Contours of Urban Violence and Insecurity: Digital Media Technologies and Mitigation of Urban Violence Among Undocumented African Migrants in South Africa

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This is a qualitative exploratory investigation into the use of digital media technologies in the mitigation of security concerns among undocumented migrants in the informal settlements within urban South Africa. The article acknowledges that adaptation of migrants in new environments is generally compounded by a myriad of challenges most of which are linked to lack of access to government systems and social capital or survival networks. This is particularly applicable to the urban settings where rampant violent crime and insecurity concerns are often laced with outbursts of xenophobia, which contribute to further uncertainties among migrants. Extensive literature review and social media theory are used to explore the potential for digital media tools to mitigate violence and insecurity among migrants. A piloted in-depth interview was used to collect data from undocumented immigrants based on a snowballed sample to saturation levels. Data were analyzed thematically to generate themes from which study findings were derived. Study findings show that, undocumented migrants suffer inexplicable barrages of social injustice due to violent crime and other insecurity concerns largely because they are scared to report cases to law enforcement agents, who in turn arrest them for being illegal in the country. Subsequently, the advent of digital and social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp helps them to create a survival network that provides a sense of security and to foster collaborations that deal with their safety concerns, uncertainty, and support for victims of violent crime.

Keywords: digital media, illegal migrants, urban violence, insecurity, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a long and gruesome history of different forms of violence pre-1994 and in the democratic dispensation. This flies against the hope and expectations the world held after the country attained freedom as a constitutional democracy, when it was anticipated that it would overcome the challenges it inherited from its violent past. Abrahams (2016) cites the South African City Network (2011) which indicates that, unless there are drastic and acute intervention measures to curb the scourge, the country's high crime rate and violence is projected to surpass 70% by 2030. Following this, a number of research reports have labeled South Africa as one of the most violent societies in the world with cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban

featuring very high in violence-related discourses (Gotsch et al., 2013; Cinini and Mkhize, 2021). It is in these cities where violent crimes take numerous forms which include armed robbery; homicide; politically-motivated violence; gender-based violence; intra and inter-gang fights; rape; neighborhood conflicts, and rampant xenophobic violence (Collins, 2013). During what now seems to be a consistent trend of violent anti-migrant campaign, these acts are often compounded by shop lootings, vandalism, mob-justice meted against alleged criminals, and murder cases that go unreported due to alleged intimidation or lack of evidence (Cinini and Mkhize, 2021). Of late, the country has witnessed blatant anti-foreign displays of structural and unstructural violence against (illegal, also called undocumented) migrants in various forms including the actions by the *Dudula Movement* (literally meaning to sweep away), especially in the Gauteng Province. Hence, migrants often witness cases where their kith and kin are brutalized with no legal recourse because the affected persons are deemed "foreigners" (ibid, p. 62).

For over a decade now, some scholars in this field of study have concurred that incidences of crime and violence can be correlated with multi-dimensional urban risk factors such as increased poverty, unemployment, inadequate basic services, poor health care and overcrowding (Gotsch et al., 2013). This feeds into the narrative that the South African government is unable to cater for and satisfy the socio-economic needs of its citizens which has led to violent service delivery protests and an array of multi-faceted anti-social behavior. Other scholars have argued that, due to the anger created by these (socio-economic) strains, the citizens tend to develop a tendency to threaten foreigners accusing them of stealing their jobs, selling drugs, bringing diseases and other forms of social ills that endanger their wellbeing (Cinini and Balgobind, 2019). Subsequently, these allegations often put migrants in a risky situation due to the negative attitudes displayed by local residents who often respond by way of unleashing discriminatory, exclusionary and hostile behavior within the host communities. In the context of community safety and security which should be understood in terms of "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want" among residents (Cinini and Balgobind, 2019), it is evident that a large section of migrants in South Africa live in the terror of poor safety and insecurity induced by the perpetual fear of systematic and structural victimization.

Subsequently, this article argues that, it is during these difficult times that migrants go through, where appropriate modes and tools of communication become critical to reassure the victims of these heinous injustices about the presence and effectiveness of the rule of law. Institutionalized communication infrastructure in the form of both public and private media becomes dutifully bound to provide apt information detailing the mitigation role and interventions that government agencies enforce to protect migrants, specifically to allay their fears and uncertainties amid these security concerns (Muswede and Mpofu, 2020). To the contrary, some scholars have argued that South African media, particularly the tabloids are consistent purveyors of incomprehensible and narrow narratives about local stories of crime, violence, murder, and xenophobia devoid of nuanced perspectives on the migration crisis (Muswede, 2015).

This situation leaves migrants with no voice with which to air their plight, serve for the plethora of communicative contexts associated with the digital and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp among others. As such, the article investigates the interface between migrants' social security and usage of digital communication tools among undocumented migrants to mitigate the perpetual threat of victimization that they encounter in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. This involves the review of literature on urban safety and security challenges in South Africa; an over of digital media utilities in the context of urban security; methods; discussion of findings, and conclusion of the study.

URBAN SAFETY AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Recent developments in the field of security studies show that, an understanding of the safety and security concerns of citizens is directly linked to the discourse on crime and violence. As a result, most definitions of violence overlap with those of conflict and crime, which are reflected in terms of "violent crime", criminal conflict, conflictual violence and violent conflict (Galtung, 1985; Moser, 2004; Abrahams, 2010). On the other hand, crime entails an act of grave offense punishable by law and includes violent crime, which in turn is an act that causes physical or psychological damage and is a breach of the law (Moser, 2004). Therefore, the uncertainty generated by violence is expressed in fear and insecurity in the context of urban crime, violence, and other security concerns that affect migrants in South Africa.

Safety and Security Concerns of Migrants in South Africa

Despite the persistence of multi-faceted security and safety concerns of African migrants over the years, most of their horrendous ordeals have not been formerly registered as statistical evidence in the legal context (Monson and Misago, 2009). This is particularly true for undocumented migrants whose vulnerability to this vicious cycle of violence has a direct bearing on their livelihood as a poor group of people with limited access to means of survival (Moser, 2004). Some scholars have argued that, in South Africa, the degree of insecurity among both legal and illegal migrants relates not only to the spatial, economic and social constraints that the endemic violence imposes on their daily lives, but their security is closely linked to the failure of the state's public security systems to protect them (Mlilo and Misago, 2019). This view is linked to the fact that, while both categories of migrants experience serious challenges of violence, it is the spatial structure that complicates their lives in the informal settlements where they compete for basic services with poor citizens who also live in squatter settlements or shacks in these townships.

Literature on this subject also acknowledges that there is no single cause that determines or explains violence, however numerous factors combine at different levels including individual, institutional and structural aspects to trigger these conditions (Misago, 2017). Arguably, most literature highlights that in urban contexts, crime and violence that end up affecting

migrants is usually rooted in unequal power relations, poverty or inequality as predominant determinants of violence, therefore assuming that, this is a linear relationship is being too simplistic (Moser, 2004; Landau, 2011; Misago, 2017; Mlilo and Misago, 2019). Instead, the scholars maintains that the daily living conditions of the urban poor heighten the potential for the emergence of conflict, crime and violence. Thus, poverty and inequality frequently overlap to generate conditions in which people resort to crime and violence (Moser, 2004). Hence, for over two decades, crime and violence have bedeviled most urban centers, particularly the Cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban with limited response from the law enforcement agents, thereby yielding a breeding ground for gansterism, murder, taxi wars, and xenophobia against migrants (Abrahams, 2010).

Crime and Violence Against Migrants in South African Townships

Despite the existence of several legal frameworks regulating the protection of migrants (including undocumented ones, asylum seekers and refugees) and an assortment of international human rights instruments to promote the same, reports show that the Department of Home Affairs has over the years been authorizing the arrest and deportation of migrants with no documents (Abrahams, 2010). Numerous scholars have maintained that safety and security of migrants in South African townships is characterized by xenophobic violence resulting in numerous deaths, physical assaults, looting, arson, grievous bodily harm, displacement, intimidation, threats, harassment, eviction notices and loss of life (Landau, 2011; Muswede, 2015; Misago, 2017; Mlilo and Misago, 2019). A majority of these research reports have noted with disdain how tens of thousands of migrants in areas such as Alexandra, Diepsloot, Hillbrow in Johannesburg and areas such as Gugulethu and Khayelitsha in Cape Town have been harassed, attacked or killed because of their nationality or merely as outsiders. Essentially, this creates a syndrome where immigration and criminalization of immigrants share an interface through discourses of fear and the "dangerous deviant" (Cinini and Mkhize, 2021), who in this case is an outsider.

Fundamentally, the plight of migrants begins as a complex journey where push factors from the sending countries such as socio-economic insecurity and political instability compounds their livelihood. In the process of their migration, a myriad of safety and security challenges including loss of valuables, physical injury, human trafficking and threat to life or death occurs. Their conundrum gets more difficult where upon arrival in South Africa, the material conditions of the host communities become untenable, thereby creating hostile safety and security challenges (Cinini and Balgobind, 2019). This results in accusations resulting from unemployed locals who feel neglected by their government who begin to blame migrants for competing with them in the informal sector resulting into violent actions. The political dimension involves authorities who then instigate locals to direct their anger and frustration against (illegal) migrants who take the blame for multiple problems (Cinini and Mkhize, 2021), including crowding the streets, joblessness, running brothels, dealing in drugs and inducing other forms of social ills. In spite of the numerous attempts to seek legal recourse, migrants are faced with a corrupt security and justice system laced up with the reality that any act of xenophobia is a mere sentiment and not a criminal act punishable by law (Cinini and Mkhize, 2021).

DIGITAL MEDIA UTILITIES AND THEIR BENEFITS TO URBAN SOCIETIES

The Digital Media Context in Urban Environments

The concept digital media is a 21st century phrase used to define all forms of digital communication related to the internet as it describes the interplay between technology, text, images and sound in the context of information production and consumption (Lindgren, 2017). It is associated with the information revolution where new (digital) media have given impetus to the evolving multi-media environment leading to numerous changes in the way society interacts, especially urban areas. Internet-based publishing and citizen journalism, largely made possible by the proliferation of digital (social) media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have permeated all facets of life (Karekwaivanane and Msonza, 2021) and this includes safety and security issues. This interplay has yielded a plethora of widely distributed digital products and a growing share of user-generated content attributable to members of the public, irrespective of geographic space or professional skill (Rodny-Gumede, 2017). Apparently, the new trend has yielded new ways of information dissemination and consumption among all age groups, and this includes the sphere of social communication in urban communities. This is particularly interesting, especially that research on use of new media applications has revealed that a significant number of people already spend more time on the digital platforms each week than on any other media platform (Lindgren, 2017). As such, most urban residents all over the world are now largely exposed to numerous digitally-inclined interactive media technologies that come with ample opportunities to participate in the urban security context as planetary citizens.

Since the advent of the internet, new media and the shift from analog to digital technology, consumption patterns among audiences, particularly urban users have changed dramatically. New media have given impetus to the evolving multi-media environment ushered through internet-based publications in the form of online and citizen journalism made possible by the proliferation of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. This has yielded a broader media landscape that features a plethora of widely distributed digital products and a growing share of user-generated content attributable to members of the public, largely urbanites, despite their professional skill levels (Rodny-Gumede, 2017). The scenario has enabled media users to become content providers, a situation that allows more citizens to subscribe to the web meanwhile facilitating ubiquitous access through platforms such as smartphones, iPads and personal computers.

The global media environment has transformed in multiple dimensions in the past two decades, with each change

influencing the kind of media products produced and distributed to target audiences (Burger, 2017). These changes have quantitatively and qualitatively affected the number and kinds of media interactions available to target audiences including the degree of gratification with which each medium is consumed. Subsequently, this has had implications for how media content is interpreted and integrated into the media users' in their daily lives within urban settings. Besides acting as socialization agents, particularly among young urbanites, Burger's study noted that digital media mainly contributes toward informing social behavior, attitudes, and how users perceive the world around them (ibid). This is attributable to the fact that most modern day users choose the kind of media they consume on the basis of their personalities, socialization needs, and personal identification needs (Narasimhurthy, 2014), owing to numerous factors including safety and security concerns.

Digital Media Utilities and Social Benefits to Urban Communities
Digital Media and User Opportunities in Urban Contexts

Today's technological landscape features both popular digital media and social media applications *inter alia* social networks, wikis, blogs, video and photo sharing options, social bookmarks, online reviews, and virtual worlds (Rodny-Gumede, 2017). In their diverse forms, these applications allow users to perform social communication tasks such as creating personal diaries, sharing videos and photos, updating and commenting on statuses, following friends and icons as well as creating avatars. Over time, media users, particularly those in the cities have become more comfortable using new media for different kinds of daily tasks including searching for whatever informational needs they have such as accessing news updates, live streams, traffic news and other related reports through a mere flip on their electronic gadgets (Jones, 2017). Apparently, this trend has reached untenable levels, as the internet has become the epicenter and fastest means of universal access to all forms of information globally (Fourie, 2017). Hence, due to the radically transformed multi-media environment, it can be argued that, there is an increased use of new media services than ever before, ultimately creating new ways of production as well as consumption of information. Subsequently, media consumption patterns have gradually shifted away from traditional mainstream media formats to more adaptable and personalized consumption patterns linked to internet surfing as a gateway to a variety of digital media platforms. This approach to information access, participation, and interpretation has transformed media users, particularly urban dwellers, from being mere consumers of media content to active participants with the ability to co-create and develop content to suit their specific needs (Fourie, 2017). As such, interactive opportunities associated with the new digital environment, particularly social media networks and their social benefits, have compelled both media scholars and users to view media reception studies and usage patterns with alternative perspectives.

Digital Media Production and Consumption Among Urbanites

Unlike traditional media, digital media engagements have increasingly become amenable to many people in most urban environments both in terms of production and consumption modes. This has yielded a situation where most users with no expertise in media production can thrive on their volition and actual construction to optimally function online (Lindgren, 2017), to explore matters that affect their safety in the neighborhood. As such, media content production and consumption are no longer seen as rigidly separate anymore, but rather the lines between them are blurred as most users can now create personal blogs and podcasts, record their daily experiences as they wish and post videos on YouTube. Judging by the popularity and level of buzz these platforms have created among users, particularly those in the urban setting, it can be argued that the blur between media production and consumption has widely been embraced among users (Horst, 2020). Subsequently, this has made digital media technologies to be more popular, particularly among urban citizens who view them as tools of self-expression regarding their social concerns such as safety and security challenges.

Digital Media and Its Capacity to Alter Conceptions of Space

This aspect is presented from the view that, prior to the advent of the internet, space was understood as an abstract and astronomical concept including within socio-economic and geographical ecologies. This entails a situation where space was previously viewed as a distinct phenomenon from the people, objects, and events that happened within it (Wood, 2012). However, of late digital media have successfully bridged this space and time, thereby enabling users to have instant communication through a variety of offshoots including text chats, voice chats and video calling, which defy the geographic distance between communicators (Chen et al., 2018) in both urban and rural settings. Beyond overcoming the traditional challenge of geographic distance, digital media technologies are commendable for facilitating instant communication and enhancing users' aptitude to alter the conception of physical space such as transnational communication or cross border transactions. In migration contexts, this would entail the ability to access information or participate in platforms, which traditionally would have been impossible to partake in due to physical distance and time constraints.

Digital Media, Low Cost and High Degree of User-Friendliness

Despite the perceived low penetration levels in poor communities, one of the benefits of digital media technologies, particularly social media networks, is their public availability on easily accessible web browser-enabled devices such as the smart phone or personal computer (Munro, 2018). For example, applications such as WhatsApp enable users to communicate interactively at nearly zero cost particularly during promotions, thereby affording users ample time to converse without fear of immediate depletion of airtime or data. Most importantly, nearly

all social media platforms rely on highly user-friendly interfaces which require minimal technical skills for optimal use (Fourie, 2017). This is a good gesture for most citizens including migrants who may be semi-literate or illiterate because they do not have to provide requisite educational or professional qualifications to partake in any form of personal or collective interaction in the process of digital media usage.

Digital Media as Enablers of Urban Community-Based Networks

With respect to the formation of interactive virtual communities, digital media technologies are renowned for enabling ordinary people to construct their own meanings based on their personal experiences rather than agenda-set editorialization associated with the mainstream media platforms (Fourie, 2017). In the context of urban safety and security concerns, this affords communities the latitude to share matters of common interest, such as socio-economic and political issues or mobilization of stakeholders over civic engagements (Clow and Baack, 2012). Thus, through digital media technologies, residents or community members can gather virtually and discuss topics of interest, share ideas and express both personal and collective views on matters of common interest including migration. This has the potential to facilitate community colloquia which enables users to share valuable information on matters of mutual interest via virtual links (Chen et al., 2018), a platform that may help address safety and security concerns among marginalized groups such as migrants. Such a network can enable community members to explore "difficult topics" by meeting civic content mediators who may contribute toward their personal and collective knowledge of issues of concern. For example, digital platforms can enable social groups to create a virtual platform where they share personal experiences of victimization or discrimination, which may later be aired on public media platforms where they can receive public attention and possible sympathy.

Digital Media as Links for Connectedness and Content Multipliers

Most types of digital media technologies, especially social media networks thrive on connectedness, making use of links to other internet-based sites, resources, and people as multipliers. For most cases, these forms enable users to converse with other users such as friends, family, parents, and potential partners in a relatively safe and convenient online environment (Lindgren, 2017). For these reasons, most people particularly those in the urban setting, spend significant amounts of time on social media for different purposes including chatting, updating profiles, and meeting friends as a daily routine (Grey and Silver-Pacuilla, 2011), in the digital media ecological landscape. Contrary to traditional forms of media, digital media platforms have a personal rather than public focus, which makes it possible for individual users to derive personal gratification even in cases that involve sole transactions (Sundar and Limperos, 2013). To this end, it is this ubiquitous nature, whose packaging processes stem from a heterogeneous and often consultative scope of practice rather than a personal appeal, which sets digital media technologies as preferred platforms of social communication among most users than mainstream formats.

METHODOLOGY

The article explored the use of digital media technologies in the mitigation of security concerns among undocumented migrants in the informal settlements within the urban setting in South Africa. It adopted the exploratory research design within the qualitative approach (Ejimabo, 2015) focusing on the Gauteng Province since it has the highest incidences of violence in the country. No specific period was preferred since the hostilities against migrants have become a perennial feature in post-apartheid South Africa (Cinini and Mkhize, 2021). Data were generated from nineteen (n-19) snowballed participants comprising nine (n-9) Zimbabweans, four (n-4) Malawians, two (n-2) Mozambicans, two (n-2) Congolese, one (n-1) Nigerian and one (n-1) participant who confirmed being a migrant but declined to declare his nationality due to fear of being stereotyped. All participants were aged between 19 and 38 years, plying in a variety of informal jobs in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. The first two migrants were street vendors familiar to the researcher in the Johannesburg CBD who operated an open kitchen and sold food to passer-by's. These initial links and contacts yielded an additional five (n-5) participants from Soweto, Alexandra, Lenasia, Roodepoort and Diepsloot townships with subsequent efforts leading to establishing a network of migrants in the surrounding informal settlements and squatter camps. The composition of the sample included four (n-4) hairdressers; three (n-3) domestic workers; two (n-2) open kitchen operators; seven (n-7) street hawkers; two (n-2) assistant health care workers, and one (n-1) traditional medical practitioner.

Due recognition of the prescribed COVID-19 protocols were observed during data collection by using telephonic interviews and/or virtual meetings with the consent of the participants. All interviewees confirmed using social media networks for at least 5 years, particularly WhatsApp which seemed overly popular among them. A thematic analysis procedure was used to allow for familiarization with data, initial coding, searching for themes, revising the themes, naming them and eventually reporting the outcomes (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure anonymity during data analysis, the 19 participants were coded as P1-P19 in order to avoid attributing their views to specific views or content. Inference to assumptions within social media theory was used to explicate the relationship between social media networking and human behavior in the context of urban safety and security dynamics. In addition to getting consent from the participants, privacy and confidentiality aspects were observed during and after the data collection process.

SOCIAL MEDIA THEORY

Social media theory is a critical theory that applies to the study of interactive human behavior in relation to how new media technologies impact society, which includes ordinary

people such as migrants. Its assumptions have an interface with the Uses and Gratifications theory, which recognizes audiences as active media users, rather than passive recipients of information (Fourie, 2017). Both theories are premised on the view that, audiences actively seek out specific media and content to achieve certain results or gratifications that satisfy their personal needs (Grahl, 2014). Studies of social media and their functions have also shown that, content developers offer products to specific target audiences or users on the basis of their keenness to determine how consumers react to their social media products (Vaught, 2013). Hence, social media theory is about communication visibility made possible by social networking with the possibility of enhanced awareness of Meta-knowledge (about who knows what and from whom) through message transparency and network translucence (Leonardi, 2014). This occurs through different platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp group lists consisting of people who may have never met, but are only connected by the World Wide Web or internet. This interaction is sustained by the benefits derived from these platforms that include unfettered interconnectivity, which creates a sort of distancing mechanism that enhances personal communication, thereby drifting away from traditional face-to-face encounters (Vaught, 2013).

THE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

These findings are presented in relation to how undocumented migrants used social media networking, specifically WhatsApp messaging to receive instant alerts on the imminence and nature of violent threats against them; to facilitate psycho-social support and empathy to victims of violence; to share survival strategies in the context of immigration policy uncertainties; discrimination; brutality, and mobilization of assistance to mitigate the impact of violent crimes on the livelihood of other migrants who found themselves trapped within hostile South African townships.

Dissemination of Instant Alerts and Imminence of Violence

In the case of organized threats of violence where "illegal" migrants are warned to live South Africa or the townships where they live, warning threats on community action are often preceded by a window period before enforcement by vigilantes and criminals. In this regard, most of the undocumented migrants reportedly said that they often "miss the build-up" to the news because they spend the larger part of the day(s) plying informal trades such as domestic work and other outdoor activities such as street hawking, selling of self-made ware and other items. Where the events are covered or explained via mainstream media such as television, six (n-6) migrants said that their situation was compounded by their inability to afford the "luxury" of watching television when they have to regularly skip meals due to the abject poverty conditions they are faced with on a daily basis.

Nearly half (n-9) of participants conceded that most broadcast media including the radio have no linguistic or cultural relevance to them, since they to do understand the local languages used

in the broadcasts. For this reason, possible alternative sources of information on imminent violence were mediated by grapevine or rumors, but were also corroborated by social media networks, particularly the WhatsApp platform. One of the participants [P3] remarked that *"When we get to the hostel, we are crowded [in one room] and we will be tired [so much] that, there is no time to think about news what[so]ever, because the following morning, we wake up early … maybe around 3 am… to work again, … so only WhatsApp [messages] work [for us]".* This was confirmed by three other participants [P 7, 9 and 13] who said that news media and government sources of information were not their priority due to the poor conditions they lived in and the need to prepare for their survival activities of the next day. As such, sixteen (n-16) of the participants acknowledged receiving prompt information via the WhatsApp chats about the often sporadic attacks against undocumented migrants, particularly those orchestrated by *Operation dudula and O kae molao*, where organized groups or law enforcement agents went about driving away (illegal) migrants or searching their homes and informal business premises.

The above situation confirms that social media networks, particularly WhatsApp messaging, undoubtedly helped the migrants to receive instant information about possible attacks and accompanying raids by allegedly *"corrupt law enforcements who demand bribes and sexual favors from migrants"* claimed one of the participants [P12]. With these information tips, some of the migrants were be able to adjust their situation to circumvent the imminent "spot" raids, which were often unannounced by local authorities such as the police or political leadership. This finding concurs with Moorhead et al. (2013) whose study acknowledged the utilities of social media networks in enabling instantaneous social communication that offer users abundant interactive opportunities to mitigate their challenges. This further supports the view that the effectiveness of communication relies on the degree to which a medium permits the users to experience the presence of the other participants (Barnes, 2012), which was the case with undocumented migrant WhatsApp group users. In the context of social media theory and WhatsApp messaging, this interactive process was compatible with the use of the communicators' natural or native language(s) where a majority of them (n-13) used code-switched texts with colloquial English, to warn each other of the impending dangers of violence in their respective townships.

Facilitation of Post-Violence Psycho-Social and Emotional Support

Whereas violent attacks on both individuals and groups of (illegal) migrants occur both structurally and sporadically, participants confirmed that most of the attacks occur unexpectedly as a shock, often" unleashed "… *by people we often talk to and sell our wares to…"* said [P12], something that complicates their fears within the communities they live in. In the recent past, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown, some incidents of violence occurred amid border closures, outlawed street vending and family visits as well as restricted movement. This prevented most undocumented migrants to physically

contact each other as their usual means of providing psycho-social and emotional support to victims of urban violence, particularly that related to burnt shelters, rape and insolvency. A majority of them (n-11) including those who worked as hairdressers (n-3) and open kitchen operators (n-2) stated that they largely relied on "WhatsApp calls or virtual meetings" to arrange for remittances to send groceries home or raise money for a funeral following the death of a fellow countrymen. This was important since some of them had nothing "to fall back on... in cases like these where COVID [19] has wiped [away] our savings," retorted participant [P17]. Three (n-3) participants alluded that they had been brutalized and robbed recently, while another two (n-2) said they feared incarceration due to their illegal status and had to depend on WhatsApp chats from fellow countrymen to know whether "it was safe to go and work outside our community or not...".

Subsequently, fourteen (n-14) participants had strong fears of deportation as purported through "fake news" sites and therefore anticipated an immigration policy change to facilitate formalization of their stay in the country as a gesture that would alleviate their dire living conditions. Their fears of crime and violence were compounded by lack of safe and stable accommodation, lack of family support and erratic working conditions. Without these basic amenities, particularly the latter, these migrants were not guaranteed of social security in the form of unemployment insurance benefits or housing assistance as none of them owned a house or permanent job in the country. Another (n-1) participant, a Congolese, attested to adopting the "sharing strategy" (Cinini and Mkhize, 2021) with unfamiliar people whom he met on WhatsApp citing similar accommodation challenges due to regular evictions from their initial shacks.

With most undocumented migrants already living in fear, panic, and working in exploitative conditions, compounded by alleged regular bribes to authorities, participants said they could hardly cope with the insecurity of their neighborhood. Hence, empathy was one of the most immediate gestures they needed from fellow migrants, family, and friends through connecting with the affective and emotive conditions of others. This made social media "handles" such as the WhatsApp platform more relevant when compared to traditional communication modes which are not premised on personal preference, gratification or virtuous autonomy (Jones, 2017). As a result, most of the participants confirmed being "... stressed; depressed; helpless or confused ..." by some politicians' remarks, which they labeled as "unfavorable..., selective... and biased against foreigners..." for fuelling fears of violence in South African townships. In response to these stressful conditions, two (n-2) migrant women [P11 and P 07] who claimed to be pregnant at the time, said it was through WhatsApp [messaging] that their relatives became aware that they needed medical help since they had no access to public healthcare. Participant [P 07] said that, "l have no papers [not documented], ... and l am scared of going to the hospital... because they will deport me right away". While these difficult fear-induced conditions called for empathetic courtesy and professional help from experts, only lay people within the

migrants-fold or WhatsApp group were available to assist the pregnant women.

Thus, through WhatsApp messaging, support entailed vicariously sharing the same feeling of what participant [P 01] called "... desperation and vulnerability" which compelled migrants to rely on inept psycho-social therapy from lay persons to alleviate their insecurity challenges (Wagaman et al., 2015). This confirms that a medium's social effects result from the degree of its social presence, created by users' interactions within the undocumented migrants' WhatsApp group. As virtual communicators, the platform enabled the migrants to experience a sense of security and belonging as they shared their personal ordeals with other people (victims) and not mere impersonal objects (Barnes, 2012). In the context of lack of political and legal oversight over their safety and security conditions, it can be argued that WhatsApp messaging was critical in facilitating apt psycho-social and emotional support among the undocumented migrants in the affected townships.

Sharing Adaptive Strategies Amid Fears of Victimization

During the period under study, all participants (n-19) confirmed the rumors also reported in South African news media that all undocumented migrants would be targeted in public places including buses, malls and taxis, sparking fears of eminent deportation or permanent travel bans by immigration authorities (News Africa, 2020; SABC News, 2020). More than half (n-10) of the participants confirmed threats of deportation, confiscation of their goods or movable properties such as furniture and electrical appliances, and mistreatment in the form of resurgent xenophobia which has happened in the recent past (Muswede and Mpofu, 2020). Participant [P2] lamented that "...the criminals make false accusations about us and justify their actions... threatening to necklace us ... [with burning tire] to death until we live South Africa, and there will be no case [recourse]". In addition to these safety woes, three (n-3) participants alleged that their plight was exacerbated by police misconduct associated with collection of bribes in order for undocumented migrants to avoid arrests [P6, P11, and P14]. The rest of the participants (n-14) highlighted security concerns relating to vigilantism and ad hoc police raids which called for (illegal migrants) to be deported back to their homes, ostensibly where they would possibly suffer severe political persecution as returning asylum seekers or refugees.

However, owing to its virtual utilities, the WhatsApp platform enabled the (illegal) migrants to share information on how to deal with these uncertainties, something that would have been difficult to do on a face-to-face encounter (Tait, 2016). Participants also confirmed that the WhatsApp messages provided some "sense of security", since some of the content "puffed through" the platform contained government policy excerpts, which reassured them of safety under South African law. This was important in the context of undocumented migrants' inability to publicly solicit official information due

to their "status", however, this was made possible through WhatsApp messaging where communicators benefited from masked anonymity (Ott, 2017). This further addressed fears among participants [P1, P4, P11, and P9] who reported "threats" about the presence of angry mobs "… *[who are] mobilizing to chase [evict] away foreigners [undocumented migrants] out of the country, [especially] … after the COVID [19] lockdown"*. As an expression of adaptability in the face of adversity, most of the participants [n-15] adapted their daily routines to what they called "near-local" errands following the WhatsApp tip offs shared among migrants in general. Fundamentally, all participants acknowledged that WhatsApp messaging was critical in providing multiple cues on alternative news updates about migrants' unsafe living environment in the townships. This confirms social media theoretical assumptions that the networks bolster the ability to defy the challenges of space and time (Jones, 2017), in social communication contexts. This was made possible by creating virtual supportive strategies via WhatsApp toward circumventing the ever-mounting threats and encounters of urban violence which undocumented migrants experienced within the townships they lived in.

Mobilization of Material and Financial Support for Victims of Violence

Due to their vulnerability coupled with unreliable casual jobs, unpredictable displacement and sporadic violent encounters with gang attacks or xenophobic violence, undocumented migrants can hardly meet their daily material needs. Of the nineteen (n-19) undocumented migrant interviewees, none of them ever received any form of aid or material assistance from the government including during the strictest period (March-September 2020) of the national lockdown in South Africa. Their socio-economic situation was aggravated by additional family responsibilities where eight (n-8) of them said they had at least two school-going children some of whom they left in their home countries. Two participants [P8 and P17] claimed that, where migrants are considered for charity donations, unfair distribution of food parcels by coordinators is evident because they [coordinators] allegedly "… *demand bribes to enlist some migrants to get food parcels [P17]"*. Another participant [P11] lamented that "… *l have changed my residence two times because of everyday threats of [xenophobic] violence, so…my children don't go [to school] most of the time, because they also don't know the [local] language(s) and are not registered [documented]"*. Due to selective news reporting affecting migrants in South Africa, the participants' difficult safety and security conditions could not find their way into mainstream media platforms. Hence, the victims were compelled to device alternative ways to reach out to the broader migrant community and civic society for material assistance, which found expression through the creation of WhatsApp group(s), subsequently leading to the networking interactions.

As a result of the popular nature of the WhatsApp platform among these migrants, all study participants attested to receiving substantial material support from individuals and undisclosed civic organizations including local churches. Most participants (n-12) confirmed that WhatsApp "charity chats" were critical in the mobilization of support materials such as food parcels, clothing, and money for rent and electricity bills. This initiative was specifically appraised by three (n-3) of the participants [P7, P11, and P15], who highlighted that WhatsApp messaging popularized their insecurity concerns beyond provision of food donations to facilitation of "*burials [funeral assistance] and drugs [medication] for injured foreigners [migrants]… who sometimes get involved in street fights in [self]-defense, particularly at night"* in the surrounding settlements.

Due to the convergence and interconnectivity of digital media technologies, some participants [P2, P5, P7, and P12] confirmed receiving assistance to link their WhatsApp to a Zoom meeting with the effect of building solidarity interactions with other (illegal) migrants during the trauma following xenophobic attacks. Participant [P2] alluded that "*this [platform) enables isolated, poor and vulnerable people to cry to others for help… in times of need"*. This concurs with the social media theory, which alludes to the platform's capabilities to enable- formulation of virtual communities that can be coordinated by ordinary users (Barnes, 2012) to solve their challenges. Thus, it can be argued that the acquisition of basic digital media skills, particularly WhatsApp messaging, was harnessed to mitigate the hostile forms of urban violence meted against undocumented migrants in a manner that would not have been possible if mainstream media were used.

CONCLUSION

The article has noted that, while crime and violence have devastating effects on humanity the world over, South Africa carries the heaviest burden of this scourge, which is particularly brazen among (illegal) migrants. While their predicament is compounded by their "undocumented status", they remain trapped in a blame game between government's non-delivery trajectory and frustrated citizens who use them as scapegoats and stereotypes. This is evident where poor migrants generally are subjected to multiple forms of safety and security anti-social behavior including xenophobia, discrimination, criminalization, and victimization. These conditions tend to yield unprecedented suffering, isolation, and other psycho-social effects on the victims with increased potential for desperation resulting from fear, poverty and economic exclusion. However, the article has noted that, owing to the digital media environment and its propensity for digital citizenship, especially WhatsApp networking, people in the margins of society such as (illegal) migrants can circumvent their suffering by amplifying their voices to society. With inference to social media theory, the article has demonstrated that undocumented migrants, like other groups, can employ available digital media technologies to provide instant alerts about imminent violence before it occurs; facilitate psycho-social support; share survival and adaptive strategies as well as mobilize material and financial support for victims of violence in crime-ridden urban settings such as townships in the Gauteng Province.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Limpopo Turfloop Research Ethics Committee. The participants provided their informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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