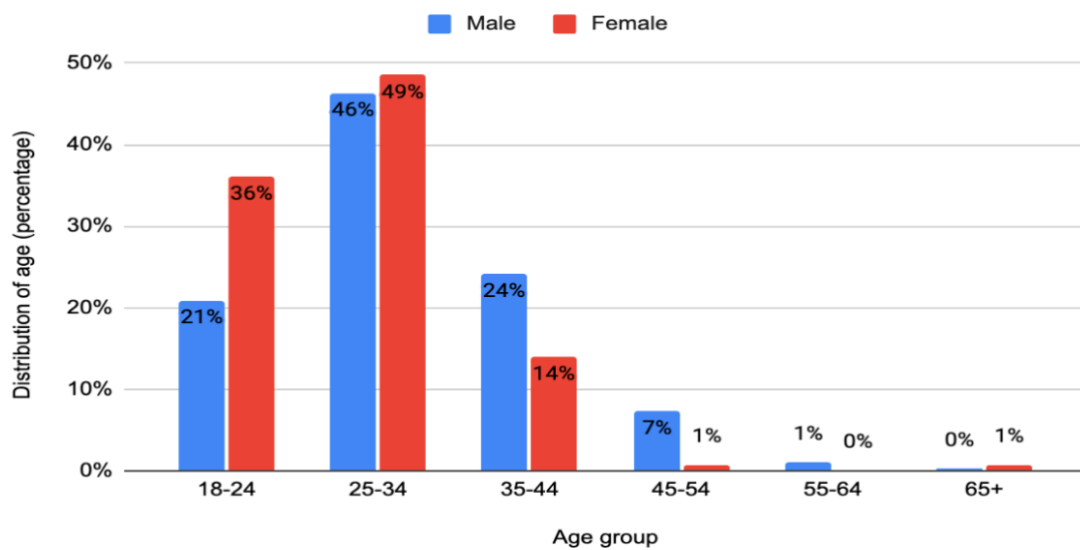Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

Figure 20 shows a weekly trendline for the results of the tweets from 1st December 2020 to 1st December 2022. This shows the total 1373 results. These show peaks, by peaks this is when conversations spike based or when an event occurred, or something triggered a high volume in conversation. This is where citizens were either engaging with online content by making, commenting, diffusing, or listening. The highest peak for this topic happened between 11/01/21 – 17/01/21 (n=170) and the trending topics being discussed were Cyril Ramaphosa's lack of action against human rights violations in Uganda after President Museveni allegedly stole elections and The African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team established by Ramaphosa securing provisional vaccine doses from Pfizer, AstraZeneca, and Johnson & Johnson. The second spike occurred between 01/02/21 – 07/02/21 (n=115) and the two issues being discussed was South Africa handing over the chairmanship of the African Union to the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa not winning any positions in the African Union Commission leadership it had targeted. The data shows that tweets about South Africans involvement in the AU decreased after Ramaphosa's tenure. Only specific events sparked spikes after February 2021.

Figure 21 presents the employment status of the Twitter users based on what people stated on their biographies and their broader Twitter activity. Most of the Twitter users were classified as Journalist (15%), followed by Author/Writer (13%), and Entrepreneur (9%), with small number of the respondents who are teachers (5%), students (5%), and lawyers (4%). Due to the fact that the researcher did not engage with the Twitter users, one cannot fully dig into these occupations to verify. AI analysis covers 40.7% of the total data (n=433) of the total 1373. Given that the primary occupation within people engaging in this conversation about South Africa's role in the AU are journalist, this could be due to the fact that South Africa guarantees freedom of press and has a well-established culture of investigative political journalism.
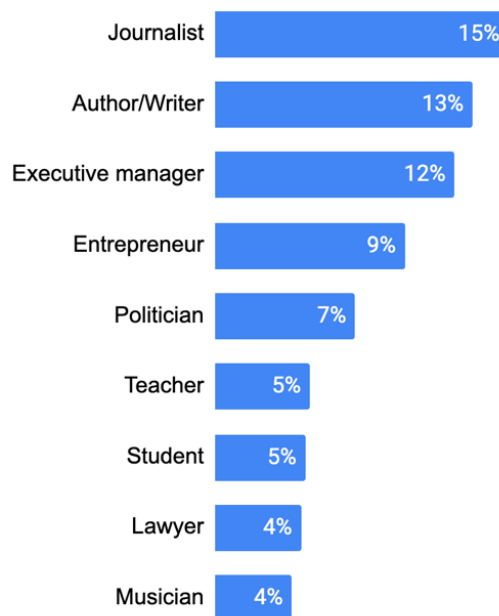

Figure 21. Respondents' employment based on twitter biographies.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.
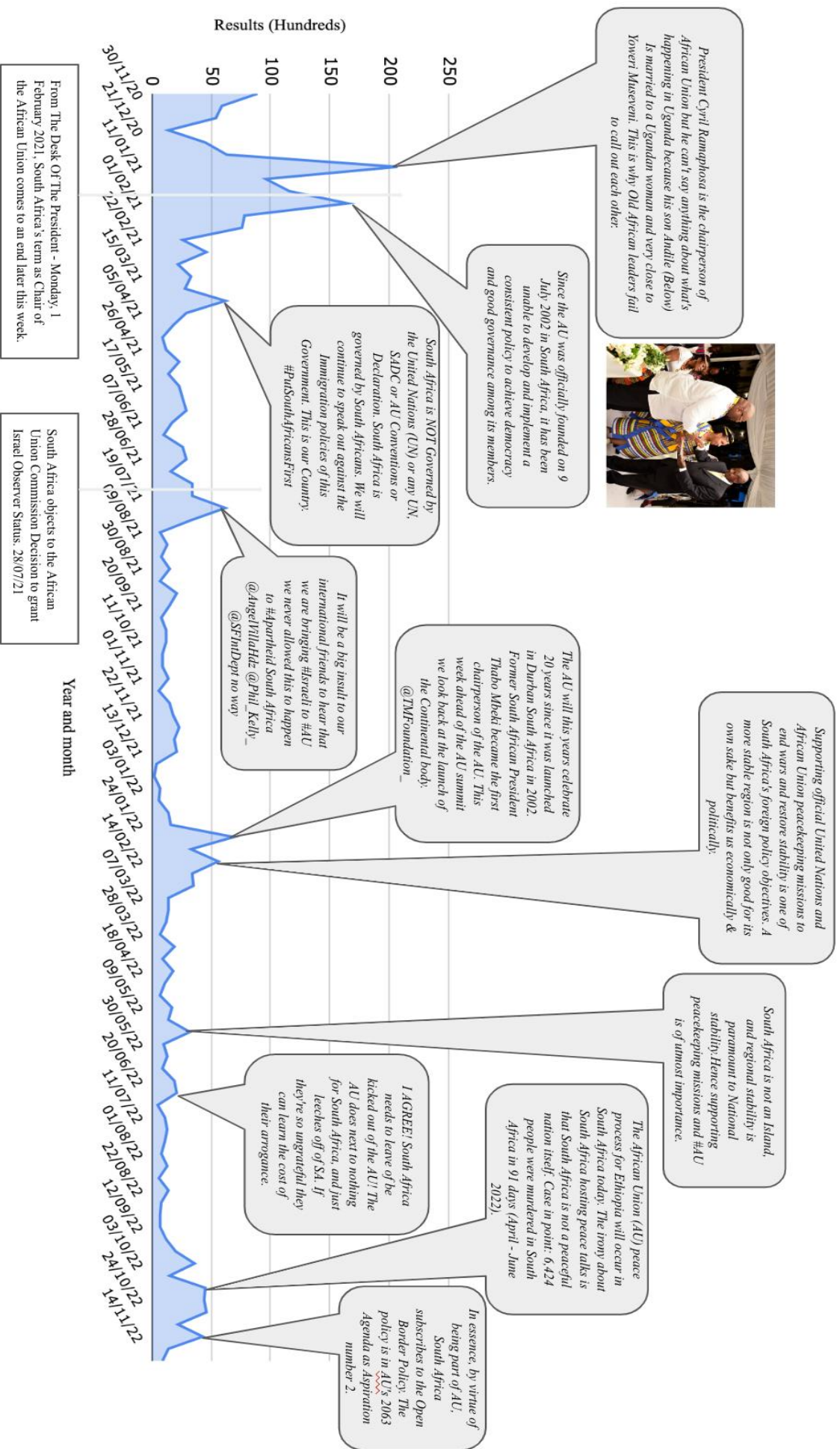
Figure 20. Trendline showing conversation peaks where South African citizens discussed South Africa in the African Union.

Source: Adapted from Talkwalker and Author's compilation, 2024.

4.2.3. Sentiment Analysis

In this section, Talkwalker's machine learning-based sentiment analysis tools were used to examine the language and text disseminated by consumers, aiming to ascertain whether their statements exhibit a positive or negative sentiment. Sentiment analysis, also known as opinion mining or emotion AI, entails the application of natural language processing (NLP) techniques to analyse conversations and discern the emotional disposition expressed in human speech or text, categorising it as positive, negative, or neutral (Talkwalker, Luxemburg).

The AI was mainly trained to identify negative, positive, and factual sentiment (Figure 22). Positive comments mentioned South Africa contribution combating in e.g. terrorism in parts of Africa like Congo, while majority of the negative comments mentioned the threat South Africa is under with the continued membership because of undocumented migrants, the high unemployment, and the corrupt leaders with AU and how South Africa is not right regional hegemon. Factual was deemed anything that could be backed up by secondary data.
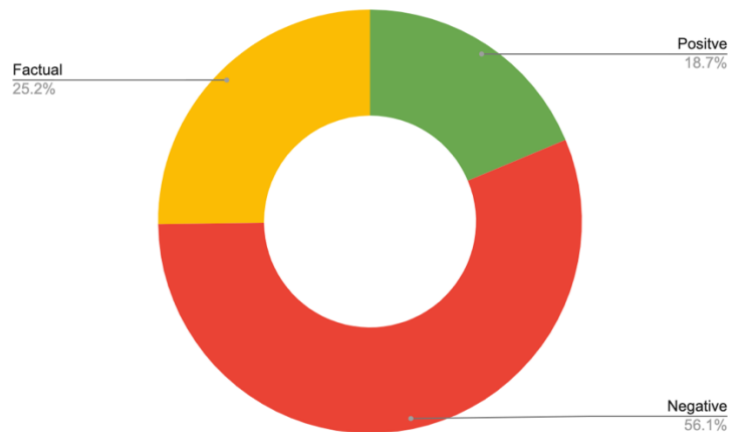
Figure 22. Overall sentiments towards the AU and South Africa membership in the AU
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

Overall, these were the trending hashtags[11] that showed either negative, neutral, or positive sentiments as derived from Talkwalker AI sentiment analysis. The main hashtags were identified from the thematic analysis and the tool tracked the prevalent hashtags during the specified timeframe in South Africa (Figure 23). This monitoring enhanced comprehension of the evolving patterns and tendencies in online conversations. This procedure necessitated manual review to filter out irrelevant posts inaccurately identified through keyword matches as false positives or negatives, occasionally misinterpreting sarcasm, and nuanced emotions due to inherent biases in sentiment analysis. The most prominent hashtags that elicited negative sentiments were #PutSouthAfricaFirst, #OperationDudula (which was a movement to remove undocumented African migrants from South Africa), #Uganda/#UgandaElections,

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[11] Users on Twitter often use a hashtag (#) to categorise and discover tweets related to a particular topic.

VoetsekANC (ANC must go), and #RamaphosaMustFall. These hashtags (Figure 23) reflect a range of emotions, including hope, pride, optimism, concern, and a desire for positive change in South Africa's engagement with the AU. A detailed explanation of the most commonly used hashtags in the dataset is in Appendix 2.
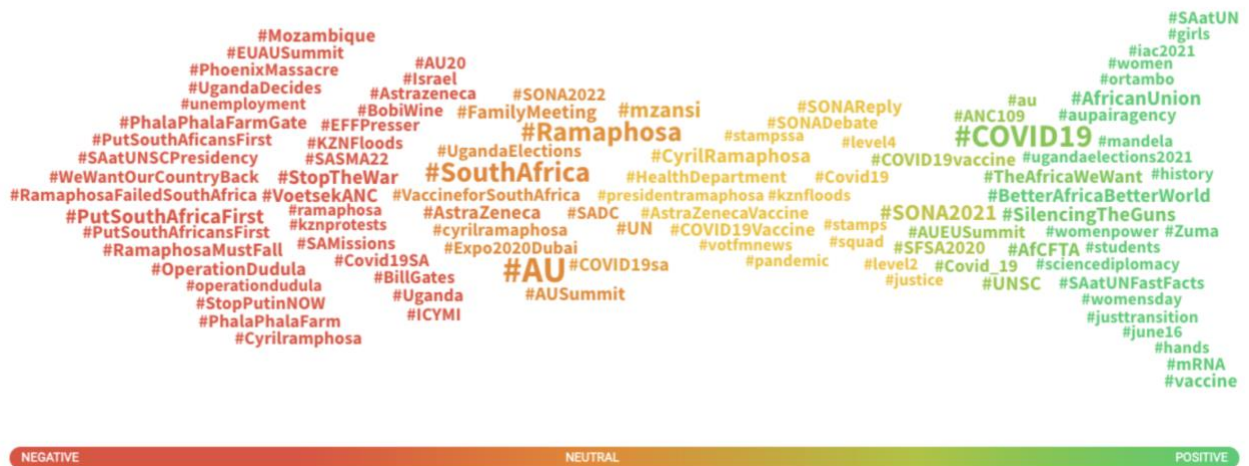
Figure 23. Sentiment key drivers and hashtags used by people on social media.

Source: Talkwalker, 2024.

Furthermore, an analysis of Share of Emotions was conducted (Figure 24). Over the filtered period (between the 1st December 2020 and the 1st December 2022), Talkwalker got (n=2.5K) documents with an emotion of Anger, which represents 56.7% of the documents within the filtered period. Negative emotions dominated the data set which represents the overall feeling that South Africans believed their country is being economically exploited through AU deals.
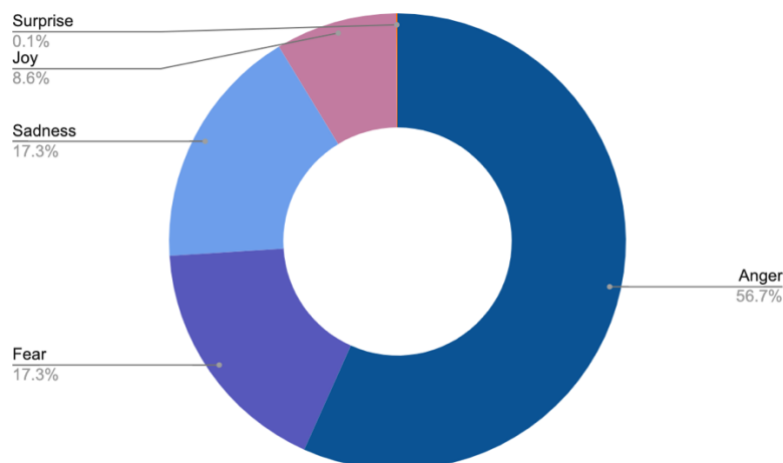
Figure 24. Share of emotions.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

4.2.4. Personal Relevance

The analysis explored the perceived personal relevance of the AU in South Africa's lives, whether the citizens talk about the AU as a distant entity (*low personal relevance*), or if its' influence on one's everyday life is perceived to be direct (*high personal relevance*). The 1373 tweets were manually coded (Figure 24). Public social media conversations showed that South Africa's even though they perceive a direct threat from migrants found it difficult to recognise the direct impact of the AU initiatives in their daily lives. The majority of comments strongly indicated a low level of personal relevance attributed to the African Union. The comments discuss an issue in connection with the AU emphasising how it will influence their own life. Low personal relevance, the speaker discusses an issue without recognising any direct influence of the issue on his own life.
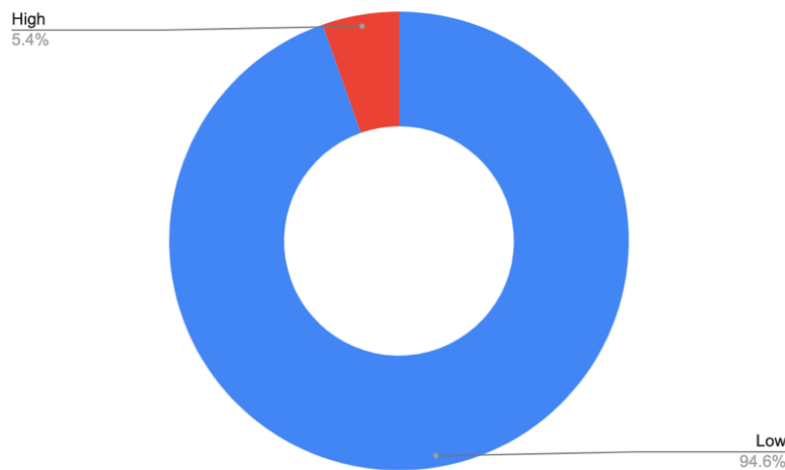
Figure 25. African Union's personal relevance in the lives of South Africans.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

4.3. Main Themes

From 1373 included tweets, three major themes were identified: (1) Leave the AU: No benefits from AU membership (n=546); (2), South Africa is not the best hegemon for the AU (group 2), (n=627); (3) Stay in the AU: AU membership is a good thing (n=215).

Theme 1[12]

This theme is about leaving the AU because citizens perceived that there are no benefits for South Africa, these tweets stated various reasons for this perceived lack of benefits in this Twitter discourse. Majority of the Tweets are critical on the state of the AU, stating that rather than serving Africa's interests, its inefficient and places an undue burden on South Africa. The

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[12] In this section, I have not altered the context or modified the tweets; the tweets presented are in their original form, enclosed in brackets and indicated by inverted commas and italics. Sensitive information is redacted.

theme encapsulated commentary on ideals of regional integration and the perceived burden on South Africa ("*It's not in our interest to pander towards deadbeat African states. South Africa could accomplish more by leaving the undemocratic, tyrannical cabal that is the #AU, and leading the continent towards liberal democracy by example. #Auxit*) financial benefits provided by South Africa (*"South Africa is the biggest financial contributor even at African Union."*) Leaving AU (*"I AGREE! South Africa needs to leave of be kicked out of the AU! The AU does next to nothing for South Africa, and just leeches off of SA. If they're so ungrateful they can learn the cost of their arrogance"*) influx of undocumented migrants (*"Nope, South Africa needs to exit SADC and AU and deport all foreigners back to the shitholes they cam from. We've had enough of them dirty stinking filthy African parasites"*). Users characterised the government as unjustifiably burdened by the AU. Critics argued that South Africa's membership in the AU has not resulted in positive outcomes, and there are calls for the country to reconsider its participation in regional pacts such as BRICS, SADC, and the AU. The sentiment is that these alliances provide little value and may even compromise South Africa's sovereignty and national interests.

Citizens in these conversations believed that AU is a source of problems rather than solutions. South Africa having membership equates to South Africa losing leadership and power, essentially the position South Africa deserves and this is holding the country back: ("*In order for South Africa to become stable again, we ought to follow in the footsteps of the United Kingdom who left the EU and leave the African Union."*) prompting it to following international examples like the United Kingdom that left the EU. The sentiment is that South Africa could achieve more by disengaging from the AU and focusing on its internal governance and development.

Instances of vulgarity, derogation, personal attacks, and stereotyping were observable in the selected sample of significant comments. However, these were subordinate to the insistence on logically sound arguments, as exemplified in the following instance: ("*AU aint working for South Africa. We need to exit AU and SADC. All them African nations can hold their own nuts. We don't benefit shit from those shithole countries with shithole people*"). They do not see the AU as a legitimate governing body on the continent and disregard the idea of the regional agenda especially since they believed it is happening in South Africa, this is demonstrated by using words like *"useless", "undemocratic, tyrannical cabal", "corrupt*" to describe the AU. South African citizens believed due to their financial power over the AU and the perceived high number of undocumented migrants South Africa, other African countries are inferior to them. The discourse suggested a belief that South Africa is being burdened by the challenges of other African nations. They show resentment towards African people and African countries are described as *"deadbeat"*, "shithole countries", "failed African states" and "shithole people".

Additionally, there is criticism directed at the ANC and political leaders for their perceived failure to prioritise South Africa's interests within the AU. The sentiment is that the ANC's membership in such bodies is viewed as politically correct but does not serve the needs of poor Black South Africans. Other commentary centres around users complaining about South Africa not being prioritised by its own president any longer while in his dual position as AU chair and

current president of South Africa. The resonating feeling was that President Ramaphosa's role as the AU Chair compromised his ability to address internal issues effectively (*"SA ZA Won't Go Anywhere with Ramaphosa as the AU Chair His main Aim is African Unity and this is Compromising the Development of SA as a Country This Man is Doing his Businesses All over Africa #WeWantOurCountryBack #PutSouthAfricansFirst #CloseBeitbridgeBorder"*).Users specified that Ramaphosa's failure to deal with issues in South Africa while focusing only on the AU was reason enough to leave the AU.

Widespread opposition among some South Africans to certain African Union AU policies, particularly those related to open borders and the free movement of people. Several tweets expressed scepticism about the efficacy of open borders in South Africa. This is the biggest push factor for leaving the AU was citizen against the free movement African Union policy they believed will have a bigger negative impact on South Africa. Users specified that the biggest risks and impacts of open borders policies and the free movement of people within Africa on South Africa will be the influx of undocumented foreigners and as a result crime ("Open borders=crime"). The discourse suggests a strong stance against what is perceived as a potential threat to national security and the well-being of South African citizens (*"An AU policy that only applies in South Africa? Interesting!* 🤪 *What the EFF did was try to gain favor in Africa, at the expense of South Africa's national security -* 🚩🚩🚩 *#PutSouthAfricaFirst ZA"*). Furthermore, there is a critique of the historical context of borders in Africa, with the argument that the current state of borders is a result of decisions made by the forebearers of the AU. This perspective challenges the notion that South Africa should not bear sole responsibility for the existing borders and implies that open borders should be approached at a continental level rather than solely within South Africa.

The trending hashtags in these conversations are #AUxit (n=22) *#VoetsekANC* (n=27) *#RamaphosaMustFall* (n=15), citizens in their tweets are criticising approaches by politicians and governments within the AU. As seen in the trendline, these hashtags appeared whenever there is discontentment with AU dealings within the continent. AUxit mirrors the BREXIT hashtag calling for South Africa to leave the AU, the resounding call for reclaiming South Africa from foreign undocumented migrants and a more domestic approach to policies that prioritises South Africans brings users to use *#WeWantOurCountryBack (n=127), #OperationDudula (n=135), #PutSouthAfricansFirst (n=203), and #CloseBeitbridgeBorder (n=94).* Commentors that use these claim that they are patriotic and a domestically orientated approach to governance from South African leaders.

Instances of questions found within the selected sample of prominent comments could be analysed in the context of justification, serving as a form of rhetoric, and deliberation, functioning as a mode of inquiry. However, discerning whether these questions were employed for rhetorical persuasion or genuine investigation posed a challenge. A recurring question persisted throughout the sample, yet it remained unclear whether it sought an informative response (*"What does the African Union do for South Africa??"*).

Despite their hostility towards the AU as an organisation, much of the user's comments were structured in a matter-of-fact way. When they speculated about the state of the AU, they were conclusive in their explanation of why the AU was not effective and South Africa should leave; these conversations were not conducive to a deliberative discussion. Generally, South Africa's involvement in the AU was perceived as negative. There is a widespread call for South Africa to exit.

Theme 2

The discussions in this theme were about people who were not against the union but said that South Africa is not the best hegemon for the AU. They are against the incompetence of South Africa when leading the AU that is already weak. Users commented that Africa is instable and South African leadership is enabling bad governance and is the weak leadership.

The first subtopic centres around strong condemnation from some South Africans regarding the perceived general overall incompetence of South African leaders during their respective chairmanships of the AU. Criticisms are directed at leaders such as Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma ("*Divided the AU, Stole from the state, involved in illicit cigarette trade, lied to South Africa, Lied to the poor, Self-enrichment through Mines ...and so it goes on, so please, where this woman goes, misery follows*") and Cyril Ramaphosa ("*With Ramaphosa at the helm of the AU only uselessness is expected*"), with concerns spanning various issues, including governance, pandemic management, and alleged indifference to the plight of marginalised groups.

The quotes highlighted instances where court cases challenged lockdown regulations, some of which were deemed nonsensical. Criticism is directed at Dlamini Zuma for her perceived inaction during her tenure as AU chair, described as "uselessness personified." There are accusations of failures in advancing the agenda of queer people in Africa under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, and Cyril Ramaphosa ("*Thabo Mbeki, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa chaired the AU but still failed to push the agenda of the queer people in Africa*").

Various social media posts expressed dissatisfaction with the leadership of Ramaphosa in both the AU and South Africa, questioning his effectiveness in pandemic management, some suggest that the AU, under Ramaphosa, he prioritised European interests over African concerns, particularly in relation to Madagascar's purported COVID-19 cure ("*The African Union, under Ramaphosa's chairmanship, continues to sideline Madagascar's purported cure to the virus. This is a clear indication of where Ramaphosa's interests lie - Europe. To this effect, this makes Ramaphosa an illegitimate African leader*") and calls for his resignation in both his roles are rooted in a perceived failure to represent and address the needs of the African people ("*Ramaphosa is dangerous to the AU as the chairperson and to South Africa as the president of the country, he has to go before he causes any more damages.*") because of his perceived loyalty to the West over Africa. Others asserted that he prioritised personal business interests over the welfare of the African continent ("*The same way Cyril Ramaphosa was an AU chairman and did nothing It was just about business and access!*").

Many question the purpose and accomplishments of the AU under Ramaphos'a leadership ("*What change, development, legacy, Contribution did Ramaphosa leave to AU?"*). Some critics question the rationale behind Ramaphosa's appointment, suggesting that he might have been chosen for his perceived silence in times of crisis, especially when it comes to issues related to African unity. The sentiment is shared that the AU, under Ramaphosa's chairmanship, is ineffective and wasteful, with allegations of leaders using AU positions as holiday vacations, further fuelling discontent among South Africans. This results with calls for South Africa to refrain from taking up positions in the AU in the future. The sentiment extended beyond Ramaphosa, with a general distrust of African leaders within the AU, labelling them as incompetent and accusing them of causing harm to the entire continent.

Overall, the sentiments reflect disappointment, distrust, and a call for change in the leadership approach within the AU. Citizens are concerned that this incompetence, lack of action on crucial issues and corruption by South African leaders taints the image of South Africa.

The second subtopic under this theme focused on users being critical of South Africa's and AU's shortcomings in addressing regional challenges mainly human right abuses and advancing AU Development Goals that reflect Agenda 2063 Goals for "A stable and peaceful Africa". Users argued that the AU particularly under the leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa, who served as the Chairperson during the period in question was ineffective in addressing critical issues and lacked the capacity to hold its member states accountable for violations.

Citizens that were critics argued that the AU, under Ramaphosa's leadership, has failed to effectively address human rights abuses and political turmoil in neighbouring countries, with a focus on Uganda, where human rights abuses and election-related violence have occurred for decades and prominent opposition leaders like Bobi Wine face routine arrests. The condemnation of Ramaphosa's silence on the alleged abuses by Ugandan President Museveni reflects a perception that the AU, and by extension South Africa, lacks the commitment to uphold democratic principles and intervene in crises ("*Disgraceful silence from Ramaphosa as an African leader & chair of AU to election fraud by dictator Museveni. Ramaphosa makes a mockery of African democracy*").

Some claim Ramaphosa's personal connections influenced his political decisions. Allegations of Ramaphosa's familial ties to Uganda, through his son's marriage, are cited as a factor contributing to his reluctance to act against Museveni ("*Ramaphosa is the compromised AU chairperson, he has to step down. His son is married to Ugandan woman that's he's silent bout Uganda crisis. He's funding Zimbabwean MDC. His sister in law Bridget Motsepe is funding the opposition party in Botswana*"). Others also highlight Ramaphosa's alleged business interests in Africa, suggesting a conflict of interest that compromises his ability to address issues impartially ("*Ramaphosa has been silent on many issues concerning AU. He has business interests in Africa hence he fails to call out these dictators*"). The AU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic under Ramaphosa also faces scrutiny, with criticism directed at the vaccination targets, the perceived failure to effectively address the crisis and the lack of support for Madagascar's proposed COVID-19 solution.

South Africans in this discourse expressed frustration with the AU's apparent silence, questioning the effectiveness of the continental bloc in standing against dictatorship and supporting democracy. The Ramaphos'a and AU's alleged failure to act in response to repression in eSwatini/Swaziland ("*Sadly the African Union is turning a blind eye on Swaziland, with Cyril Ramaphosa holding the highest position in this organisation but not saying anything at all*"), END SARS ("*Nigerian Police are busy k!ll!ng our African Brothers and sisters* 😭 *South Africa as the chair of the AU should intervene soon* 😭 *#EndSARS an Injury to one is an injury to all* 😭") and Boko Haram in Nigeria, corruption in Zimbabwe ("*President Ramaphosa as the African Union Chairperson What has he done to stop this dictator called Mnangagwa?*") and its overall silence on other various regional matters contribute to the perception that the organisation is ineffective and toothless ("*AU is toothless, SADC is very slow to react. In fact, African leaders have the tendency to wait for USA and European countries to fix their regional matters. Ramaphosa was the AU chairman, and he knew exactly what was going on in Capo Delgado and he does nothing*").

Responses to news about South Africa's failure to secure positions within the AU Commission is seen as waning power (*AFRICAN UNION: Foreign policy failure leaves South Africa with no posts in AU Commission. Because African countries don't take South Africa seriously anymore ever since Ramaphosa became President*"), most responses saw it as the diminishing of the country's influence within the AU because of Ramaphosa ("*Under the leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa, South Africa has lost positions and dignity it was enjoying in A.U. He is not only bad in South Africa, but he has branded the country as a failure in foreign policing and as lawless. We are just spectators now in AU*"). One tweet contended that South Africa's historical leadership roles within AU committees have not yielded positive outcomes. Implying a growing dissatisfaction with South Africa's influence within the AU, suggesting that a change in leadership might be necessary for more effective regional engagement ("*It is good South Africa lost, for many years even before Ramaphosa administration SA has been leading many committees of AU but we don't have positive results, we lost Gaddafi the founder in the midst. Is about time other countries lead*"). Numerous instances of rhetorical questioning were observed, ranging from simple expressions of doubt like "Really?" to more elaborate forms such as ridicule ("*Is Ramaphosa really the leader of the African Union?*") or as a lead-in to the poster's assertion or justification ("*What was or is the reason for him to be appointed in the first place?*"). Similar to theme 2, it remained challenging to ascertain whether the questions posed in this sample were intended for rhetorical emphasis or sincere inquiry.

To summarise, people's discontent is mainly about the AU's inefficacy in handling regional conflicts, the lack of condemnation for human rights abuses, and a perceived disconnect between the AU's objectives and its actions. Ramaphosa's tenure is characterised as a period of diplomatic inertia. Additionally, concerns are raised about South Africa's diminishing influence within the AU and a perceived failure in executing foreign policy effectively. In comparison to the other two themes, commentary revolved around individuals wanting reform within the AU, calling for stronger and more decisive leadership within the AU to address the pressing issues facing the continent because they had genuine concern for the issues facing other African

countries. Public social media comments revealed a contradictory demand too, the need for the AU to have more power over member states on decisions related to human rights abuses.

Theme 3

Users in this theme advocated for South Africa to stay in the African Union and find solutions to regional issues facing the continent. These tweets highlight how South Africa is the beacon of hope for the AU as regional hegemon and other countries benefit greatly from South Africa's continued membership.

The tweets indicated that South Africans take pride in South Africa's principled positions within the AU. There is a strong sentiment against allowing Israel to oversee the AU, with the view that it would be an insult and against the principles that South Africa stood for during the Apartheid era. South Africa is commended for maintaining a principled position on the right of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, aligning with international norms. There's a call for South Africa to actively participate in the AU and assert its rightful place ("*It's about time that South Africa fights for its rightful place in this AU family....we can't pay for everything and not participate!*"), highlighting a sense of responsibility and leadership within the continental body.

The quotes suggested that South Africans recognise their country's influential role on the African continental stage, particularly through President Cyril Ramaphosa's leadership as the head of both South Africa and the AU ("*Not only is Cyril president of South Africa, he's president of the African Union which means, he's the first leader of our continent*"). There is an expectation and call for South Africa, as part of regional bodies like AU, to take decisive stances and actions on issues affecting other African nations, such as Zimbabwe, Eswatini, Uganda ("*South Africa as a sister country and a leader of AU must not remain quite when the Ugandan forces are acting out of the prospects of the law and democracy*"), and Mozambique. South Africa's involvement in addressing political disputes and conflicts within the continent is acknowledged ("*How much they've actually done about it is more difficult. I don't know the details, but to my knowledge equipment at least have been sent to Mozambique. But at the very very least SADC, the AU, and South Africa are aware of the problem*").

South Africans here overwhelmingly expressed positive evaluations of South Africa's leadership role in regional governance within the AU. There is a widespread sentiment that Ramaphosa, while concurrently managing national affairs, the AU, and the ANC, has demonstrated remarkable coping skills amid the challenges of the pandemic (*"Ramaphosa is running the country, AU and the ANC while dealing with the pandemic while trying to save lives of SAns who are going to extra lengths to resist his effort. He has no time. I doubt anybody else right now would have coped the way he is coping*"). Additionally, there is recognition for Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma for her past excellent record in AU leadership, a user recommends her again to assume the position after Ramaphosa's tenure ended ("*I recommend Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini-Zuma she was an excellent leader at the AU*"). Despite challenges and past hostilities, South Africa's ability to broker deals and navigate complex situations is viewed as

a fascinating and commendable aspect of its role in the AU ("*It remains fascinating story on how he was to broker this deal with so much ease! Africa has been hostile to South Africa especially with recent xenophobic stories. You could observe that even chairpersonship AU by Pres Ramaphosa was not well received! How did he do it???*").

In response to news about Ramaphosa's tenure coming to an end, comments conveyed that under South African leadership, particularly exemplified by Ramaphosa, tasks were accomplished, suggesting a belief in the country's capability to bring about positive outcomes ("*They should really just leave South Africa as the chair of the African Union. Only under SA do things actually get done. By now we would be on par with European Union*"). The sentiment extends to the idea that South Africa, if retained as the chair of the African Union, could potentially achieve progress comparable to that of the European Union, showcasing a positive view of the nation's potential for fostering stability and progress in the regional context.
In contrast to the other two themes, the content under this particular theme exhibited solely positive sentiments and comprised the smallest quantity of tweets.

4.4. Major Findings

Analysis of hypotheses

These findings come from the reviewed literature, social media analysis using thematic analysis. The data collected showed that there is a difference between how the South African government perceives it position and interactions with the AU goals to achieve Agenda 2063 and reality on the ground for South Africans.

Finding 1:

Loss of national sovereignty due to AU membership is the most important tension as it leads to the lack of social cohesion and national integration within AU member states. The two enemies of national sovereignty in this context are perceived to be:
1. Dictators in Africa who want to remain in power for decades and make decisions without understanding country specific needs and leaders like Ramaphosa who are labelled as businessmen who put their needs before the country.
2. Western influence, that dictates all AU decisions and activities. Calling the whole credibility of the AU into question.

The study found that South Africans generally have a negative perception of the AU. Public social media conversations showed that South Africa's found it difficult to recognise the direct impact of the African Union's activities on their own lives – that means that they feel like personal relevance of the AU was expressed to be low in a strong majority of the comments reducing the ability to have strong social cohesion.

Frustration is evident in comments describing the AU as useless, corrupt, and a burden on South Africa which they perceive is a better country in Africa. Some individuals view the AU

as a platform that exploits South Africa, for example users kept mentioning that South Africa is the biggest financial contributor to the AU but there is a lack of transparency in the handling of AU funds by AU. This emerged often in the discourse. South African's extensively discussed the perception of being second-class citizens in their own country, while African leaders reap the economic benefits of South Africa taking care of other African citizens because they misused their own funds and AU funds. The poor economic circumstances in majority of African countries and the lack of trust in a better future of the country have triggered the migration of workers to South Africa. The notion that foreign companies are hiring cheaper foreign labour instead of South African adds to their feeling of powerlessness and victimhood. They feel frustrated because even their top politicians seem to be incompetent on the international political arena. This made them question their own abilities since they elected these people. Users mentioned that the AU does not contribute to solving African problems but rather served its own interests to benefit African leaders financially. Criticism is directed at the AU for its alleged ineffectiveness in addressing regional matters no matter who is at the realm of the AU chair. Especially in dealing with leaders accused of human rights violations like Museveni in Uganda and Emmerson Mnangagwa in Zimbabwe. There's a sense of dissatisfaction with the AU's role in holding African leaders accountable. Calls for South Africa to exit the AU and other continental pacts like SADC, were emphasised due to the perceived lack of value and benefits derived from these alliances. There is a call for South Africa to follow the example of the United Kingdom leaving the EU (BREXIT), suggesting that South Africa could accomplish more independently.

Based on this finding, H1 is justified. The lack of social cohesion and national integration within AU member states, including South Africa, impedes the political and economic benefits of regional integration. The personalistic approach to regional integration, as discussed by Larceneux et at., (2015), emphasises the influence of individual leaders and their personal interests in shaping the integration process. This approach often leads to decisions that prioritise personal gains over collective benefits, potentially hindering the progress of regional integration. The implications of the personalistic approach are significant for regional integration efforts, as it can impose financial burdens on the integration process and hinder the achievement of collective benefits. Additionally, the lack of social cohesion and national integration can hinder the development of a cohesive society, which is essential for successful regional integration (Cowden et al., 2017). Therefore, addressing the lack of social cohesion and national integration is crucial for maximising the political and economic benefits of regional integration.

Finding 2:

The study revealed that majority of the comments reduced South Africa's impact and effectiveness in tackling regional issues to being a mere bystander. The study found that critics argued that South Africa, under Ramaphosa's leadership, has experienced a foreign policy failure, losing positions and respect within the AU from once being a respected country. There is a perception that the country's influence and standing in the AU have diminished.

Some argued that the AU, with South Africa at the forefront, should have played a more active role in addressing conflicts and crises on the continent; the constant failure to do so shows South Africa's lack of commitment to democracy and progress in Africa. There is criticism of the AU, with South Africans expressing disappointment in its lack of intervention in instances of human rights abuses, such as those witnessed in Uganda during elections. The absence of a response from President Cyril Ramaphosa, who chaired the AU, was questioned. This for many disqualifies South Africa to continue leading the AU as this position requires assertive leadership. A small segment was saddened when South Africa's tenure came to an end in 2021, as they do not see any other country fit to lead the AU besides South Africa.

President Ramaphosa's perceived silence, especially in the face of reported violence and oppression, is described as an act of cowardice. People cite that strong leadership looks like Putin who is decisive. Users wanted Ramaphosa to go beyond mere statements and actively engage in resolving crises like what Agenda 2063 states in Goal 11. Some South Africans view the AU as ineffective and criticize it as a forum for social gatherings rather than a platform for meaningful diplomatic efforts. There is scepticism about the significance of holding positions within the AU, with suggestions that such roles might be symbolic and lack influence. There was a demand for accountability, with calls for Ramaphosa to explain the outcomes of his leadership within the AU. The lack of transparency and information about the impact of AU decisions contributes to scepticism about his leadership, that is why hashtags like #RamaphosamustFall were prevalent in the data.

There was a segment of people who were unaware of Ramaphosa's role as the AU Chair, indicating a potential communication gap in conveying the significance of such leadership positions. Some discussions drew comparisons with past AU leaders, such as Thabo Mbeki and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, questioning whether Ramaphosa's leadership has measured up in terms of advancing African causes. NDZ came up as the preferred choice among users, because Ramaphosa's chairmanship was sometimes framed as being influenced by external and business interests.

This finding justifies the hypothesis that South Africa is observed as lacking the assertive leadership necessary for driving regional integration within the African Union. South African's do not believe that South Africa is positioned to lead Africa. While a regional hegemon could potentially facilitate integration and maintain relevance in the global arena, majority of comments diminish South Africa's impact and effectiveness in regional issues, coupled with criticisms of President Ramaphosa's perceived lack of firm leadership and foreign policy failures, there are calls for more proactive engagement in resolving regional conflicts and crises.

Finding 3:

A small topic emerged, South African's even question the benefits of trade partnerships when South Africa trades mainly with Germany, the United States, China, Japan, the United

Kingdom, and Spain. They contend that African countries should be trading the most with each other.

H3 is justified based on the findings that show that regional integration efforts within Africa, despite the establishment of various institutions and initiatives, have not significantly improved economic conditions or increased intra-regional trade due to challenges such as inadequate financial resources and inefficient operation of regional cooperation. According to Jordaan (2014), regional integration in Africa has faced challenges due to multiple and overlapping memberships of regional integration organisations, which have hindered the progress of inter-regional integration. This has led to a situation where Africa trades less with itself than with developed nations.

Finding 4:

The biggest concern was security. South Africans dislike towards the AU regarding security mainly revolves around the migration issue, there is a strong fear about unfamiliar undocumented migrants and the crimes they are presumably set out to commit. Many people expressed fear over the growing crime rates due to an influx of migrants, however the high unemployment rate and growing inequality seems to be the real sore point here.

There exists a prevalent belief that South Africa's membership in the African Union is linked to the substantial influx of destitute undocumented migrants into the country. This perception is rooted in the belief that the AU, by failing to hold corrupt African leaders accountable, indirectly contributes to the migration of citizens from numerous failed African states seeking a better life in South Africa. The porous border controls and policies of the AU are cited as impediments, preventing South Africa from effectively deporting these individuals. This leads to the suggestion by some that leaving the AU will reduce the number of undocumented migrants in South Africa. Many claim that if South Africa left the AU, they would be able to handle the migration crisis by having stronger border control methods. Some cite that because South Africa has a strong military that aids other African countries, they should be utilised in securing the country's borders. Citizens also expressed strong concerns that the AU intrudes in national decision-making processes and reduces member states' control over local issues especially regarding the migrant issue in South Africa. As calling out the migration issue in South Africa makes South Africa become labelled as "xenophobic".

South African's worry that their culture and identity is in danger as the number of Africans from other countries rises, these are people mainly from Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Ethiopia. Comments are angered by the idea of Ramaphosa's talking about African unity that may come at the expense of South Africa's national development. "African values" such as Ubuntu, are perceived as weak concepts in the contemporary world. Many people said that these values are failing the AU, which is already views weak internationally. They argued that the AU aims to create a homogenous culture in every country based on a liberal ideology. However, this culture doesn't match the local history and culture of South Africa and the people should not be forced to accept this. Losing of self-identity due to the weakening and

disintegrating local communities are making these fears even stronger for most. People in the discussions do not want the president fostering unity but wanted him to "#PutSouthAfricanFirst" in all the decisions he makes and should oppose open borders in South Africa. They want Ramaphosa to be more patriotic.

Moreover, South African commenters believed that the South Africa is treating the undocumented migrants better than its own citizens because of the AU, NGO's and the constitution that protect their rights even when they are in the country illegally. Following up on the migration issue, some people claim that the South Africa is not protecting its citizens effectively against the threat of crime committed by undocumented migrants, emphasising this as an internal threat. There is a need for more independence for member states on decisions related to home affairs without the interference of the AU. User's expressed reservations about the balance between South Africa's domestic priorities and its responsibilities within the African Union. The call is that addressing internal challenges should take precedence over extensive involvement in continental affairs, with concerns about potential compromises and the impact on the country's development.

Another concern was that the AU's priorities may not be aligned with South Africa's interests, with accusations that the organisation focuses on regional integration rather than individual sovereign issues, as result South African presidents should always prioritise domestic matters, prompting calls for reassessment of South Africa's involvement in the AU.

This justifies H4, South Africa's consideration to leave or stay in regional integration efforts such as the AU are influenced by migration policies. This is seen as the biggest failure of regional integration, failure to integrate people. There two exist contrasting perspectives on migration. Advocates argued that migration fosters development for both sending and receiving countries, presenting opportunities for growth. Conversely, opponents view migration as a loss for the home country and a threat to the host population (Mangu, 2020). This perception often leads to support for stringent immigration measures, including border security and restrictions on migrant rights. Since the end of Apartheid, South Africa has experienced recurring violent xenophobic attacks, notably in 2008 and 2015. Unfortunately, South African authorities' and politicians' tendency to deny the issue has normalised xenophobia instead of addressing it as a criminal offense (Lejarraga, 2023). This response has exacerbated the situation and hindered regional integration efforts. Foreign nationals are often accused of competing with locals for scarce resources, stealing jobs, committing crimes, and contributing to high unemployment rates in South Africa. With an official unemployment rate of 24%, and even higher for the youth, this perception portrayed African foreigners as beneficiaries rather than contributors to the economy (Mangu, 2020).

4.9. Summary

This chapter provided an extensive account of the research outcomes and discoveries derived from analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data. It commences with an examination of geographical attributes followed by an exploration of the socio-demographic characteristics of

the respondents. The findings revealed the ratio of male to female respondents, as well as the distribution of age, employment. The result shows that males (71.5%) are more vocal online than and females (28.5%) The most active age group online is 25 to 34 (47%) followed by 18 to 24 (25%). Their occupations varied but the most prevalent were Journalist (15%), followed by Author/Writer (13%), and Entrepreneur (9%). They most prevailing sentiment in the discussion among South African citizens was negative (56.1%), with males (77.2%) voicing out the most negative comments. Anger (56.7%) was the common emotion expressed by users throughout the period of the study followed by fear (17.3%) and sadness (17.3%). The results showed that South Africans have a negative perception of the AU and as a result do not want South Africa associated with the body and any regional integration efforts. Citizens believed their national and personal pride is being attacked. People felt that the AU as a different entity introduces a new form of governance that hinders progress. This notion leads to a strong sense of powerlessness and fear of being reduced to another failed African state.

Additionally, the lack of social cohesion and national integration can hinder the development of a cohesive society, which is essential for successful regional integration (Cowden et al., 2017). The personalistic approach's focus on individual motives and intentions may contribute to the challenges of building social cohesion and national integration, as it emphasises personal interests over collective well-being, potentially undermining the unity and cooperation necessary for effective regional integration. Therefore, addressing the lack of social cohesion and national integration is crucial for maximising the political and economic benefits of regional integration. The four-phased framework was used to identify and qualitatively investigate the prevalent facets of AU discussions in South Africa. Grouping together topics from the 1373 tweets that occurred repeatedly between 2020 and 2022 with a thematic analysis revealed motivations, attitudes, rationales for or against South Africa's continued participation in the AU based on how South Africa's perceive the AU. The result showed that how South Africans perceive the AU as a regional body, determines if they want South Africa to continue membership in the organisation.

Furthermore, the thematic analysis further gave better understanding about the research topic and the research questions. The first and most dominate theme was about South Africa leaving the AU because it provides no financial benefit for the country, and it causes an influx of migrants. Secondly and as prevalent is calling out the AU for being weak and South Africa for not being the right hegemon for Africa due to internal issues and not addressing human right abuses and election rigging on the continent for example in Uganda. Third theme, South Africa is making positive impact in the AU because of South Africa's influential role in addressing continental challenges, contributing to regional stability, and providing leadership within the AU especially when dealing with Covid-19. Overall characteristics of South African citizens participating in this online discussion seem to represent patriotism in their statements, stating that leaving or staying or condemning the AU or South Africa leaders serving in the AU is for the betterment of South Africa. In conclusion, the findings from the data analyses are presented in relation to all research questions and hypotheses proposed in this study. The subsequent chapter provides a more elaborate interpretation and discussion of the research results and findings.

5. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER REASEARCH

5.1 Introduction

This chapter encompassed discussions, recommendations, and suggestions for future research. Initially, the research results and findings are deliberated upon in alignment with the research objectives and questions outlined in Chapter one of this dissertation. The chapter commenced with an examination of the socio-demographic characteristics of the target group, addressed research questions within this discourse. Additionally, the chapter delved into discussions regarding regional integration and national development within South Africa. The findings are compared with previous research on regional integration identified in the literature review, clarified the significance of national development in sustaining support for regional integration. Moreover, the implications of this support for decision-making, regional cohesion, and development are explored.

By employing Andreotta et al.'s (2019) four-phased framework, this study systematically identified and qualitatively scrutinised the enduring aspects of South African engagement in AU discussions as reflected in South African posts on Twitter spanning from December 1, 2020, to December 1, 2022. Computational techniques were applied to model nine topics within the corpus, facilitating the recognition and grouping of similar topics recurring over the two-year period. A subsample of tweets was then extracted from the most relevant topic groupings, and a thematic analysis was conducted, categorising them into three themes: "Leave the AU," " South Africa is not the right hegemon," and "Stay in the AU." This detailed process demonstrates using a combination of methods, including both qualitative analysis and data science techniques, to examine information from social media.

This methodology leveraged the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative techniques are indispensable for generating and categorising topics that encompass the entire dataset. These topics served as an initial framework for comprehending the dataset, providing a foundation upon which meaningful themes can be set, contextualised within the broader socio-political landscape of South Africa from 2020 to 2022. By integrating quantitatively derived topics into the qualitative analysis, the objective was to formulate themes that could be generalised to a larger, relevant portion of the dataset. The wholesomeness of these themes is validated by their alignment with computationally derived topics, which recurred consistently throughout the period (i.e., prevalent topic groupings). Across the literature, topics such as poor leadership and governance within the AU are recurrent (Eregha, 2007; Makinda & Okumu, 2007; Tieku, 2019; Abdulrahman & Abraham, 2016), alongside the theme of advocating for continued membership in regional bodies like the AU (Magliveras & Naldi, 2002; Lucey & Gida, 2014; Makinda, Okumu, & Mickler, 2015; Grimm, 2011). The repetition of these topics emphasises the validity of the findings. Additionally, the emergence of the theme concerning South Africa withdrawing from the AU due to perceived economic drawbacks is a new observation.

This is the first study to evaluate the perceptions of South African citizens perspectives on South Africa's contribution and interactions with the African Union through the content analysis of social media. Notably, certain themes uncovered in this study have not been explicitly recognised in previous data science analyses of tweets concerning South Africa's participation in the AU as perceived by citizens. Nonetheless, as the study progressed through various phases of the framework, these themes gradually became more evident. During the grouping stage, identifying topics based on sentiment, keywords and motivation helped with grouping. According to Andreotta et al. (2019), finding a new theme that wasn't found in other data science studies supports that using both quantitative and qualitative methods can uncover more themes than just using quantitative methods alone.

5.2. Conclusion

Through the application of Andreotta et al., (2019), four-phased framework, this study contributed to an emerging literature on South African citizens perception on South Africa's contribution and interactions with the AU by providing an in-depth examination of the structure of South African social media discourse. The second chapter highlights the complexity of defining integration, emphasising its manifestation as the collaboration of distinct states within a specific territory. Integration, often linked to economic goals such as strengthened trade relations, involves the incorporation of individual states voluntarily relinquishing aspects of sovereignty for specific transactions, spanning political, economic, and social domains. In the era of globalisation, regional integration aims to navigate global challenges and capitalise on associated benefits. In the international arena, states, especially weaker ones like those in Africa, find membership in regional integration blocs essential for geopolitical influence. Membership decisions are influenced by push and pull factors, with states seeking benefits, promises, or assistance to address domestic challenges, ultimately requiring consensus for entry into a regional bloc.

5.3. Characteristics of people participating in discourse in South Africa

This dissertation is concerned with how regional integration and national development impact each other and how citizens perceive this trade off. Employing a convenient sample on social media, the research examines the socio- demographic characteristics. Subsequently, the ensuing section offers a synthesis of the key findings and their alignment with the research questions. The result shows that both males (71.5%) are more vocal online than and females (28.5%) The most active age group online is 25 to 34 (47%) followed by 18 to 24 (25%). The most prevalent voting age and highest social media present age group in social media in South Africa. They most prevailing sentiment in the discussion among South African citizens was negative (56.1%), with males (77.2%) voicing out the most negative comments. This is evident in local polls when South African citizens vote for political parties that resonate with messaging that promises them secure borders and jobs.

The literature review revealed that owing to the type of information that people consume online, their stance on political issues is influenced by these factors and they are more inclined

to spread the message online and offline. This study reinforces the existing selective exposure theory (Garrett, 2009; Cardenal et al., 2019). South African's actively seek out these communities to validate their political views like #OperationDudula and #PutSouthAfricafirst being the most used hashtag when it comes to the AU and South Africa's membership. Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz developed the Two-Step Flow Theory, which explains how the media affects public opinion. According to this idea, the media fails to alter people's minds; instead, it changes opinion leaders, who then have a big effect on what other people think (Soffer, 2021). The prevailing belief suggests that undocumented migrants, lacking traceable addresses, are emboldened to commit crimes, contributing to rising crime rates. This sentiment is reinforced by certain officials, police, intellectuals, and media, who attribute violent crime to migration. The connection between migration and crime persists among ordinary citizens and officials in South Africa. This study proved the Two-Step Flow Theory to be valid. In the context of this study, the anonymity of social media allows one to voice out their opinion without the "fear of isolation" which is the biggest premise of Noelle-Neumann's theory. The type of words and sentiments shared showed that the people did not fear any repercussions.

Applying Vroom's Expectancy Theory to political conversations online proved that individuals are more likely to engage if they believe their efforts will lead to meaningful contributions, recognition, and outcomes that they find valuable or attractive. The theory provided a framework for understanding the motivational factors that underlie South Africans decisions to participate in online political discussions to activate change at both local, national, and regional level. The Theory of Citizen Involvement theory not only explains why people interact with each other online, but it also supported the idea that a strong democracy needs its people to be actively involved in shaping the political scene. The election polling of South Africa proves that what people voice out online translates to polls. Economic struggles contribute to a shifting political climate, with the ANC losing support, as evident in the 2021 local elections where it secured less than half the national votes. Rising parties advocate for enhanced border security and selective migration, framing their stance in economic terms. This trend is expected to continue in the 2024 national government elections as politicians capitalise on anti-migrant sentiments to secure votes.

Also, obtaining people's opinions on regulations makes them more useful by addressing the details and practicalities that might be missed in a top-down approach (Kolcava et al., 2021). Basically, including people's opinions in policymaking is important for making policies that are not only well-informed but also fit with and are supported by the groups they are supposed to help, which leads to a more accountable and responsive government.

5.4. Revisiting Research Objectives, Questions & Hypotheses

The overarching aim of this dissertation was to investigate the relationship between regional integration and national development, aiming to understand the role of integration in fostering growth and development. To achieve this aim, five objectives were identified, each corresponding to four research questions designed to fulfil the research objectives of this dissertation.

To analyse perceptions of the AU to comprehend the prevailing attitudes towards the organisation. To answer the first question qualitative research was conducted. The study found that South Africans generally have a negative perception of the AU. Public social media conversations showed that South Africa's found it difficult to recognise the direct impact of the African Union's activities on their own lives – that means that they feel like personal relevance of the AU was expressed to be low in a strong majority of the comments. They described the AU as useless, corrupt, and a burden on South Africa which they perceive is a better country in Africa. Using data science techniques to show sentiment, anger (56.7%) was the common emotion expressed by users throughout the period of the study followed by fear (17.3%) and sadness (17.3%).

The second, third objective was to explore and describe South Africa's multifaceted role within the AU, focusing on its leadership, diplomatic engagements, economic influence, and political contributions, with the aim of understanding its impact on regional integration and governance in the African continent and its hegemon role. To address this question, an exhaustive review of existing literature and secondary data was collected on AU cites was done on past and present contributions of South Africa on the continent. This opened the debate about whether South Africa should leave or stay in the AU. South Africa appears to overlook the correlation between the lack of successful developmental regional integration and its current challenges. Despite efforts to avoid appearing hegemonic, it has missed opportunities to play a catalytic role in regional integration initiatives. This highlights a disconnect between South Africa's aspirations and its actions in fostering regional cooperation. Therefore, the research questions related to the objectives 2 and 3 are answered.

The fourth objective was to formulate actionable suggestions for AU policymakers to enhance growth and development through regional integration. A literature review was undertaken to examine subjects pertinent to regional integration matters in South Africa and national development and topics found within the qualitative findings to be able to suggest viable future recommendations to promote cohesive regional integration. The literature review was presented among current theories of regional integration, and economic integration, citizen behaviour suitable for accomplishing the objectives outlined in the proposed research of this dissertation.

To test the hypotheses, the study employed qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the effects regional integration has on national development. The findings of the study indicated that, within South African commentary on South African citizens perception on South Africa's role in the African Union, a wide range of sentiments are present. A small segment of South Africans wants the country to remain in the AU because they see the positive impact that the country has on the regional body through South Africa being chair. The time is imminent it would seem for communicators and governments to discuss AU policy geared towards integration, with a continent characterised by interconnected borders and integrated infrastructure spanning across its expanse, this portion of the populace is attentive and eager to participate in the discourse and want to see Africa developing to achieve its Agenda 2063 goals and believed in Pan-Africanism. Very prevalent in the discussions, are some users discussing

the possibility of South Africa leaving the AU because the AU exploits South Africa's finite economic resources and burdens the country with undocumented migrants; so there remains a pressing need to implement communication strategies to persuade members of the South African public of the country's contributions to continental affairs and dealing with the influx of migrants. Yet, in some conversations people discussed how bad governance from South Africa is weakening the AU, and these voices expressed discontent regarding South Africa's perceived loss of influence within the AU as regional hegemon. South Africa boasts the most advanced infrastructure on the continent and leads in FDI within SADC and Africa. Its diversified economy contributes significantly to regional integration in SADC and AU. Despite these accomplishments, South Africa's role in Africa sparks controversy. Some view it as imperialistic and exploitative, dubbing it a "bully." Scholars debate its hegemonic status compared to Nigeria due to the latter's higher GDP, but others argued South Africa's gateway status to Africa maintains its hegemony. It remains the top choice for conducting business on the continent.

The empirical evaluation has yielded the subsequent hypotheses:

1. H1: The lack of social cohesion and national integration within AU member states, including South Africa, impedes the political and economic benefits of regional integration. (Verified)
2. H2: Despite the need for a regional hegemonic power to drive regional integration and maintain relevance in Africa and the global arena, South Africa is perceived as lacking the assertive leadership required for such a role. (Verified)
3. H3: Regional integration efforts within Africa, despite the establishment of various institutions and initiatives, have not significantly improved economic conditions or increased intra-regional trade due to challenges such as inadequate financial resources and inefficient operation of regional cooperation. (Verified)
4. H4: South Africa's consideration to leave or stay in regional integration efforts such as the African Union may be influenced by migration. (Verified)

The result presented that South Africans perceive no economic benefits from regional integration for the country. They do not support regional integration and do not hold the African Union in high regard. The overarching findings of this study offer a comprehensive comprehension of the advantages and hurdles associated with regional integration in Africa, encompassing both external and internal challenges that exist in South Africa that prohibit cohesive regional integration. Certainly, the research contributed to the ongoing debate about regional integration and national development and validated the need for cohesive integration for growth and development yielding theoretical and governance implications.

5.5. Suggestions for further research

Due to data scraping capabilities of Talkwalker and time constraints, Twitter was the convenient and better adept at stimulating political participation than Facebook. However, future studies should analyse data from different social media websites. like Facebook,

according to Statista (2023) in South Africa, there were 30.7 million Facebook users, constituting more than half of the country's population. Among them, 29% belonged to the age group of 25 to 34 years, representing the largest demographic segment. The demographics and dataset would be vaster capturing more voices.

Secondly, the present study exclusively examined tweets posted between December 1, 2020, and December 1, 2022. Subsequent research undertakings could extend the analysis to tweets beyond this timeframe to enhance the comprehensiveness of findings and to track the evolution of South Africans' perceptions regarding South Africa's membership in the AU. Nonetheless, this current proof of concept study has established a framework for future analytical research on African citizen perceptions of governance across diverse social media platforms.

This study was conducted prior to the general elections in South Africa in May 2024. Future research could be done post-election to examine whether the positions of political parties, particularly the ANC or any other party like the EFF advocating for open border policies will influence the election outcomes.

The dataset utilised in this study exhibits a degree of representativeness with regards to age and gender demographics. However, to enhance the precision of future analyses, it is advisable to incorporate conventional paper-based questionnaires alongside social media monitoring. This dual approach would facilitate the inclusion of segments of the population that may not be adequately reached through online platforms, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive and accurate depiction of age-related data.

Lastly, this study would build if South Africa's potential departure from the AU would lead to increased economic isolation and negatively affect its national development. Morocco's absence from the AU from 1984 to 2017 may have limited its influence in continental politics and its ability to benefit from economic initiatives designed to foster intra-African trade and cooperation. The re-admission of Morocco to the AU marked a significant shift in its foreign policy, opening new avenues for engagement with African states (Reumert, 2023). However, the specific impacts of Morocco's absence and subsequent return to the AU on its political and economic relationships within Africa would require further investigation into the historical and contemporary dynamics of Morocco's foreign policy and economic strategies in relation to the continent.

5.6. Recommendations

For the African Union to build its credibility for South African's, they need to be transparent about the benefits of AU membership. Citizens need to know that their voices are being heard by the AU. The AU could run something like the European Parliament's 'Parlemeter' survey where they monitor European citizens' opinions on the EU membership and its benefits. In this instance, the AU would also gauge attitudes towards the AU, its priorities, actions, and mission. The survey would engage not only the South African population to identify specific concerns and misconceptions regarding the AU. The surveys could be conducted face-to-face, with video

interviews and online. By doing this survey, this will keep the AU accountable to citizens who want to keep their governments answerable. This would also raise awareness about the presence of the body for those that do not of its existence.

While intra-regional trade has improved in recent years, it remains insufficient. The study emphasises the importance of prioritising intra-African trade over international trade. Drawing lessons from the EU's integration process, African nations must rely more on each other for successful integration. This shift is crucial given the predominant reliance on international donors for development initiatives. Africa needs to develop a self-reliant framework to reduce dependence on external aid and facilitate a smooth transition towards autonomy.

South Africa, a young democracy at 30 years old, continues to grapple with challenges stemming from its apartheid past. Despite this, it has made significant strides nationally, continentally, and globally. Like other nations, it faces internal issues, notably high unemployment rates contributing to widespread criminal activity. However, South Africa's progress should not be overlooked, as it navigates its unique path towards addressing historical injustices while striving for socio-economic development.

Violence against foreign nationals has been condemned by the South African government. This study challenges the notion that South Africa is incapable of coexisting peacefully with other Africans, citing historical evidence of harmony. It suggests that the government should prioritise addressing youth unemployment through strategic planning and fostering reconciliation with non-South African nationals. The implementation of these objectives is crucial for achieving the desired outcomes and promoting social cohesion.

The study suggests that African nations must prioritise developmental initiatives to enhance the credibility of their trade sectors. Collaboration between smaller and larger economies is essential for achieving effective integration.

Many smaller states in the region feel overshadowed by South Africa's dominance in trade, emphasising the importance of a balanced trade sector for all countries. Successful integration requires narrowing the gap between African nations. Regional Integration in Africa hinges on collective political will and synergy, as individual strength cannot rival supranational institutions. African leaders must prioritise collective goals over personal ambitions and greed to achieve synergy in politics, economics, and society. This unity, akin to the EU's success, necessitates Africa's return to Pan-African principles of unity and solidarity, epitomised by Ubuntu. Addressing overlapping memberships in regional blocs is crucial to avoid diluting priorities and increasing expenditure. Multi-memberships should only occur once primary regional block memberships are clearly defined to ensure focused objectives and efficient regional business operations.

Given the potential implications of South Africa's departure from the AU, it is recommended that South Africa carefully evaluates the consequences before making any decisions. While some may argue that withdrawal from the AU would not lead to increased economic isolation,

it is crucial to recognise the significant benefits of membership in terms of access to regional markets, cooperation on economic development initiatives, and diplomatic influence. Therefore, policymakers should prioritise maintaining South Africa's membership in the AU and actively engage with other member states to address any concerns or challenges within the organisation. This approach will help ensure continued economic growth and development while fostering stronger ties with neighbouring countries and the broader African continent.

The SADC region lacks a comprehensive framework to manage labour migration effectively. Despite efforts to reduce barriers across its 16 countries, progress has been limited. While bilateral agreements enable visa-free travel in some cases, there's a need for a more proactive regional migration strategy. South Africa, as a major destination, would gain significantly from such a system, benefiting both migrants' countries of origin and the migrants themselves. However, the absence of a strong regional plan hampers efforts to address future migration challenges, highlighting the need for a more coordinated approach within the SADC region.

Given the significant presence of young people on social media, social media platforms provide an opportunity for the government to engage in direct dialogue with citizens and stakeholder. Through interactive posts, live Q&A sessions, and online forums, the government can facilitate discussions on regional integration topics and address concerns or questions from the public. This will give citizens the feeling that they are part of integration.

6. NEW SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS

South Africa's status as the most developed economy in SADC and Africa emphasises its fundamental role in regional integration efforts. Its economic strength positions it as the regional hub, capable of influencing integration outcomes. However, navigating its domestic, regional, continental, and global interests poses challenges, often leading to conflicts of interest. Maintaining mutually beneficial commercial relationships with regional economies is crucial for South Africa's role in fostering regional integration. At the backdrop of this information, this research explores the critical position South Africa occupies, balancing regional and global leadership amidst domestic demands for addressing internal issues.

In terms of contribution, unlike previous studies, this research examined the intricate aspects of regional integration and utilised a qualitative methodology to evaluate its impacts on growth and development. Conducting a study on the relationship between regional integration and national development, using South Africa as a case study. The new aspects of this study are outlined below:

1. Insights into Regional Bodies' Efficacy: This study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of regional bodies like the African Union AU in fostering economic growth and development among member nations. The analysis adds to existing literature to highlight the challenge of overlapping memberships within the AU, shedding light on the complexities of regional integration. Overlapping membership creates conflicting priorities and commitments, making it difficult to make progress towards integration and collaboration and leads to higher spending on managing various regional activities especially for South Africa which is expected to be the regional hegemon of both the SADC and the AU. This result can be used to by the South African government to lobby for prioritising to resolve the issue of countries belonging to multiple regional groups through clear guidelines and incentives to encourage countries to streamline their regional affiliations, thereby reducing administrative costs and promoting more efficient resource allocation.

2. Understanding the Economic Influence: This finding suggests that despite efforts towards regional integration, South Africa's economic ties still predominantly lean towards European partners. This challenges the notion of strong intra-regional trade within Africa. The implication is that African countries should prioritise trade among themselves to promote regional integration effectively, similar to the European Union model. Future applications could involve policy recommendations aimed at promoting intra-African trade and reducing dependency on external markets for economic growth and development. This could include initiatives to enhance infrastructure & market accessibility, streamline trade processes, and encourage economic cooperation among African nations within the context of frameworks of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

3. Exploration of Socio-Political Dimensions: The study explored the socio-political aspects of integration, examining citizens' views on their country's role in regional bodies. It revealed a disparity between South Africans' perceptions and the actual

benefits of AU membership, impacting political preferences. Voters tend to support parties aligned with their economic and social interests, particularly those advocating for South African welfare "Putting South African's First" as seen in local elections. This suggests a gap that political parties can exploit. By adapting their messaging to resonate with these sentiments, parties may garner wider electoral support for the upcoming May 2024 elections and beyond.

4. Theoretical Framework on Regional Hegemony: An additional substantial contribution to this study lies in the introduction of a theoretical framework aimed at deepening understanding of the impact of integration on economic growth and development, focusing on South Africa's role as a regional hegemon. By examining South Africa's experience, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges and benefits of regional integration for citizens and policymakers. These insights can inform future decisions on whether to stay or leave regional integration bodies like the African Union, contributing to informed policymaking and fostering regional development.

5. Holistic Examination of Social and Developmental Impacts: Lastly, this study went beyond analysing the economic effects of regional integration by examining its impact on development and social factors. While acknowledging the importance of institutions in driving growth through integration, the study suggests that successful regional integration requires addressing social issues effectively, not just focusing on economic factors. By engaging with diverse stakeholders and incorporating their perspectives into integration strategies, governments can ensure policies that are inclusive and responsive to citizens' needs. This approach promotes support for African Union membership not only in South Africa but also in other AU countries, as citizens are more likely to embrace regional integration when they perceive it as benefiting them rather than being at their expense. This study contributes to advancing regional integration efforts by emphasising the importance of social development alongside economic growth.

7. SUMMARY

This study contributed to understanding regional integration and its role in the growth and development of countries. Following the success of the European Union in Europe, regional integration has garnered significant attention for its potential benefits in the African context (Yeates, 2017; Caporaso & Tarrow 2009), including economic development, trade enhancement, and increased bargaining power for example (Pomerlyan, 2022). South Africa, having transitioned from apartheid to a leading economic force in Africa (Mangu, 2020) plays an important role in regional integration in Africa. However, its status as a hegemon is disputed despite leading the African Union multiple times due to challenges in addressing domestic issues like unemployment and crime (Gwala, 2015). The objective of this research was to investigate the impact of regional integration on South Africa's growth, based on citizen perspectives.

This study used a combination of qualitative and data science methodologies to evaluate the communication surrounding themes of regional integration on social media platforms in South Africa. Utilising proprietary software developed by Talkwalker, data was collected from Twitter over a 24-month period, spanning from December 1, 2020, to December 1, 2022. The data collection involved querying social media using a predefined set of keywords associated with the African Union and South Africa's membership. This method facilitated the extraction of the most relevant posts, providing a focused analysis of discussions related to regional integration. A secondary analysis of economic data pertaining to Africa, the African Union, and South Africa was conducted from various sources, including books, journals, newspapers, and theses, to support empirical findings.

The study revealed that many South African citizens believed that leaving the African Union would be beneficial, citing limited economic benefits from the organisation. The public perception suggested that South Africa's advanced infrastructure and superior economic strength, coupled with the African Union's failure to hold other African leaders accountable for political instability, have led to an influx of economic migrants from Africa into South Africa. This influx is exacerbating the already high unemployment rates in the country further dwindling any benefits of regional integration on the country.

Based on these results, one recommendation is narrowing the gap between African countries. Regional integration in Africa hinges on collective political will and synergy, as individual strength cannot rival supranational institutions. African leaders must prioritise collective goals over personal ambitions and greed to achieve synergy in politics, economics, and society. Leaving the African Union will not solve the unemployment issues that have led to crime in South Africa without strategic plans from the government, the country's departure from the African Union would lead to potential economic isolation and undermine past regional integration initiatives by the country.

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APPENDICES:

Appendix 1: Thematic Analysis Code frame Analysis

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Description of tweets	Number of tweets per theme
AU membership as a good thing	South Africans take pride in SA's ability to maintain law and order and create stability	Diverse perspectives show how South Africa actively shapes diplomatic engagements, takes principled stances on international issues, and contributes to the effectiveness of the African Union	55
	South Africa retains the capacity to influence meaningful and consequential impacts on the continental stage	Expectations and perceptions regarding South Africa's influential role in addressing continental challenges, contributing to regional stability, and providing leadership within the African Union	63
	South African's positively evaluate South Africa's leader's role in regional governance	Recognition of successful tenures, advocacy for Africa, multi-tasking capabilities, and diplomatic skills of South African leadership on the continental stage	97
South Africa is a weak regional hegemon A weak influence: Things are not going in the right direction	Condemn the incompetence of South African leaders in their role as Chairman of AU	Negative evaluations of South African AU leaders in their contributions to regional governance over perceived incompetence, silence on critical issues, and questionable motives	356
	Critical of shortcomings in addressing Regional Challenges and Advancing AU Development Goals	Criticism is directed towards President Cyril Ramaphosa, both as the Chairperson of the AU and as South Africa's leader in his inaction and lack of intervention in cases of human rights abuses and electoral fraud and repressive regimes within Africa, South Africa not driving economic integration on continent	271
No positive impact by being part of the AU: Leave the AU Leave the AU: My country has not benefitted from its AU membership	Perceive Lack of Positive Impact from African Union Membership	Arguments about AU, rather than serving Africa's interests, is inefficient and places an undue burden on South Africa	156
	Lament at South Africa not being prioritised by its own president any longer	Dissatisfaction with President Cyril Ramaphosa who appears more engaged in continental and international affairs than addressing pressing issues within South Africa	186
	Against African Union Policies they believe will have Potential Detrimental Effects on South Africa	Opposing open borders policies and the free movement of people within Africa because it is causing influx of undocumented migrants foreigners to South Africa	204

Code frame on excel sheet

The Code Frame followed:

Is the comment an authentic voice?
Before start to code, checking if the comment is an authentic voice. For example, if a comment only includes the title of an article written by a journalist, it is not relevant. In this case, please do not code the given line.

Attitude towards the au
In this aspect, please mark what the speaker's general approach is towards the AU.

- **Leave the AU: Anti-AU attitude**
  The speaker discusses an issue from an anti-AU standpoint, criticising the AU.
- **Stay in AU: Pro-AU attitude**
  The speaker discusses an issue from a pro-AU standpoint, supporting the AU.
- **Factual**
  The speaker states factual information from reputable new sites.
- **Not applicable**
  The attitude towards the AU cannot be recognised from the comment.

African Union Perspective
Vectors of tension
In this aspect, please mark with an X the thematic field through which the speaker shares their perspective on the AU. If more than one of the below are discussed:

- **National Sovereignty**:
  The AU is often seen as having regulations that serve no purpose for member states, instead disregard local requirements and the country's local interests. Citizens often interpret this as intrusive, and as a loss of national integrity and power for decision-making.
  Also, if the comment speaks about the structure of the AU, or the bureaucrats who work at the AU, those comments belong here too.
- **Economy:**
  The comment discussed the distribution of AU funds, benefits of AU on country (trade, investment), corruption related to AU funding, or the economic inequalities between member states. The beneficiaries of AU funding, corruption related to business dealings between AU leaders. The comment might reflect how economically stronger member states exploit poorer ones' labour force or natural resources.
- **Culture:**
  The comment reflects the influence of migration on local culture or discusses how the AU supports values which are foreign to South Africa, the AU coming across as a

progressive organisation compared to the more conservative local community. The comment might also discuss South African values which are shared by the speaker.

- **Security:** *Sense of security perceived by the speaker*
  Following up on the migration issue, some people claim that the AU is the cause of migration in Africa. Some comments are measuring the benefits of being a member of the AU vs. exiting the Union (AUexit). The comment might also discuss crime and terrorism.

Proximity and personal relevance

In this aspect, please mark how close the discussed issue is to the speaker, depending on how close or far-fetched the speaker perceives the given problem. This is not necessarily dependent on how emotional the comment is, but more on the direct influence on the speaker's life. The reference to proximity can be implicit sometimes (e.g.: control over the internet → "I, personally, will not be able to browse").

- **High personal relevance**
  The speaker discusses an issue in connection with the AU emphasising how it will influence their own life.

  > E.g.: "*The only policy I see impacting my life implemented by the AU, is the open borders, I don't want foreigners here.*"

- **Low personal relevance**
  The speaker discusses an issue without recognising any direct influence of the issue on his own life.

  > E.g.: "*Nigerian Police are busy k!ll!ng our African Brothers and sisters* 😭 *South Africa as the chair of the AU should intervene soon*"