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

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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

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 Africa¹ 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

¹In 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 efforts by the South African government there is lack of research into 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. Adejumbi & Kreiter (2020) assert 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 sought 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 an interesting example as a case study.

To achieve the research aim, these are the objectives delivered in 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's see benefits.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. 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.

2.2. 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 1) 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.

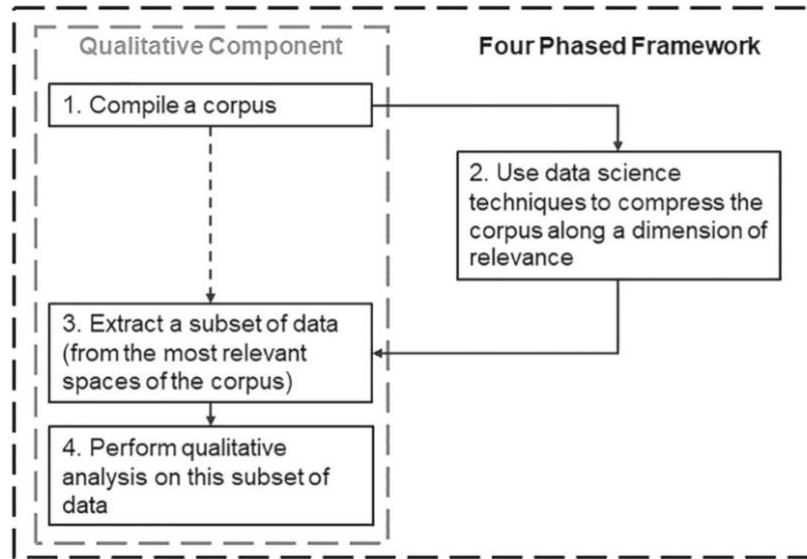


Figure 1. Schematic overview of the four-phased framework.
Source: Andreotta et al., 2019.

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_TV RADIO 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 2, 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.

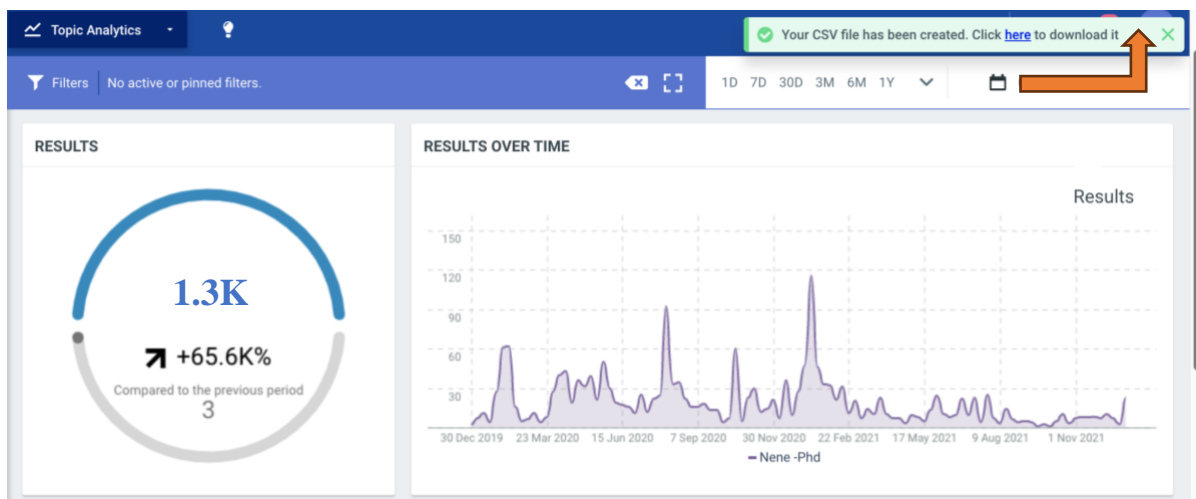


Figure 2. Data cleansing and data downloading.
Source: Talkwalker, 2023.

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, 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 3 below and the results in Figure 10.

Figure 3 shows the AI Classifier interface feature of Talkwalker that I manually trained for the sentiment analysis after data has been cleansed. In Figure 3, 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.

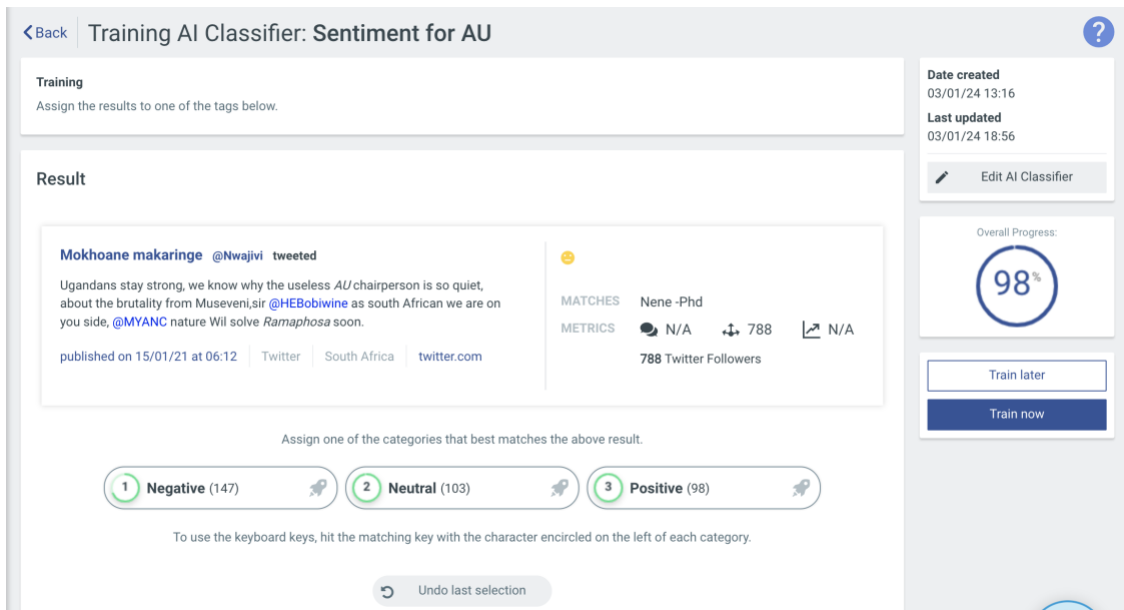


Figure 3. Talkwalker AI Classifier training process.
Source: Talkwalker, 2023.

While training the AI, I could check for accuracy of the classifier by checking if it coded the tweets correctly (Figure 4) 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.

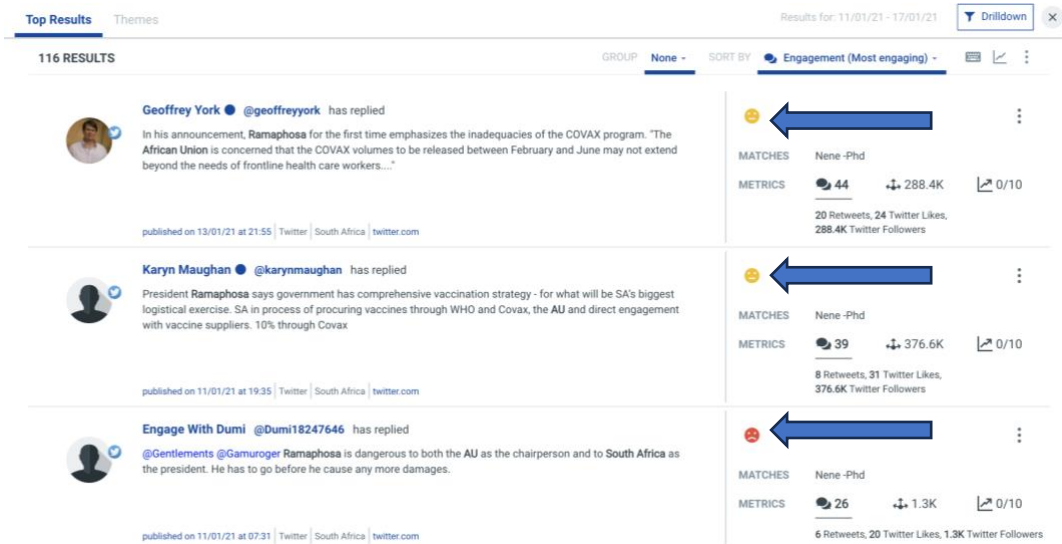


Figure 4. Validating coded data using machine learning algorithms based on sentiment.
Source: Talkwalker, 2023.

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 1.

Table 1. 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 2.

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 2) was adjusted as follows.

Table 2. 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. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESULTS

A total of 1764 tweets were identified from Talkwalker with 1039 Unique Authors². 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.

3.1. 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 5): 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.

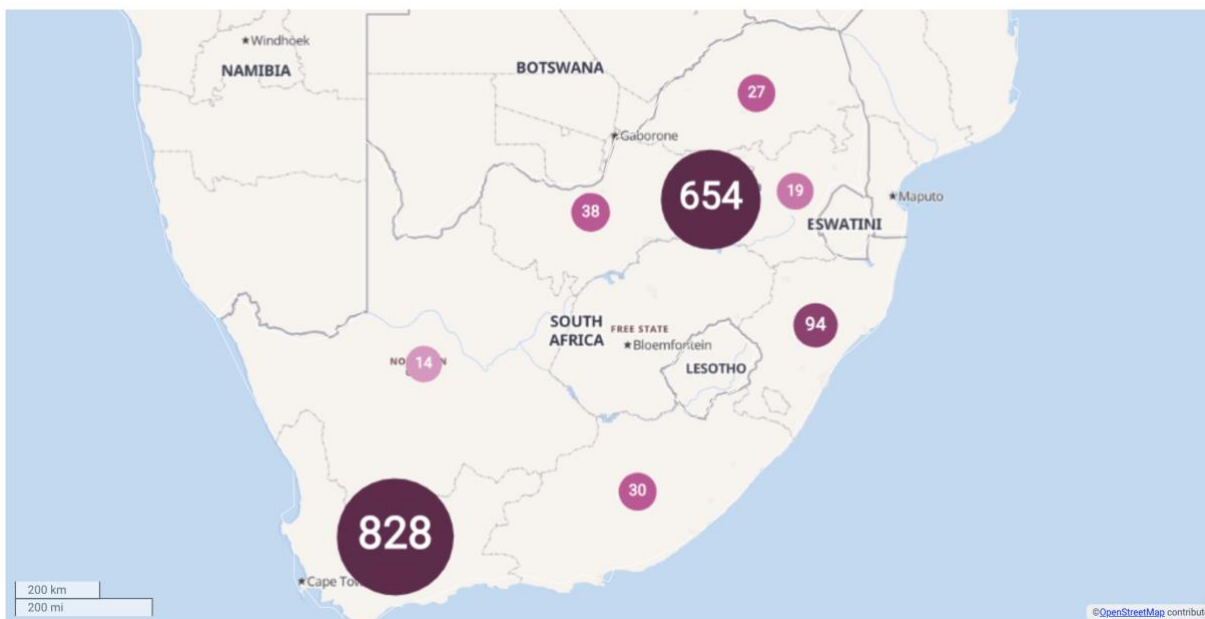
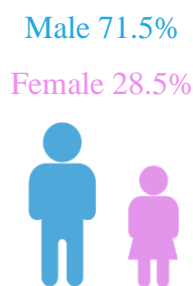


Figure 5. Map of where sample of tweets originated from in South Africa.
Source: Author's compilation from Talkwalker, 2024.

² 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.

3.2. Socio - Demographic Characteristics³

A total of 1373 tweets were identified from Talkwalker by 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).



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 6). 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 7).

³ The data comes from AI driven analysis, which relies on information an algorithm can extract from the user's social media profiles.

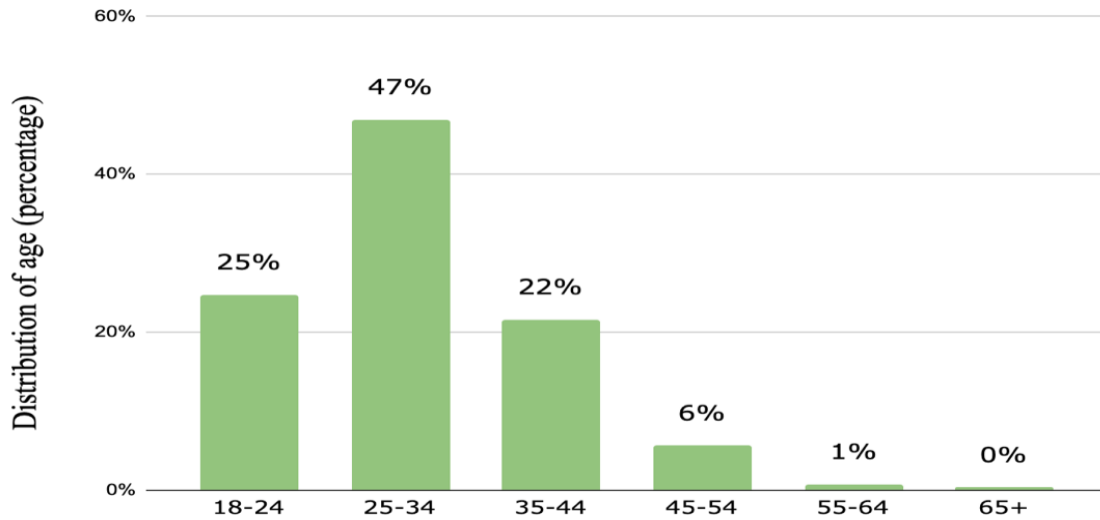


Figure 6: Respondents' age group.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

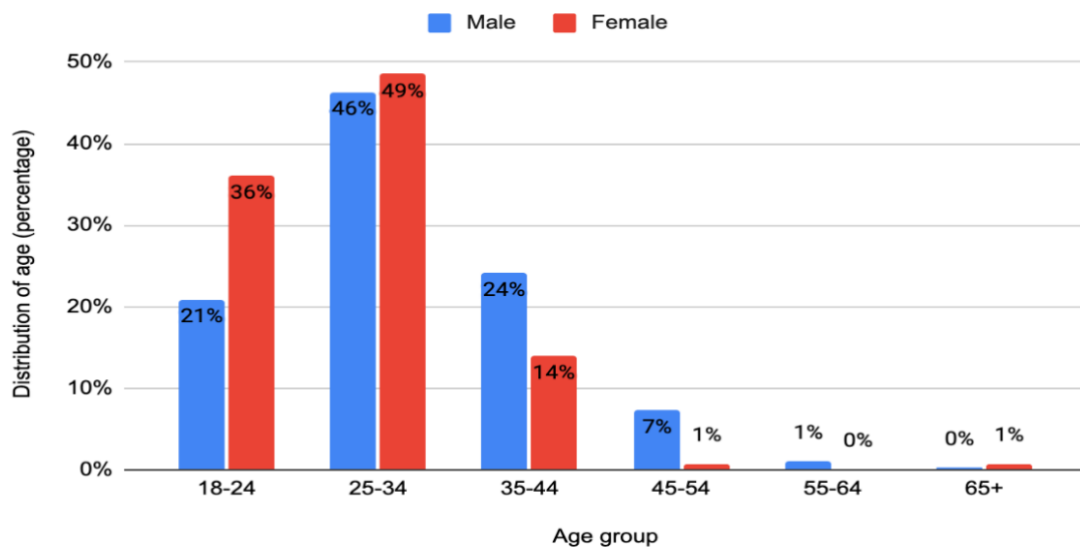


Figure 7. Respondents' age group and gender.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

Figure 8 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 9 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.

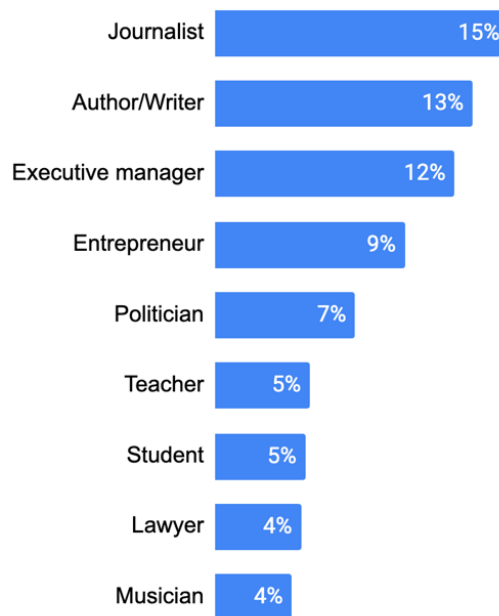


Figure 9. Respondents’ employment based on twitter biographies.
Source: Author’s compilation, 2024.

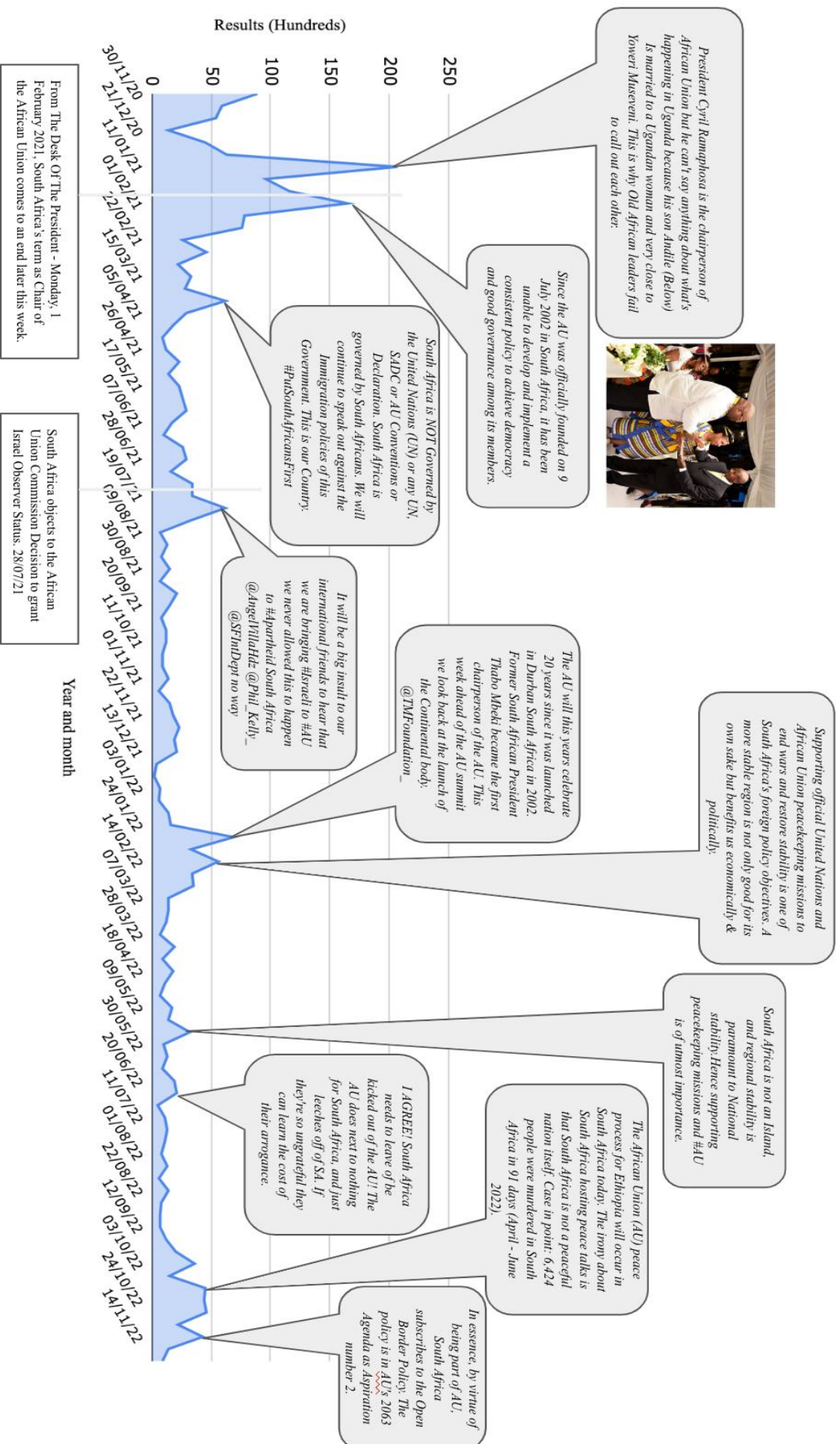


Figure 8. Trendline showing conversation peaks where South African citizens discussed South Africa in the African Union.
 Source: Adapted from Talkwalker and Author's compilation, 2024.

3.3. 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 10). 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 the 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.

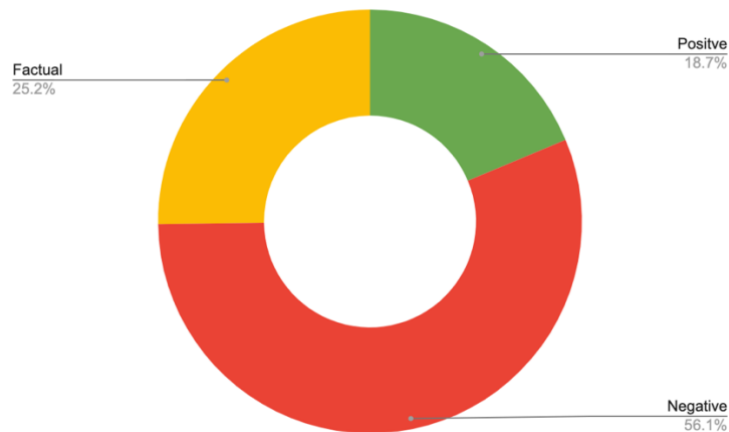


Figure 10. Overall sentiments towards the AU and South Africa membership in the AU.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

Overall, these were the trending hashtags⁴ 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 11). 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 illegal African immigrants from South Africa), #Uganda/ #UgandaElections, VoetsekANC

⁴ Users on Twitter often use a hashtag (#) to categorise and discover tweets related to a particular topic.

3.4. 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 13). 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.

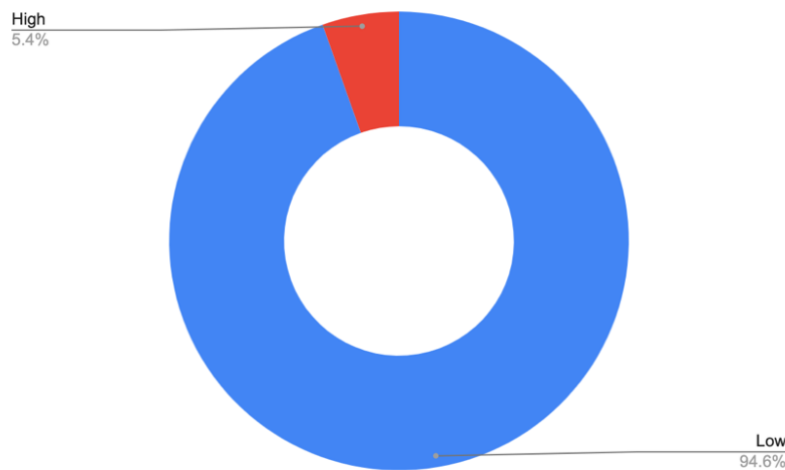


Figure 13. African Union's personal relevance in the lives of South Africans.
Source: Author's compilation, 2024.

3.5. 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 1⁵

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

⁵ 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. In

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 or 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 (*“SAZA 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 Ramaphosa's 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 Ramaphosa's 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 killing 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.

3.6. 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 its 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 helm 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 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 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. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study employed qualitative and data science 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 SA leaving the AU because the AU exploits South Africa's finite economic resources and burdens the country with illegal 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 express 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.

Literature 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 reinforced this existing selective exposure theory (Garrett, 2009; Cardenal et al., 2019). South African's actively seeked out these communities to validate their political views like #OperationDudula and #PutSouthAfricaFirst being the most used hashtag when it comes to the African Union and South Africa's involvement. 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 illegal immigrants, 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 attributed violent crime to immigration. 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 immigration, 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.

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 (Ubuntu means "I am, because you are"). 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 comprehensive regional plan hampers efforts to address future migration challenges, highlighting the need for a more coordinated approach within the SADC region. Lastly, 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.

5. 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.

6. REFERENCES

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7. PUBLICATIONS

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