Opinion leadership, threats, and enhancers to social cohesion and unity of South Africans and African immigrants in the post-apartheid era

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Most existing studies document the sporadic incidences of Afrophobia, xenophobia, color-blind xenophobia, and sibling fights within South Africa. These studies consistently present citizens as active players in anti-immigrant attitudes, actions, and sentiments. However, there appears to be a scarcity of literature in the South African context that focuses on how opinion leaders affect social cohesion and unity between South Africans and African immigrants. Additionally, although some research has examined factors that influence social cohesion between these groups, there is a lack of comprehensive studies on the specific role of opinion leaders in enhancing or threatening this cohesion. The paper seeks to respond to the question what are the effects of opinion leaders in enhancing or threatening social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants? Through the use of exploratory and case study research designs, as well as qualitative methods and thematic analysis, this paper seeks to explore how opinion leaders such as the South African government and its officials, politicians, political parties, and the media, affect social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants. The work argues that opinion leaders can positively and negatively influence social cohesion between these groups. The paper recommends that political parties, government officials, and the media play a key role in fostering social cohesion between African immigrants and South Africans. This has significant implications for enhancing unity in South African communities composed of African immigrants and South African nationals.

KEYWORDS

African immigrants, opinion leaders, social cohesion, South African nationals, xenophobia, threats, enhancers, African continental integration

1 Introduction

Opinion leaders are individuals whose views and opinions hold significant sway and are frequently sought after by others when making decisions in various contexts (Cosmas and Sheth, 1980). Similarly, Glock and Nicosia (1963) define opinion leaders as agents of information who exert social influence and guide decisions in particular directions. These individuals or groups provide social reinforcement that supports and strengthens decisions already made (Glock and Nicosia, 1963). Opinion leaders share similar characteristics with agents of political socialization, who are individuals or groups that play a key role in transmitting societal values and shaping public discourse, perceptions, and attitudes. In this way, they act as role models for driving behavioral change within their communities (Valente and Pumpuang, 2007). These individuals possess significant power in shaping public opinion

and fostering social change. As such, behaviors and attitudes are closely linked to the influence of opinion leaders, as people often emulate the actions and adopt the views of those they admire or regard as authorities.

Therefore, opinion leaders play a crucial role in influencing the behavior and attitudes of individuals within society. These individuals are often seen as influential, charismatic, and knowledgeable in specific areas such as politics, fashion, technology, or other fields, making others turn to them for guidance and direction. However, it is important to acknowledge that the influence of opinion leaders is not always positive or benign. They have the potential to spread misinformation, promote harmful ideologies, or reinforce negative stereotypes. Therefore, it is vital for individuals to critically assess the messages they receive from opinion leaders and consider multiple viewpoints before forming their own beliefs and behaviors.

While much research has been conducted on the role of opinion leaders and agents of political socialization in shaping values, opinions, perspectives, and actions, there is limited research in the South African context exploring how these figures influence social cohesion and unity between South Africans and African immigrants living in South African communities. Additionally, scholars like Maseng (2020) have explored factors that either threaten or enhance social cohesion between African immigrants and South Africans. However, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies addressing the specific role of opinion leaders in fostering or hindering social cohesion and unity within shared spaces between these groups.

Maseng's (2020) study highlights both the challenges and enablers of social cohesion. On the one hand, it points to issues like xenophobia and mistreatment by public officials as key threats. On the other hand, it identifies positive factors such as professional and service-based interactions, shared communities, and meaningful interpersonal contact as elements that promote stronger social ties between South Africans and African immigrants. However, a limitation of this study is that it does not explore the role of opinion leaders and their impact on social cohesion between these groups.

In addition, most existing research focuses on various forms of xenophobia in South Africa, including Afrophobia, color-blind xenophobia, and tensions described as sibling rivalries. These studies often portray citizens as key drivers of anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviors. However, there is a noticeable lack of literature that examines the role of opinion leaders in shaping social cohesion and promoting unity between South Africans and African immigrants.

Using exploratory and case study research designs, as well as qualitative methods and thematic analysis, this paper seeks to address the question what are the effects of opinion leaders in enhancing or threatening social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants? Thus, the paper explores the effects of opinion leaders in enhancing or threatening social cohesion between these groups. As will be demonstrated, the paper shows that opinion leaders, such as political parties, government officials, and the media, can influence social cohesion between African immigrants and South African nationals in both positive and negative ways. Their messages and actions have the power to either promote unity and understanding or deepen divisions and reinforce xenophobic attitudes. This paper aims to address the gap in existing research by exploring the role of opinion leaders in either promoting or hindering social cohesion between

South Africans and African immigrants living in South Africa. It will finally recommend practical steps that political parties, government officials, and the media can undertake to promote social cohesion between the two groups from different African backgrounds.

The first section of this work provides a historical overview of the immigration of Africans to South Africa, while the second part addresses the conceptualization and operationalization of concepts. The third section presents and reviews the literature on opinion leaders regarding anti-immigrant sentiments in a global and African context and concludes with the social cohesion-African immigrants nexus in the South African context. Section five provides the reader with the theoretical discourses employed in the paper. The sixth section elucidates the methodological approaches used by the researcher to achieve the intended objectives of the paper. The last three sections present and discuss the results and finally provide the conclusions of the paper.

2 Historical overview of the immigration of Africans to South Africa

Southern Africa has experienced a long-standing pattern of intra-regional migration, beginning in the mid-19th century (Crush et al., 2005). Migration from outside South Africa has played a significant and long-standing role in shaping the nation's development. It has been a fundamental part of the broader growth process in Southern Africa, particularly highlighted by the history of labor migration dating back to the 19th century (Tati, 2008). Neighboring countries such as Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana, and Malawi functioned as labor reserves for South Africa's mining sector (Tati, 2008; Anderson, 2006). This pattern emerged due to the uneven development driven by colonial capitalism, which led to the creation of economic hubs centered on capital accumulation, especially in South Africa and Zimbabwe (Tati, 2008; Anderson, 2006). The mining industry in South Africa, focusing on gold, diamonds, and other minerals, relied heavily on cheap migrant labor from these surrounding countries (Tati, 2008; Anderson, 2006). Thus, cross-border migration for employment within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has been a common practice for over 150 years, predating the establishment of colonial borders (Crush et al., 2005).

Since the mid-19th century, countries in Southern Africa have both sent and received migrants (Crush et al., 2005). Labor migration began in earnest with the influx of workers, particularly from present-day Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, to the Kimberley diamond mines (Crush et al., 2005). In addition, the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand significantly reshaped migration patterns across the region (Crush et al., 2005). In the early stages, most of these migrants traveled independently in search of work (Crush et al., 2005).

Thus, migration in the region was largely dominated by male workers, often unskilled or semi-skilled, who were primarily recruited to work in the mines (Tati, 2008; Anderson, 2006). Labor migrants were employed not only in the mining sector but also across various other industries. Commercial agriculture, manufacturing, domestic work, transportation, and construction all utilized migrant labor, although precise figures on the number of workers in these sectors remain unclear (Crush et al., 2005). During the apartheid era, the

immigration of Africans from other African states into South Africa was predominantly driven by the recruitment of laborers in various sectors.

Beginning in the 1960s, the apartheid government actively encouraged white immigration through recruitment campaigns and financial incentives (Brown, 1987), largely in response to the declining percentage of the white population within South Africa (Mostert et al., 1998). By the 1970s, the birth rate among white South Africans had reached notably low levels, prompting increased efforts to boost white immigration (Mostert et al., 1998). It was not until the late 1980s that the government considered the level of white immigration to be adequate.

From the 1990s onward, immigration trends in South Africa shifted significantly from being primarily labor-focused to encompassing broader forms of general and permanent migration (Posel, 2004). This period also saw the removal of formal restrictions on African urbanization within the country, marking a major change in internal and cross-border migration policies (Posel, 2004). Cross-border migration from other African countries into South Africa rose significantly during the 1990s (McDonald et al., 2000). However, the precise number of individuals who have entered the country in recent years remains unclear due to limitations in available data (Posel, 2004). In 1995, estimates from the South African Police Service suggested that between 5.5 and 8 million undocumented immigrants were living in South Africa. In contrast, the Ministry of Home Affairs placed the figure at around 4 million for the same year. However, neither of these estimates was accompanied by clear methodological explanations, leading scholars to question their reliability and credibility (Standing et al., 2000, p. 61; Crush, 2000). Over the past few decades, South Africa has seen a consistent rise in its immigrant population, increasing from 2.1% of the total population in 1996 to 3.9% by 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2024). By that year, the number of immigrants had reached approximately 2.4 million, with women making up just over one million of the total (Statistics South Africa, 2024). The majority of these immigrants originate from other African countries, particularly from within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region (Statistics South Africa, 2024).

Although this paper does not focus primarily on the historical background or numerical scale of African immigration to South Africa, it is essential to provide readers with some contextual understanding of this migration. Numerous official and academic sources offer various explanations for these migratory patterns. Presenting this background is important for illustrating the demographic diversity of South Africa, where migrants and host communities often coexist and share the same social spaces. This coexistence raises critical questions about social cohesion and unity between these groups, core concerns addressed in this study. The following section introduces and clarifies the key concepts used throughout the paper to guide the reader's understanding.

3 Conceptualization and operationalizing of concepts

The reader is reminded that the main goal of this work is to explore the effects and/or influence of opinion leaders on threats and enhancers to social cohesion and unity between South Africans and African immigrants in South Africa. As such, it is necessary for the reader to understand how "social cohesion" and unity, as well as "threats" and "enhancers" to social cohesion, are conceptualized and operationalized in this work. Social cohesion can be understood as.

> *"unity and understanding between people from different backgrounds who work, and/or live in the same community or social space." Examples of this phrase include 'different backgrounds' such as different countries of origin, ethnic groups, languages, religions, and modes of dress. "African continental integration," on the other hand, is defined as "a possible single government and/or space where African citizens are able to move, live and work freely"* (Maseng, 2018, pp. 16–17).

Threats to social cohesion in the context of this paper are defined as any activities, actions, and pronouncements that influence divisions between South Africans and African immigrants. This includes (a) negative or hostile attitudes toward African immigrants, such as (a) xenophobia, (b) Afrophobia, and (c) xenolasia.

Furthermore, enhancers to social cohesion are activities, actions, and pronouncements that promote unity among people. These include "Philoxenia," which refers to the act of showing kindness or hospitality to foreigners (Papanikos, 2020). The idea of philoxenia suggests that welcoming strangers fosters connections that transcend differences, creating a sense of belonging for both the host and the guest (Papanikos, 2020).

Finally, unity refers to positive perceptions, attitudes, and ideals toward African continental integration. For instance, Maseng (2018, pp. 16, 17) refers to "African continental integration" as "a possible single government and/or space where African citizens are able to move, live and work freely." In historical context, African Unity was understood as "the political fusion of the different states of Africa." Some believed that African Unity involved "practical steps in economic, educational, scientific, and cultural cooperation" (Balewa, 1964, p. 159). These concepts provide the guiding frameworks that will be used in the discussion section against the literature, theory, and findings of this work. The following sections provide an overview of existing literature on opinion leadership and anti-immigrant attitudes.

4 Literature review on immigrants sentiments by opinion leaders

This section reviews existing literature on the role of opinion leaders, such as political parties, politicians, governments, and the media, in shaping immigrant sentiments within both global and African contexts.

4.1 Political parties, politicians, and anti-immigrant attitudes

Although political parties are primarily concerned with contesting elections with the intention of forming a government, among other key functions, they also play a significant role in shaping public perceptions, values, and attitudes toward various societal issues. Hopkins (2010) highlights political parties as prominent representatives that have the ability to capture public attention and provide a platform to significantly influence how people interpret their

environment. Blumer (1958) similarly argues that political parties can foster negative perceptions and attitudes toward different groups.

In this regard, a body of scholarly work highlights the role of political parties in shaping negative public perceptions toward immigrants (Pettigrew, 1998). Thus, the study by Pettigrew (1998) has demonstrated how political parties in the USA fueled anti-immigrant sentiments by blaming the nation's social problems on immigrants and their descendants. Similar patterns have been observed in Switzerland, where the Swiss People's Party (SVP) launched a public anti-immigrant campaign advocating for the expulsion of immigrants involved in criminal activities or abusing the country's welfare system (Lahav, 2010). The campaign garnered 200,000 signatures and was set to be voted on by the public (Lahav, 2010).

In addition to the role of political parties in fostering anti-immigrant legislation, Malhotra et al. (2013) found that countries such as Austria, France, Italy, and Switzerland witnessed the rise of right-wing political parties that gained support by spreading anti-immigrant rhetoric. Bohman (2013) further indicated that as political parties in Europe increasingly voiced anti-immigrant statements, public perceptions of immigrants became more negative. Rustenbach (2010) also observed a growing trend of support for anti-immigrant political parties in Europe, with right-wing parties advocating for stricter immigration control measures in line with the support they received from citizens and their influence over governments.

In Africa, similar patterns emerged, with political parties in countries like Côte d'Ivoire capitalizing on anti-immigrant sentiments. The Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI), led by Laurent Gbagbo, mobilized support by adopting a xenophobic political stance against immigrants (Crook, 1997). Even opposition parties have used anti-immigration rhetoric to mobilize political support. Thus, leaders of emerging opposition parties have attempted to build political support by criticizing long-standing ruling parties for their perceived leniency toward immigrants. For example, during the lead-up to Côte d'Ivoire's first multiparty presidential elections in 1990, opposition candidate Laurent Gbagbo centered his campaign on the challenges associated with years of migration into cocoa-growing regions (Crook, 1997; Boone and Kriger, 2010; Mitchell, 2011). Eventually, ruling party politicians adopted similar rhetoric, escalating tensions and contributing to violent conflict. Similarly, after Tanzania legalized opposition parties in 1992, political figure Christopher Mtikila advocated for 'uzawa', a push for indigenization, and incited attacks on foreign-owned businesses (Chege, 1994; Heilman, 1998). Across the continent, opposition parties have regularly leveraged anti-immigration sentiment to challenge dominant ruling parties, especially those historically associated with high levels of immigration.

A survey conducted by Whitaker and Giersch (2015) across 11 countries found that, in the absence of clear ideological distinctions between political parties, some African politicians attempt to gain public support by using immigrants as scapegoats for complex issues like crime and unemployment. By adopting exclusionary rhetoric, these political elites elevate the importance of immigration in public discourse and normalize anti-immigrant sentiment among the general population.

Opposition parties in several African countries have increasingly employed anti-immigration rhetoric to gain political support, often criticizing ruling parties for their perceived tolerance toward immigrants. Parties campaign on migration-related grievances, promote indigenization, and incite hostility toward foreign-owned

businesses. This trend reflects a broader lack of strong ideological divides; politicians frequently scapegoat immigrants for issues such as crime and unemployment. The adoption of exclusionary rhetoric by political elites heightens the visibility of immigration in political discourse and legitimizes xenophobic attitudes among the public. While this substantial body of scholarly work highlights the role of political parties in shaping negative public perceptions of immigrants, it largely overlooks how such sentiments contribute to threats or enhancers of social cohesion between immigrants and South Africans within the South African context.

4.2 Governments and anti-immigrant attitudes

One of the core functions of government is communication and political socialization. Several scholars have provided empirical evidence on the role of government in fueling anti-immigrant attitudes. Lahav (2010) argues that governments can implement policies that either facilitate or hinder the integration of immigrants. For instance, the Swiss government had a bilateral agreement with the European Union (EU) that granted immigrants from EU countries the same rights as Swiss citizens, with the exception of political participation (Lahav, 2010). However, Gauci (2009) highlights that EU immigration laws also negatively targeted specific groups. According to Gauci (2009), immigrants from Russia, the Middle East, and Africa faced discriminatory attitudes due to the EU's restrictive immigration policies.

Beyond the EU, Mitchell (2011) provides evidence from Ghana, where the government played a role in fostering anti-immigrant sentiments through institutionalized anti-immigrant legislation. In 1969, Ghana's President Kofi Busia enacted the "Aliens Compliance Order," which blamed immigrants for the country's economic difficulties. This policy led to the forceful expulsion of foreigners and contributed to a rise in anti-immigrant sentiments in Ghana, particularly as the country's political and economic conditions deteriorated (Mitchell, 2011). In South Africa, there are clear signs that public officials frequently misuse their positions of power to shift public frustration away from themselves and onto migrants (Filipec et al., 2024). This tactic helps distract from governmental shortcomings such as ineffective leadership, corruption, and failure to address community concerns. This strategy, referred to as scapegoating (Cilliers, 2020; Tarisayi and Manik, 2020), has indirectly contributed to the rise of xenophobic attitudes toward African immigrants. As part of a broader global trend, the South African government has also adopted the practice of blaming immigrants for various socio-economic challenges, including crime, disease, unemployment, and poverty (Filipec et al., 2024). In addition, existing literature shows that the operations of departments such as the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) are often inefficient and biased against African immigrants, reflecting the widespread 'Makwerekwere' ideology (Umezurike and Isike, 2013). This mindset portrays African immigrants as outsiders, leading to their exclusion from both the sense of national belonging and access to the formal and informal benefits associated with citizenship ideology (Umezurike and Isike, 2013).

The literature highlights that the way a state designs and enforces its laws, as well as how its public institutions operate, plays a critical

role in shaping the experiences of immigrants. Governments can create environments that are either inclusive or exclusionary, depending on the policies they implement and the attitudes reflected in institutional practices. For instance, immigration laws, administrative procedures, and the behavior of officials in departments such as Home Affairs can either facilitate integration or reinforce marginalization. When public institutions treat immigrants with fairness, efficiency, and respect, they contribute to a more welcoming and cohesive society. Conversely, when these institutions are marked by inefficiency, discrimination, or xenophobic ideologies, they foster exclusion and deepen social divisions. Thus, the state is not a neutral actor but an influential force that can either promote social inclusion or institutionalize hostility toward immigrant communities. Hence, there is a need to frame the role of the South African government in shaping public sentiments as either threats or enhancers of social cohesion between immigrants and South Africans within the South African context.

4.3 Media and anti-immigrant attitudes

Mass media plays a crucial role in disseminating information to the public and shaping public opinion (Tella, 2016). It is widely recognized that the media significantly influences societal perceptions through agenda-setting, guiding the issues that people prioritize and shaping their views (Tella, 2016). All forms of mass media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and social media, are integral to distributing information and impacting various aspects of life. As an agent of political socialization, the media helps transmit values across generations, making it an essential force in shaping individual and national attitudes. The amount of time spent consuming news, particularly on political and current affairs, is significantly linked to attitudes toward immigration, as the volume and content of immigration-related news in a country directly influence public opinion.

Earlier studies by Oliver (1997), Domke et al. (1999), and Peffley et al. (1996) suggest that public exposure to news plays a key role in shaping anti-immigrant attitudes. In this context, media coverage of immigration can influence attitudes at both the individual and national levels and has the potential to foster negative perceptions. The media, therefore, can play a central role in exacerbating anti-immigrant sentiments. Negative media portrayals may amplify perceived threats, often exaggerating the adverse effects immigrants may have on society. For example, in the USA, there has been a notable trend of negative media responses to immigration (Sobczak, 2007). Semaan (2014) reviewed literature on stereotypical portrayals of Arab children, showing how the media, through editorial cartoons, television shows, comic strips, and other platforms, depicted Arabs as inhuman or villainous. Similarly, various studies in Britain have demonstrated the media's role in cultivating negative anti-immigrant attitudes, particularly through the negative portrayal of Muslims in newspapers (Greenberg and Miazhevich, 2012; Moore et al., 2008; Richardson, 2004).

In Africa, the media, both traditional outlets and social media platforms, has significantly contributed to the spread and intensification of xenophobia, Afrophobia, hate speech, and social hostility in countries like Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa (Ogunmola, 2024). In these contexts, media channels have often perpetuated

negative stereotypes about immigrants, portraying them as threats to national identity, economic stability, or public safety (Ogunmola, 2024). Sensationalist reporting, unverified claims, and inflammatory rhetoric have reinforced public fears and prejudices, creating an environment in which discrimination and violence against foreign nationals are more easily justified. Social media, in particular, has amplified these narratives by enabling the rapid and widespread sharing of xenophobic content, often without regulation or accountability (Ogunmola, 2024). This digital echo chamber has not only shaped public opinion but has also mobilized individuals and groups to act on anti-immigrant sentiments, thereby undermining social cohesion and fueling cycles of exclusion and conflict. This existing literature requires interrogation on how media sentiments affect social cohesion between immigrants and South Africans within the South African context, either as threats or enhancers. The following section provides a synopsis of the literature on the social cohesion-African immigrants nexus in the South African context.

4.4 Social cohesion vs. African immigrants in South Africa

Social cohesion in South Africa has become an important policy and societal issue due to challenges such as the country's internal divisions related to whites and non-whites, as well as changing immigration patterns into South Africa. As such, questions of social cohesion between African immigrants and South Africans are common due to recorded xenophobic attitudes and attacks. To this end, existing research on the relationship between social cohesion and immigration reveals both positive and negative impacts on interactions between South Africans and African immigrants. For instance, Maseng (2020) highlights that xenophobia, harassment by officials from the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), along with identity-related differences, act as barriers to social cohesion. Similarly, a study by Mutukwa (2022) concluded that the inability of the South African Police Service (SAPS) to address conflicts between African immigrants and South Africans was a barrier to social cohesion between these groups.

In addition, the media's negative depiction and representation of African immigrants fuels xenophobia. Moreover, this portrayal undermines social cohesion and hampers efforts to promote unity that embraces diversity in South Africa, particularly as immigrants live alongside local communities and share common spaces. Thus, the media fails to improve the public perception of African immigrants, hindering efforts to foster social cohesion (Moyo and Nshimbi, 2020).

On the other hand, professional and service-based interactions, shared communities and neighborhoods, and positive interpersonal contact contribute to strengthening social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants (Maseng, 2020). In this regard, social cohesion can arise from social and economic interactions (Oucho and Williams, 2019). For instance, when migrants offer services that are in high demand or critically important to the host community, especially in areas where the local population lacks the capacity to meet such needs, this can strengthen social bonds and interdependence (Friedberg and Hunt, 1995). There is evidence supporting this from Maseng (2019), who provided empirical evidence that both African immigrants and South Africans

held positive views of social cohesion between themselves. In addition, this study indicated that positive contact inspired good relations between these groups, countering the general narrative that migration breeds conflict between host nations and immigrants (Maseng, 2019).

From what we observe, social cohesion in South Africa is a pressing issue, shaped by historical racial divisions and shifting immigration patterns. Tensions often arise between South Africans and African immigrants, fueled by xenophobic attitudes and actions, including mistreatment by authorities and negative media portrayals. These factors create significant barriers to unity and mutual understanding. However, there are also positive dynamics at play. Social cohesion is strengthened through shared communities, professional interactions, and the provision of essential services by immigrants, especially where local capacity is lacking. Evidence suggests that such positive contact fosters mutual respect and cooperation, challenging the narrative that immigration inherently causes conflict. What needs to be studied, which is the objective of this work, is the role of opinion leaders in either enhancing or threatening social cohesion between African immigrants and South Africans. The following section delves into the theoretical underpinnings of this paper.

5 Theoretical discourses

In this work, I use social influence theory combined with persuasion theory as frameworks to analyze how opinion leaders, including government bodies, officials, politicians, political parties, and the media, affect social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants in shared spaces, both official and unofficial. Social influence theory assumes that social influence leads to behavioral changes within social settings, caused by one person or a group (Kelman, 1974) toward other persons or groups. The theory identifies three modes of accepting social influence: compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman, 1958). This means that influenced individuals or groups can either comply with, identify with, or internalize the actions, behaviors, or words of opinion leaders who are influencers. In this context, the influencing agent provides information to deliberately or unintentionally prompt behavioral changes (Kelman, 1974). Deliberate behavioral influence occurs through direct commands such as threats, orders, or persuasion, while unintentional influence stems from indirect expressions of expectations, beliefs, and norms (Kelman, 1979).

Persuasion theory is mainly linked to the research of Hovland et al. (1953). It is a psychological framework that examines how the traits of a message, the communicator conveying it, and the context in which it is received can affect an individual's attitudes and behaviors. Essentially, it studies the process of influencing someone's opinion or actions through communication. This paper will apply this analytical framework to explore how both deliberate and unintentional information can either promote or hinder positive behavior, attitudes, or opinions that impact social cohesion between African immigrants and South Africans in various communities. Additionally, persuasion theory will be used to analyze how message characteristics, the delivery of communication, and the context in which it is received can shape attitudes and behaviors, either threatening or enhancing social cohesion between these groups.

Therefore, both of these theories are expected to offer valuable insights into the underlying dynamics of how opinion leaders influence attitudes such as philoxenia (the love of foreigners) and xenophobia (the fear or dislike of foreigners) toward African immigrants within the South African context. Applying social influence and persuasion theories, this analysis will explore how various opinion leaders—such as government officials, media, political parties, and politicians—play a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes and behaviors. These theories will help unravel how the messages and actions of opinion leaders can either foster a welcoming environment for African immigrants or contribute to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, ultimately affecting social cohesion in South Africa. The section that follows provides the reader with the methodological approaches used by the researcher for this work.

6 Methods

6.1 Research design

This paper adopted a case study research design supplemented by an exploratory research design. Case study research design is a qualitative approach that involves a thorough and detailed analysis of a specific case or a limited number of cases (Hancock et al., 2021). A case study centers on a specific case, which may be an "individual representative of a group" or a particular phenomenon defined by certain boundaries in time and space, and examined within its unique context (Hancock et al., 2021). The case study is chosen due to the paper's focus on examining the influence of opinion leaders on social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants residing in South Africa. The case study design applies to this work due to its focus within the South African context, including the spatial and social relations between immigrants and South Africans. It is important to note that the findings of this study should not be viewed as representative of the relationships between South Africans and other Africans living outside of South Africa's borders, but are specific to South African communities.

As indicated, in addition to the case study, the researcher also employed an exploratory research design. This type of research design is used to explore an area or phenomenon where little is known (Olawale et al., 2023). According to Mouton (1996), the objectives of exploratory research include establishing facts, collecting new data, and identifying significant patterns or themes in relatively unexplored areas, with the goal of gaining fresh insights into the phenomenon under investigation. I therefore used this design because little has been documented by researchers to provide insights into the role of opinion leadership on threats and enhancers to social cohesion and unity among South Africans and African immigrants. Most of the existing work only provides evidence of anti-immigrant sentiments by opinion leaders without considering the effects of such negative or positive sentiments on social cohesion between immigrants and nationals, particularly in countries such as South Africa, which is an immigrant-attracting capital on the African continent.

6.2 Research method

In order to provide insights on the effects of opinion leadership on threats to and enhancers of social cohesion and unity among

South Africans and African immigrants, I relied on qualitative research methods. Qualitative research primarily focuses on understanding the reasons behind people's behavior and how their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and fears influence such behavior (Lim, 2025). This research method was significant in this study because it offered an opportunity to unravel how the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and fears of opinion leaders influence the general behavior of South Africans and African immigrants toward one another, and how this ultimately affects social cohesion and a sense of unity among Africans residing in South African communities. Thus, qualitative methods are narrative rather than quantitative in nature, making them useful for providing insights on the effects of opinion leaders on social cohesion between the two groups under examination in this work. These methods were appropriate for exploring the complex phenomena of social cohesion between various groups in depth. They captured the behavior of opinion leaders toward African immigrants and how this affects the social context of cohesion within the shared communities of nationals and immigrants. Qualitative research was used to explore the depth and complexity of human experiences and viewpoints, as well as contextual details and subtleties (Lim, 2025) regarding the role of opinion leaders in social cohesion between nationals and African immigrants. My choice of qualitative research was more than a methodological decision; it reflected a commitment to understanding the richness of social phenomena and gaining insight into the personal, subjective experiences (Lim, 2025) of opinion leaders on the subject at hand.

6.3 Data collection techniques

I used document analysis and videography as data collection techniques. This method involves examining a range of documents, such as books, newspaper articles, academic journal publications, and institutional reports (Morgan, 2022). The use of document analysis relied on existing documents, records, and materials such as dissertations, theses, journal articles, and government legislation and plans to uncover the complexities of South African opinion leaders' influence on citizens and African immigrants regarding social cohesion and unity between these groups. The researcher relied on existing publications related to pro- and anti-immigrant attitudes from opinion leaders in the South African context. Thus, various scholarly publications on pro- and anti-immigrant attitudes and sentiments from the years 2000 to 2024 were used as sources of data for this work. On the one hand, data on threats to social cohesion came from documents addressing anti-immigrant sentiments or attitudes, while on the other hand, data for enhancers of social cohesion was sourced from publications elucidating pro-immigrant attitudes or sentiments.

In terms of videography, this refers to the use of video recordings to capture events, behaviors, or phenomena for research purposes (Knoblauch and Haken, 2021). As such, various content from these opinion leaders available on sites like YouTube was viewed and analyzed to observe patterns, themes, or content relevant to the research on issues of threats and/or enhancers to social cohesion between South African nationals and African immigrants. Various videos on anti-immigrant actions were observed and analyzed; these included (a) an SABC News video from 2022 in which the then Minister of the Executive Council on Health of Limpopo, Dr. Phophi Ramathuba, was covered by the media in a hospital, stating that the 'Limpopo health system is being abused by

undocumented foreign nationals,' and (b) the SABC News (2023) video featuring Gayton McKenzie, leader of the Patriotic Alliance, stating that 'We do not want illegal foreigners here.' These videos from politicians as opinion leaders underscored the influence of these figures on threats to social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants.

On the other hand, there are multiple videos of the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) condemning xenophobia. Among these videos is a 2019 segment by ENCA titled "Malema condemns Xenophobia," in which this opinion leader expresses pro-immigrant sentiments. While there are many more videos in this vein by the leader of the EFF, it is observed that Malema is among the pioneers in enhancing social cohesion between these groups.

To this end, document analysis provided us with textual data (i.e., the use of written materials like articles and books), while videos offered non-textual data (i.e., video content). Document analysis and videography complemented each other by providing both historical and real-time perspectives of opinion leaders on pro- and anti-immigrant sentiments and attitudes, as well as their effects on social cohesion. These techniques were useful in enhancing the depth and credibility of the findings.

7 Presentation of results

7.1 South African government agencies and officials vs. social cohesion and African unity between African immigrants and South Africans

State institutions play a crucial role as opinion leaders in shaping societal views due to their authority, influence, and ability to set policies and norms. Thus, elected and appointed government officials, as well as law enforcement agencies, have a crucial role to play in either enhancing or threatening unity between South Africans and African immigrants. It must be noted that, on the one hand, elected and appointed officials, executive branches, and legislative bodies have significant power to shape public opinion through laws, policies, and public statements. They set agendas and influence public discourse on various issues such as the economy, social policies, and international relations. On the other hand, law enforcement agencies are charged with enforcing laws and maintaining public order.

Thus, their actions and policies on crime prevention, community policing, and the use of force can influence public perceptions. Therefore, actions by government officials, as well as law enforcement agencies, toward anyone considered a foreign national have implications for the long-term goal of the African Union to establish a United States of Africa. Considering that South Africa is one of Africa's pivotal states and also attracts the majority of immigrants of African descent, positive or negative actions by government officials and law enforcement agencies toward African immigrants residing in South Africa have serious implications for African unity.

The manifestations of anti-immigration violence in South Africa are often influenced by political actors (Akinola, 2018) and public servants. Thus, negative political narratives about immigration, including framing immigrants as threats or burdens, can fuel negative attitudes and justify discriminatory actions. Mosselson (2010) argues that certain members of the South African government, especially those in high-ranking positions, hold the view that the influx of immigrants, particularly illegal

ones, poses a threat to the sovereign power of the state. This perspective stems from the belief that these immigrants are residing within the state illegally and without the consent or permission of the sovereign authority.

According to Neocosmos (2008), since the advent of a democratic dispensation in South Africa, immigrants have been perceived as threats to the country, while government departments and members of parliament have also portrayed negative perceptions toward them. The actions and voices of agencies can influence public perceptions. There is evidence showing how law enforcement officers in South Africa, including those from the South African National Defense Force (SANDF), the South African Police Service (SAPS), and metropolitan police departments like the Johannesburg Metro Police Department (JMPD) and the Tshwane Metro Police Department (TMPD), sometimes behave in ways that undermine social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants (Maseng, 2020). The fact that law enforcement institutions espouse anti-immigrant attitudes becomes ingrained in society. Thus, besides the legal or illegal attitudes and actions of law enforcement officers toward immigrants, South African citizens' attitudes are reinforced by what they observe from these officials.

This situation arises from a history of negative interactions between South African officials and African immigrants. It is historically and contemporarily evident that South African law enforcement officers often employ harsh measures against African immigrants. Therefore, South African state institutions, through actions perceived as anti-immigrant, pose a significant threat to the unity between African immigrants and South African nationals living in shared socio-economic environments.

There are well-known cases of xenophobic treatment by the abovementioned agencies dating back to the early 2000s. In March 2000, SAPS initiated 'Operation Crackdown' in Johannesburg, and later in 2015, launched "Operation Fiela," which involved collaboration with SANDF. During 'Operation Crackdown,' numerous African immigrants were reportedly arrested and taken to deportation camps, where their belongings were allegedly looted (The Independent, 2000). Disturbingly, SAPS officers were also reported to have subjected immigrants to humiliating searches, partially stripping them to verify their nationality based on vaccination marks (The Independent, 2000).

Barou et al. (2012) observed that "Operation Fiela," contrary to its intended purpose, created opportunities for extortion, exploitation, and mistreatment of African immigrants, reminiscent of incidents in 2008 and 2011. Reports surfaced of SAPS officers stripping immigrants partially naked and extorting money from them, actions that clearly undermine human security. According to Norton and de Haan (2013), human security is characterized by the absence of threats of violence or coercive force in people's coexistence within their environment. Unfortunately, this ideal is not realized in the interactions between African immigrants and South African public service officials and law enforcement officers during these operations.

Research conducted by Maseng (2018, 2019) has provided empirical evidence confirming that negative interactions involving public officials representing South African institutions pose a significant threat to social cohesion. In studies involving 50 African immigrants and 35 South African residents in Sunnyside, Pretoria, narratives revealed that various forms of mistreatment by SAPS and TMPD were pivotal in undermining social cohesion between these groups. Specifically, the ill-treatment and attitudes exhibited by these officials were identified as primary factors contributing to the lack of social cohesion (Maseng, 2018, 2019). Moreover, there was widespread

mistrust directed particularly toward SAPS and TMPD, further exacerbating tensions between South African nationals and African immigrants (Maseng, 2018, 2019). The persistent mistrust, harassment, and ill-treatment by institutional representatives such as the DHA and the SAPS significantly contribute to the lack of unity among Africans from various nations who share communities in South Africa.

These issues pose a substantial challenge to societal unity, as they create divisions and tensions rather than fostering cohesion and mutual respect. In addition to the findings from the interviews mentioned earlier, instances of rejection of African immigrants were evident in confrontations between SAPS and these immigrants in 2015 in Vanderbijlpark, Gauteng province, and a similar incident in Johannesburg in 2019. These confrontations further exacerbated tensions and posed threats to social cohesion between South African nationals and individuals perceived as African immigrants.

Moreover, the prevalence of xenophobia in South Africa has been underscored by multiple pieces of evidence. It has been documented that police officers sometimes fail to handle cases reported by immigrants with the same urgency and attention as those reported by South Africans. Additionally, there are instances where police officers overlook cases of harassment against immigrants. Immigrants frequently face harsh treatment from SAPS officials. Studies by Neocosmos (2008), Masuku (2006), Steenkamp (2009), Crush (2000), Umezurike and Isike (2013), Tella and Ogunnubi (2014), and Tella (2016) reveal negative attitudes and treatment toward immigrants by government departments, institutions, and officials. These observations highlight systemic issues within South African institutions, where biases and discriminatory practices contribute to the marginalization and mistreatment of African immigrants, further straining social cohesion in the country.

The negative role of state institutions in undermining social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants is well-documented in existing literature. Several studies (Crush, 2000; Masuku, 2006; Steenkamp, 2009) have identified the South African Police Service (SAPS) as a key agent in perpetuating negative stereotypes and hostility toward immigrants. These works reveal that immigrants often face discriminatory attitudes, verbal abuse, and even physical violence at the hands of police officers. In addition to SAPS, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) has also been implicated in fostering anti-immigrant sentiment through its bureaucratic inefficiency, mistreatment, and exclusionary practices (Crush, 2000; Umezurike and Isike, 2013; Tella and Ogunnubi, 2014; Tella, 2016). Amusan and Mchunu (2017) further assert that African immigrants are regularly subjected to dehumanizing experiences when attempting to secure legal documentation, which contributes to their marginalization. These institutional behaviors not only violate the rights of immigrants but also erode trust, heighten tensions, and weaken the prospects for building inclusive and cohesive communities in South Africa.

The role of individuals within the South African cabinet and parliament in fueling anti-immigrant attitudes has also been documented by scholars. A case in point regarding the fueling of anti-immigrant sentiments by members of parliament and the cabinet is the speech given by then Minister of Home Affairs Mangosuthu Buthelezi to the National Assembly (NA) in 1994 (Kihato, 2007). Specifically, Buthelezi stated that "if South Africans are going to compete for scarce resources with the millions of 'aliens' that are pouring into South Africa, then we can bid goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme" (RDP) (Kihato, 2007). Against this backdrop, Akinola (2014, p. 57) concludes that the South African government has

successively been at the receiving end of blame for the "stigmatization of foreigners and fueling acts of xenophobia" using institutions of the state and governance. It is not surprising that research conducted by Maseng (2018, 2019) provided empirical evidence confirming that negative interactions involving public officials representing South African institutions pose a significant threat to social cohesion.

The premises in countries such as South Africa suggest that the manifestations of xenophobia in these societies are perpetrated by political speeches from political parties, politicians, and government agencies and officials. These speeches mystify xenophobia (Mabena, 2021). Denialism by politicians and government officials regarding the existence of xenophobia justifies anti-immigrant attitudes (Mabena, 2021), resulting in one of the threats to social cohesion between South Africans and African migrants.

Similarly, scholars have noted that traditional authorities also fuel anti-immigrant attitudes in South Africa. Most recently, King Goodwill Zwelithini was observed to be among the sources of the 2015 xenophobic attacks against African immigrants. Allegedly, King Zwelithini publicly pronounced that immigrants should vacate the country since they were enjoying local resources meant for South Africans (Tella, 2016). These statements signify the contribution not only of citizens but also of the South African government, government officials, and traditional authorities in fueling anti-immigrant attitudes toward African immigrants (Tella, 2016).

The studies above reveal the role played by governments, their officials, and institutions in fueling anti-immigrant sentiments. These studies succinctly point out that these anti-immigrant actions and sentiments play a major role in threatening social cohesion and unity between African immigrants and South Africans. This highlights a refusal to embrace pluralism and tolerance toward African immigrants. Misguided treatment by law enforcement officers and public servants toward African immigrants serves as a substantial obstacle to achieving social cohesion and unity between these immigrants and South Africans. These dynamics highlight systemic challenges within institutions that need to be addressed to foster a more inclusive and cohesive society in South Africa.

While there is evidence showing the institutionalization of anti-immigrant attitudes by governments and their officials, the scholars cited above fail to examine the policies instituted by the South African government aimed at promoting social cohesion between nationals and immigrants. An assertion by Gordon (2015) that the South African government lacks effective policies to combat xenophobia is not entirely true. This is because, at both the legislative and policy levels, as well as in practical terms, the South African government has played a positive role in fostering social cohesion and unity between immigrants and nationals, particularly in the context of African immigrants and South Africans living together in South Africa. Evidence from studies by Maseng (2024) highlights the presence of philoxenia[1] toward African immigrants by the South African government. Maseng (2024) reveals that certain aspects of the South African migration legislative framework exhibit philoxenic characteristics. Additionally, the paper provides evidence of various economic sectors and communities within the country that demonstrate a spirit of philoxenia.

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[1] Philoxenia is simply defined attitude of hospitality and openness towards foreigners.

The latter cited work acknowledges the Immigration Amendment Act No. 8 of 2016, enacted by South Africa's Parliament, as a key piece of legislation regulating entry and departure from the country. Over time, it has been amended to address evolving migration challenges. The Act classifies migrants into two categories: "Legal foreigners," who are in South Africa according to the Act's rules, and "Illegal foreigners," who lack the necessary documentation. While the Act has been criticized for perceived xenophobia toward illegal migrants, it underscores South Africa's commitment to philoxenia, or hospitality, toward legal migrants.

Key provisions promoting this welcoming approach include

1. Temporary Residence Rights: The Act allows for temporary residence permits for individuals with legitimate reasons, such as work or study.
2. Visas for Specific Purposes: It provides various visa options for individuals seeking to work, study, or visit relatives, thereby fostering integration into South African society.
3. Asylum Seekers' Rights: The Act recognizes the right of individuals fleeing persecution to seek asylum.
4. Access to Healthcare: Migrants are granted access to medical treatment, reinforcing the notion that healthcare is a basic human right.

The Immigration Act reflects South Africa's commitment to human dignity, inclusivity, and recognition of the positive contributions of migrants, while still maintaining necessary immigration controls. Moreover, the Act presents a positive narrative regarding the South African government's dedication to a legislative framework that promotes the integration of immigrants, with significant implications for fostering unity and social cohesion between these groups at the legislative level.

The Immigration Act plays a significant role in accommodating asylum seekers and refugees in South Africa. Additionally, the South African government has institutionalized the National Action Plan (NAP) to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerances. This initiative aims to address social challenges and promote inclusivity and social cohesion among African immigrants. Furthermore, social cohesion is supported within South Africa's higher education sector through the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) of 2001, which outlines strategies to increase the representation of African immigrant staff and students, thereby enhancing diversity in educational institutions.[2] These legislative and policy documents highlight the

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2 For detailed analysis on Philoxenia by the South Africa government, the readers must read Maseng (2024). Migration vis-à-vis philoxenia in South African context: implications for African continental integration. International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science. Accessible on this URL Address: http://102.133.176.231/bitstream/20.500.12714/834/1/Migration-vis-%C3%A0-vis-philoxenia-in-South%20African-context-implications-for-African-continental-integration.pdf. This work offers a detailed, evidence-based analysis of certain aspects of the South African migration legislative framework that exhibit philoxenic characteristics. Additionally, it provides evidence of various economic sectors and communities within the country that demonstrate philoxenia.

often-overlooked efforts by the South African government to promote social cohesion and unity between South African citizens and African immigrants, an area that has received limited attention in scholarly discourse.

7.2 South African political parties and politicians vs. social cohesion and African unity between African immigrants and South Africans

Existing studies on the anti-immigrant attitudes of politicians and political parties provide insights into how the sentiments expressed by these figures can shape citizens' positive or negative views toward immigration and immigrants. These studies highlight that political mobilization or rhetoric with xenophobic undertones can influence how citizens form their opinions on immigrants. The literature emphasizes the key role of political parties in shaping public attitudes toward immigration and immigrants, as well as how their influence can galvanize public support for enacting anti-immigrant legislation.

In this regard, the portrayal of immigration (and immigrants) as sources of national contamination by South African politicians is not a new phenomenon in the country's history (Gordon, 2017). Peberdy (2009) explores previous discussions surrounding immigration, along with the immigration policies and practices of the South African state during the non-democratic era. A closer look at the immigration discourse during the colonial and apartheid periods highlights the importance of racial identity, especially the construction of white identity (Klotz, 2013). Since the 1990s, South African politicians have frequently portrayed immigrants as harmful, criminal, and disease carriers in public addresses and policy debates (Gordon, 2017; Peberdy, 2009; Klotz, 2013).

Similarly, Dodson (2010) and Crush and Ramachandran (2014) indicate that politicians in South Africa have fueled anti-immigrant sentiments by blaming immigrants for incidents of crime and claiming that immigrants compete for resources with South Africans. In the same vein, Tella (2016) observed that anti-immigrant sentiments expressed by South African politicians have escalated and intensified the adoption of xenophobic attitudes and violence by both police officers and citizens toward African immigrants. While some politicians have voiced opposition to xenophobia (Gordon, 2015), they tend to scapegoat immigrants when public dissatisfaction with the government rises (Bekker, 2015).

In recent times, some political parties have emerged with a primary focus on anti-immigrant activism. On the one hand, Operation Dudula has proven to be a single-issue party whose members actively engage in vigilante behavior and violence toward immigrants (Dratwa, 2024). On the other hand, the Patriotic Alliance (PA) party and its leaders have consistently been openly vocal in their anti-immigrant position (Dratwa, 2024). Members of these political parties have even gone so far as to physically go to the Beitbridge border post between South Africa and Zimbabwe to prevent undocumented Zimbabweans from entering the country (Dratwa, 2024).

Prior to officially registering as a political party, Operation Dudula began a campaign on June 16, 2021, called "Let us Clean Soweto" (Dratwa, 2024). The initiative aimed to remove "illegal migrants," drug dealers, and foreign business owners from the township (Dratwa, 2024).

It specifically targeted migrants from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, as well as some South Africans mistakenly identified as immigrants (Dratwa, 2024). In one of his speeches, the leader of the PA, Gayton McKenzie, emphasized in a YouTube video titled 'We do not want illegal foreigners here' that illegal immigrants must go (SABC News, 2023). In 2022, the PA leader, Gayton McKenzie, publicly supported Limpopo Health MEC Dr. Phophi Ramathuba, who at the time had a verbal engagement with a hospitalized Zimbabwean immigrant that contained xenophobic undertones regarding the patient's admission to the hospital (SABC News, 2022). In support of the Limpopo MEC of Health, Gayton McKenzie declared that he would pull an oxygen mask from immigrants found in the South African public health sector (News Afrika, 2022).

The emergence and actions of Operation Dudula, along with anti-immigrant statements by some politicians, represent a growing threat to social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants. Such actions fuel division, suspicion, and hostility within communities. Political figures have further escalated these tensions and normalized anti-immigrant sentiment in public discourse. Inflammatory statements exemplify the dangerous rhetoric that dehumanizes immigrants and fosters division. These narratives and actions collectively undermine unity, incite fear, and erode the foundational values of inclusivity and solidarity essential for a cohesive South African society.

Despite the existence of anti-immigrant sentiments from some political parties and vigilante movements, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), particularly through their Commander in Chief (CIC) Julius Malema, have condemned various acts of xenophobia toward African immigrants. The EFF leader has clearly identified himself and the party as Pan-Africanists. This is particularly evident in the party's stance on a completely borderless Africa (Maritz, 2022). Such sentiments underscore the party's approach to enhancing cohesion among Africans (Maritz, 2022). This existing evidence indicates that anti-immigrant attitudes by politicians result in disruptions and/or enhancements to social cohesion and unity between South Africans and African immigrants. A wealth of videographic evidence highlights the efforts of the EFF and its leader, Julius Malema, in promoting social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants. These videos portray Malema as a vocal and influential opinion leader who consistently speaks out against xenophobia and advocates for unity across the continent. Titles such as *(a) Malema Condemns Xenophobia, (b) Julius Malema Has Weighed in on Xenophobic Attacks, (c) Julius Malema Condemns Recent South African Xenophobic Attacks,* and *(d) The Rise of Xenophobia in South Africa Plays Into the Hands of the Oppressors* reflect a clear and consistent message of solidarity. By using public platforms to challenge anti-immigrant sentiments and promote pan-Africanism, Malema attempts to contribute meaningfully to building bridges between communities, reinforcing the shared identity and interconnectedness of all Africans. Due to the varying positions between the EFF and other parties, such as the PA, on immigration, Maritz (2022, p. 81) underscores that.

> "immigration of any kind has become an issue on both the left and right of the South African political narrative."

Therefore, the majority of political parties in South Africa, with the exception of the EFF, have advocated for stricter immigration controls as a solution to the nation's problems (Machinya, 2022). It is

not surprising that a significant portion of the electorate harbors anti-immigrant sentiments, which undermine social cohesion. The emergence of new political movements across different regions has brought immigration to the center of public debate and examination (Yilmaz, 2012). These movements, often characterized by populism, frequently single out immigrants as scapegoats for broader political issues (Cochrane and Nevitte, 2014). Scapegoating African immigrants by political parties is among the factors that fuel anti-immigrant attitudes, ultimately undermining social cohesion.

Social cohesion between South African citizens and immigrant communities is being weakened due to the widespread use of anti-immigrant rhetoric by the majority of political parties. This reflects the growing normalization and entrenchment of populist, anti-immigrant discourse within the country's mainstream political landscape (Machinya, 2022). Many political leaders contribute to this by framing immigration as a crisis, often using exaggerated and emotionally charged language to incite moral panic (Machinya, 2022). Such narratives stand in stark contrast to South Africa's commitment to regional integration, which relies on unity among African nations and peoples (Machinya, 2022). By promoting anti-immigrant populism, political leaders make such sentiments seem more legitimate and persuasive, using them to explain the country's challenges (Machinya, 2022). As this discourse gains traction among the public, it deepens divisions between South African citizens and African immigrants living in the same communities.

In this context, the issues affecting social cohesion between immigrants and nationals in South Africa are complex, often exhibiting both low positivity and high negativity. It is evident that the EFF appears to be the only party attempting to advocate for and influence citizens to build an essence of social cohesion with African immigrants. While other political parties exacerbate threats to unity and social cohesion, the EFF remains a voice of reason in promoting social cohesion.

7.3 South African media vs. social cohesion and African unity between African immigrants and South Africans

The South African media has also largely contributed to the distribution of information about immigrants to the public by offering opportunities for public comment through "letters to the editor, talk shows, and television debates" (Harris, 2001). Duncan (1996) specifically reveals that South Africa's print media, in particular, has largely and consistently published reports that negatively and stereotypically represent immigrants. Minnaar and Hough (1996) support these findings by providing evidence of how negatively oriented letters to the editor about immigrants have influenced negative public attitudes. According to Minnaar and Hough (1996), these letters to the editor expressed common stereotypical views regarding how illegal immigrants are involved in criminal activities, infiltrate cities, suburbs, townships, and squatter camps, and take away available housing as well as job opportunities from South Africans.

Jossel (1997) also made similar observations about the portrayal of immigrants by the South African media. To this extent, the mass media significantly influences how the public perceives and understands topics such as nationalism, migration,

and citizenship (Gagliardone and Sibiya, 2025). The rise of the internet and social media has further amplified the media's impact on public conversations about migration and immigration (Ekman, 2019). Hence, Tella (2016) further supports the idea that negative perceptions toward African immigrants remain prominent in contemporary South African newspapers due to the media consistently providing anti-immigrant reports to the public. The distribution of news about the rising number of immigrants, coupled with the increase in unemployment among locals, may fuel anti-immigrant attitudes (Sniderman et al., 2000). Similarly, the effects of news are reliant on the context in which such news is received (Sibley et al., 2006). In essence, the content distributed by the media to the public is important in shaping attitudes.

These studies succinctly indicate the role of media in fueling anti-immigrant attitudes.

To this end, public perception created by the media depends extensively on what is said about immigrants; hence, in cases where institutions that deal with migration present negative opinions through the media, it becomes unlikely for members of the public to contest such opinions (Harris, 2001). Some studies point out that the level of reporting can also be a determinant of public perception toward immigrants. Observations indicate that, on average, nationals may develop positive attitudes toward immigrants when media attention on immigration is at lower levels. Thus, the higher the levels of attention on immigration by the media, the more negative attitudes nationals may develop toward immigrants.

Similarly, the distribution of news that is both positive and negative presents dual-sided information to the public. While Zaller (1992, 1996) observes that the distribution of news influences the public when it is one-sided and biased, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009) expand on Zaller (1992, 1996) work by making similar observations that biased news coverage instills certain ideas in the public, thereby shaping specific views about immigrants. In recent times, there has been an emergence of what Dratwa (2024) conceptualized as "The Birth of Anti-Immigrant Online Movements." These online media groups have attempted to espouse and normalize anti-immigrant perceptions, attitudes, and actions (Dratwa, 2024). As such, these perceptions, attitudes, and actions gained traction, leading to street protests organized against migrants in Gauteng Province's townships, such as Alexandra. Due to xenophobic rhetoric and sentiments, protests against African immigrants became rampant (Dratwa, 2024).

One of the most well-known online groups was "The Put South Africans First movement," which emerged on Twitter during the early lockdown period and reached a point of being used over 16,000 times in a single day. In September 2020, "The Put South Africans First movement" embarked on public marches to both the Nigerian and Zimbabwean embassies with the hashtags 'ForeignersMustGo' and '23SeptemberCleanSA'. The main objective of both marches was to demand the deportation of Zimbabwean and Nigerian nationals by their respective countries. The media and anti-immigrant attitudes appear to overly portray immigrants negatively; as a result, media reports have a negative impact on the portrayal of immigrants in host communities. Thus, studies on media and immigrant attitudes, reveal the role of media in fueling anti-immigrant attitudes. Indirectly, these studies reveal how anti-immigrant reports threaten social cohesion between nationals and immigrants.

8 Discussion of results

From the existing evidence, there are manifestations of anti-immigration sentiments and violence in South Africa that are often influenced by political actors and public servants. These negative political narratives about immigration, including framing immigrants as threats or burdens, can fuel negative attitudes and justify discriminatory actions. In instances where certain members of the South African government hold the view that the influx of immigrants, particularly illegal ones, poses a threat to the sovereign power of the state, this inspires ordinary South Africans to develop negative perceptions toward immigrants. Therefore, activities, actions, and pronouncements by government officials influence divisions among South Africans and African immigrants. In this regard, the negative attitudes or anti-immigrant stances by officials threaten social cohesion between African immigrants and South African nationals.

Besides government agencies and officials, from the 1990s to contemporary times, South African politicians have frequently portrayed immigrants as harmful, criminal, and disease carriers in public addresses and policy debates. The frequent characterization of immigrants as parasitic, criminal, and disease carriers in public speeches and policy debates fuels threats to social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants. While this is the case, it is also evident that political parties such as the EFF are cornerstones of promoting social cohesion between African immigrants and South Africans. Thus, while the majority of parties and politicians threaten unity and social cohesion, the EFF does the contrary by enhancing cohesion in many of its formal speeches on the migration-social cohesion nexus.

In addition, the role of media in fueling anti-immigrant attitudes suggests that negative public perceptions of immigrants and migration are created. Thus, in cases where institutions that deal with migration present negative opinions through the media, it becomes unlikely for members of the public to contest such opinions. Thus, the level of reporting is a determinant of negative public perception toward immigrants, and ultimately, this becomes a cornerstone of threats to social cohesion between immigrants and nationals residing in South Africa.

Similarly, at a theoretical level, international literature and government-led anti-immigrant sentiments in South Africa are consistent with social influence theory, as government officials and agencies have exerted social influence that has led to anti-immigrant behaviors within the social settings of the country. Thus, the anti-immigrant pronouncements by some government officials underscore the threats to social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants. In this regard, some South Africans and African immigrants comply with, identify with, and internalize government or government official-led anti-immigrant sentiments. Therefore, opinion leaders, such as government agencies and officials, through their actions, behaviors, or words, are influencers and catalysts of threats to social cohesion between these groups. From the context of persuasion theory, the conveying of anti-immigrant messages by some South African government officials has long affected individuals' anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviors. The threats to social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants result from being influenced by government opinions or actions through communication.

While there is evidence suggesting that the South African government holds anti-immigrant opinions, attitudes, and actions, there is also recent scholarly evidence that contradicts the predominant narrative. As seen in the presentation section, there is what must be construed as philoxenia toward African immigrants by the South African government. Thus, the Immigration Amendment Act No. 8 of 2016, enacted by South Africa's Parliament, is a key piece of legislation regulating entry, departure, various permits, and citizenship in South Africa. The various aspects of the South African migration legislative framework exhibit philoxenic characteristics, and this should be recognized as one of the key enhancers of social cohesion between South Africans and immigrants. In the context of this legislative framework, enhancers of social cohesion include aspects such as temporary residence rights, visas for various reasons (i.e., work, study, or visiting relatives), asylum seeking, and access to healthcare.

The latter cited work acknowledges the Immigration Amendment Act No. 8 of 2016, enacted by South Africa's Parliament, as a key piece of legislation regulating entry and departure from the country. Over time, it has been amended to address evolving migration challenges. The Act classifies migrants into two categories: "Legal foreigners," who are in South Africa according to the Act's rules, and "Illegal foreigners," who lack the necessary documentation. While the Act has faced criticism for perceived xenophobia toward illegal migrants, it highlights South Africa's commitment to Philoxenia, or hospitality, toward legal migrants. The provisions for fostering integration into South African society are designed to enhance social cohesion. There are also institutional plans by the South African government aimed at enhancing social cohesion and philoxenia. These include (a) the National Action Plan (NAP) to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerances, and (b) the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) of 2001.

The findings of this study emphasize the significant influence that opinion leaders including government officials, political parties, and media institutions have on shaping the dynamics between South African citizens and African immigrants. Evidence suggests that these actors play a dual role: they can either promote or hinder social cohesion depending on the nature of their engagement. On the one hand, inclusive political discourse, responsible media reporting, and fair policy implementation have the potential to foster unity and mutual understanding between communities. On the other hand, divisive rhetoric, exclusionary policies, and xenophobic media narratives contribute to social fragmentation and hostility toward immigrants. The paper reveals that these opinion leaders are not merely observers of societal developments but are actively shaping public perceptions and intergroup relations. Therefore, their actions and messages are central to either building bridges of cohesion or reinforcing social divisions within South Africa's diverse population.

9 Conclusion

This work revealed that opinion leaders such as the South African government and its officials, politicians and political parties, as well as the media, either positively or negatively affect social cohesion between South Africans and African immigrants. It argues that opinion leaders can impact social cohesion between these groups in

both positive and negative ways. At the legislative and planning levels, government officials and agencies are clear regarding a policy-oriented approach to enhancing social cohesion between nationals and immigrants. However, it appears that there are various challenges related to curbing threats to social cohesion between these groups, such as xenophobia. Thus, while legislation, policies, and plans such as the Immigration Act, the NAP, and NPHE are philoxenic, not all South African societies face the same anti-immigrant realities. Moreover, it seems that South African politicians predominantly exacerbate threats to social cohesion between these groups. This is evident from popular and documented discourse, as the EFF and its leader Julius Malema appear to be the only ones espousing positive perceptions toward immigrants, particularly those of African descent and documented ones. Scholarly evidence suggests that the South African media and anti-immigrant attitudes tend to portray immigrants negatively. Thus, studies on media and immigrant attitudes reveal the role of media in fueling anti-immigrant attitudes. Indirectly, these studies illustrate how anti-immigrant reports threaten social cohesion between nationals and immigrants. Similarly, negative media reports shape both threats and enhancers to social cohesion between these groups. The reader must understand that this work is not empirically based; therefore, I propose that further empirical research should be undertaken on this subject to ascertain the interpretations of opinion leaders in shaping the immigrant-national social cohesion nexus.

This paper contributes to the growing body of research on migration and social cohesion by examining the influential role of opinion leaders, which include (a) the South African government and its officials, (b) political parties, and (c) the media in shaping the relationship between South African citizens and African immigrants. It argues that these actors have the power to either foster or undermine social cohesion through their public discourse, policy decisions, and media narratives. The paper highlights both the constructive and destructive effects of these opinion leaders on social cohesion. On the one hand, the constructive effects of these opinion leaders enhance social cohesion, while on the other hand, the destructive effects threaten social cohesion. The paper contends that political and media actors are not passive observers but active participants in either bridging or deepening divides between host communities and immigrant populations.

The paper recommends that political parties, government officials, and the media play a key role in promoting unity and peaceful coexistence between nationals and immigrants. In addition, there is a need for accountability as well as monitoring and evaluating the implementation of philoxenic legislation, policies, and plans meant to curb xenophobia or anti-immigrant attitudes. Considering that South Africa is Africa's most preferred destination, there is a need for community-based workers who can assist in educating communities about the legislative imperative of philoxenia. While it is difficult legislatively and politically to justify informal or illegal immigrants in the country, it must be imperative to criminalize xenophobia. This has significant implications for enhancing social cohesion and unity in

South African communities composed of African immigrants and South African nationals.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article because data was sourced from existing written documents and media reports on YouTube.

Author contributions

JM: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Formal analysis, Methodology.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author declares that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

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