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Pan-Africanism as a laughing matter: (Funny) expressions of African identity on Twitter

ABSTRACT

Pan-Africanism, a concept that attempts to capture the essence of being an African, needs to be reconsidered in the age of social media. In this article, we examine how Twitter users negotiate the question of African identity through humorous hashtag-driven conversations. We specifically question whether a new kind of Pan-Africanism is emerging on Africa's Twitterverse through the use of a popular hashtag in 2015, #IfAfricaWasABar. In our analysis of tweets linked to #IfAfricaWasABar, we conclude that Twitter provides temporary solidarity by engaging users in humorous exchanges regarding the sociocultural, political and economic issues that define the African continental condition today.

KEYWORDS

#IfAfricaWasABar
globalization
humour
identity
Pan-Africanism
Twitter

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2015, Motswana blogger and mathematics student Siyanda Mohutsiwa tweeted the following question: 'If Africa was a bar, what would your country be drinking/doing?' The tweet – meant to inspire users to imagine Africa as a joint with African nations as its patrons – attracted Twitter users to post jokes, memes and serious comments using #IfAfricaWasABar. Following

1. Twentieth century movements for unity of the black race to resist slavery, colonialism, Apartheid and other forms of racism in the diaspora were key catalysts of a vibrant Pan-African discourse (Kasanda 2016; Musila 2016).

the popularity of the hashtag, Mohutsiwa gave a TED talk later in February 2016, where she referred to the Twitter exchange as a project of 'social Pan-Africanism'. Siyanda argues that her idea of Pan-Africanism has the political goal of uniting young Africans with 'creative energy' and 'innovative ideas' in response to political elitism and the failures of post-independence Africa (Mohutsiwa 2016).

Pan-Africanism – a concept used to refer to the unity of people of African descent – is facing an existential challenge in a world that is increasingly globalized. For over a century, Pan-Africanism was defined in terms of a racial struggle against the oppression of the black race.¹ Over the past two decades, however, migrations, sociopolitical developments and the spread of communication technologies have led scholars to question old Pan-African theories (Wachanga and Mazrui 2011; Kasanda 2016). While Pan-Africanism is often considered a fluid concept and a subject of dynamic generational, cultural and political interpretations (Adi and Sherwood 2003; Kasanda 2016), this article does not aim to interrogate its historical and philosophical roots (or re-evaluate its epistemology). Instead, it focuses on its expressions online and what the conversations, through Twitter hashtag #IfAfricaWasABar, portend for African identity. We employ the concept Pan-Africanism here for two reasons: First, the initiator of the conversation, Siyanda, alluded to the notion of Pan-Africanism in her TED talk in February 2016. Secondly, the sheer volume of the tweets the hashtag generated was remarkable, with more than 60,000 just a week after it started (Mungai 2015). The hashtag #IfAfricaWasABar inspired Twitter users, if not on a policy level then at least on an emotional one, to engage in dialogue that sparked imagination about a place where all African nations could interact.

PAN-AFRICANISM AND IDENTITY

The origin of Pan-Africanism is associated with black activists and intellectuals in North America in the nineteenth century. Pan-Africanism has taken many forms, although it is generally used to describe a 'shared sense of a broadly conceived African identity' (McCall 2007: 1; Kasanda 2016). In the mid-twentieth century, Pan-Africanism was recognized as an ideology that fostered liberation struggles against white oppression in the diaspora and European colonization in the African continent. Emphasis was placed on the 'idea that people of African descent share similar histories and struggles, a common destiny, and processes for forming cross-cultural unity' (Falola and Essien 2014: 1). Over time it seemed that the concept of Pan-Africanism would die a slow death when colonialism and the Cold War ended, even though proponents claimed the ideology had a 'solid intellectual basis' (Momoh 2003: 32).

If unity was at the core of traditional understandings of Pan-Africanism, then the pervasiveness of the thinking of African identity in terms of the black skin confined it to racial solidarity. The 'nativist view' (Kasanda 2016) that imagines the 'African identity' in terms of the colour of the skin is aptly described by Mbembe (2005) as the idea that 'being black' means 'not being white'. However, today, processes of globalization, digital mobilities and migrations have altered the understanding of the African identity and the enduring notion of African unity (Njubi 2001; Wachanga and Mazrui 2011; Zeleza 2011). The trend is moving towards a Pan-Africanism that is attuned to contemporary sociocultural and political changes as well as unity that recognizes multiplicities of African identities. Kasanda (2016) argues that the

blackness-of-the-skin thinking is questionable today because it overlooks global flows and migration in both the African continent and other parts of the world throughout history. Kasanda's Pan-Africanism argues for a unity rooted in the idea that all people of African descent share common universal sociopolitical challenges and thus solidarity in the contemporary world exists when addressing those common challenges.

The New Pan-Africanism however, still has to contend with challenges associated with complex identities and diversities in Africa and beyond, which are defined by colour, ethnicity, language, culture or colonial heritage (Sabelo 2010). Furthermore, historically there are conflicting conceptions of Pan-Africanism, for instance, varying perspectives of unity, whether it is Trans-Atlantic, Trans-Saharan, Sub-Saharan or global (Kasanda 2016), as well as ever-changing identities of those who subscribe to the idea of being African but have migrated to other continents.

In addressing the question of the multiplicity of identities, the concept Afropolitanism² has recently gained currency among Pan-African scholars. Mbembe's 2005 conceptualization of Afropolitanism recognizes that Africa is both a 'destination' and a 'departure area' of different people and multiple cultures (Kasanda 2016: 190–91). Afropolitanism accounts, to a large extent, for the new African identities, particularly in the western world. However, proponents further recognize the centrality of new media technologies in promoting an African identity and rejecting any 'identity of victimhood' (Mbembe 2005).

While an individual would move across places and cultures and still retain a 'privileged bond' (Gehrmann 2015: 62) to the 'motherland', the Internet is recognized as a site for the construction of an African identity by connecting communities that 'subscribe to Afropolitan values and culture' (Abebe 2015). Afropolitanism has, however, been criticized for being class-based, western-funded and promoting commodification, leading Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina to assert, *I am Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan*.³ The contention over the African identity is aptly described by Kasanda:

[...] identity, including African identity, is not a simple data set given once and for all. On the contrary, identity involves constant configurations that include elements of various kinds, as for example social and cultural representations, social and political ratios of force, individual, and collective choices.

(2016: 192)

Castells, in fact, reminds us that the 'search for identity, becomes a source of meaning, especially when local and national identities are overlooked and undermined in favour of global flow of power and images' (2010: 3). Additionally, despite the possibilities that technology provides to discuss abstract issues, the search for identity is hardly new because in a fleeting world where everything from organizations and institutions to social movements come together and dissolve a national bond, cultural identity provides a sense of stability and security (Castells 2010).

Just as nationalism can be seen as a collective identity to assert an autonomous identity against other nations, so the present day individual and collective identity is a 'resistance against globalisation' (Castells 2010: 11). Today, this self-identity is also considered a mark of asserting control over how one is seen by the world at large. However, even though modern African ethnicity has been considered a social construction for some time (Berman 1998),

2. It was first coined by Nigerian-Ghanaian writer Taiye Selasi who referred to 'Afropolitans' as 'not citizens, but Africans of the world' (2005: par. 3).
3. Wainaina's speech to the African Studies Association, UK in 2012 has generated an interesting discourse on Afropolitanism (see Santana 2015).

4. It was started to promote a students' movement against the statue of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in March 2015.
5. The hashtag was used to protest against South Africa's President Jacob Zuma over corruption.
6. Kenyan Twitter users used the hashtag in July 2015 to criticise Cable News Network (CNN) and other western news outlets over negative coverage of Africa.
7. A humorous virtual 'war' among West Africans over a spicy rice staple.
8. Tweets that followed the hashtag imagined Africa as a school and different nations as its students (Gharib 2016).

present day technology and the processes of globalization may provide the conditions for reimagining a united African identity (Wachanga and Mazrui 2011).

In his study of online media platforms in Africa, Ojo (2006) identifies 'solidarity and shared interests' as a driving force for the creation and promotion of online communities. Other recent studies have shown that media technologies such as Twitter expand the capacity for 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991) to connect and engage. Gruzd et al. (2011) see signs of 'real community' on Twitter on two levels – the collective and personal. The collective community on Twitter is bound by 'Twitter's norms, language, techniques, and governing structure' yet is also personal because users 'imagine they are following and talking to unique and identifiable tweeps' (Gruzd et al. 2011: 1312–13).

Although Ojo (2006) underscores the significant increasing ease of civic engagement online, he argues that the Internet has 'revived old rivalries and prejudices along religious, political, cultural, gender, ethnic, and racial lines' (Ojo 2006: 178), many of which were brought to prominence during colonial rule (Tazi 2014). Indeed, online engagement may not necessarily be different from real-life encounters, and hence social differences still matter and remain manifest online; possibly even exacerbated in some cases. Furthermore, Internet accessibility is still poor in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, while the use of social media for example, Facebook, is still low (see ITU 2017) while engagement on digital platforms is still restricted to mostly the urban populations. Here it is however important to note that WhatsApp is increasingly being acknowledged as widespread and a platform for political discourse and participation in some African nations (Omanga 2019).

TWITTER AND HUMOUR IN AFRICA

Previous studies have shown that the uptake of new media technologies such as Twitter is a consequence of low 'entry barriers' (Benkler 2006) and the attractiveness of the 'effective networked power' (Couldry 2014). This, perhaps, could explain the vibrant Twittersphere in several African countries marked by the use of hashtags to generate diverse discussions (see Portland-Communications 2015). Three key developments have marked the use of Twitter in Africa in the past two years: popular hashtag movements, the rise of online communities and the use of humour in hashtag conversations on the platform (Tully and Ekdale 2014; Bosch 2016; Nothias and Cheruiyot 2019).

Twitter hashtags in Africa have addressed social, political, cultural and everyday life issues. Some of the popular hashtags have been used to mobilize protest against racism, governments and politicians, such as #RhodesMustFall⁴ and #ZumaMustFall⁵; to criticize the media, for example, #SomeoneTellCNN⁶; to engage in entertaining chatter, for example, #JollofWars⁷ or #IfAfricaWasABar (which also inspired a similar hashtag in 2016, #IfAfricaWasASchool⁸). Indeed, Twitter has recently generated interest among scholars over its potential to promote deliberation and drive social change (Ogola 2015; Nyamnjoh 2016).

Apart from driving daily conversations about diverse sociopolitical issues that define Africans' daily life, recent studies show how Twitter promotes civic engagement among the youth in Africa (Tully and Ekdale 2014; Bosch 2016; Mancu 2016). This form of citizen participation has been marked by engagement in serious issues as well as amusing conversations. In the study of Twitter use by Kenyans, Tully and Ekdale conclude that 'playful engagement' on the platform is promoting deliberation as users 'infuse developmental agendas in their comments, actions and interactions' (2014: 68).

As a conversational device on social media, humour – as well as parodies, memes or sarcasm – provide content for repurposing and sharing across networks of followers.

Humour on social media has a *spreadable* attribute that can spur creativity, interactivity and participation on social networks (Jenkins et al. 2013). There is also the potential that the network made possible by social media will create ‘real communities’ out of common activities and the connections between users (Gruzd et al. 2011: 204). According to Jenkins et al. (2013), humour ‘[...] involves exchanging judgments about the world and defining oneself either with or against others’ (2013: 204). Humour, in general, is said to play a role in preventing conflicts and creating a sense of camaraderie:

[...] humour may be used in order to break tension, to create a sense of community, to build solidarity through in-group inclusion and out-group exclusion, as a method of coping with injustice or trauma, as a survival tactic, as a form of political resistance, for therapeutic ends, and for social commentary and critique.

(Zimbardo 2014: 61)

Studies of humour in political cartoons or comic strips in Africa show it is utilized mostly by the oppressed populations as a form of resistance against political misrule and to ‘cope with the rigours of everyday life’ (Obadare 2009: 246; Obadare 2010). Those subverted find humour to be a source of empowerment (Obadare 2009; Taiwo 2016), but its use also expresses the sense of frustration at the inability of the oppressed to change their current sociopolitical status (Willems 2011). As is detailed later in the paper, the study illustrates the various functions that humour can play in communication, be it face-to-face or in the Twittersphere.

To further interrogate the question of whether an identity of a new Pan-Africanism is emerging through Twitter in Africa, we examine how the hashtag #IfAfricaWasABar was used, as promoted by the initiator, Siyanda Mohutsiwa. Mohutsiwa’s tweet was motivated more by a curiosity of how Pan-Africanism could be defined, rather than an understanding of the concept. Following Mohutsiwa’s motivation, the overall question guiding us in this process is: What kind of Pan-Africanism does Twitter promote through the use of #IfAfricaWasABar?

METHOD AND DATA

Motswana writer Siyanda Mohutsiwa began the hashtag #IfAfricaWasABar on 27 July 2015. Using #IfAfricaWasABar as a search term, we generated an HTML snapshot of 5513 tweets on 5 July 2016. The collected tweets were originally created between 27 July 2015 and 29 April 2016. The HTML file was later converted to a CSV file, therefore making the tweets available on a spreadsheet for analysis. Unlike the manual collection of tweets, taking HTML snapshots ensures the metadata for every tweet is captured for analysis. Each tweet came with several fields including Twitter ID, username, retweet count, favourite count, the post, link to embedded image, language and time zone.

Since the aim of the paper was to understand the popular notion and articulations of Pan-Africanism, retweeting (frequency of the tweet being forwarded with the potential for a wider reach) was considered a mark of approval or an idea that was perceived to be significant enough to be discussed further. Therefore, we were interested in sampling tweets with the highest number

of retweets. For our sample, we selected for qualitative analysis only tweets retweeted more than ten times. The rationale behind this sampling was that retweets are 'reactive act in response to a comment and a gauge of popularity' (Highfield 2015: 2714). Out of the 5,513 tweets, selecting those retweeted more than ten times narrowed our data to 200 tweets, for which the highest number was 1,298 retweets.

Re-tweets provide a suitable indicator of visibility of posts on Twitter, while also constituting a 'conversational ecology' where a subject is tackled consistently (boyd et al. 2010: 1). To analyse the data, we employed a detailed textual analysis in examining and interpreting the sample of 200 tweets. We searched for themes that emerged from the tweets through 'careful reading and re-reading of the data' to find recurrent ones (Daniel 2011: 419). The steps we took in this process consisted of copying all the tweets to a spreadsheet, after which we re-evaluated the text for the themes, and then extracted concepts for the categories. In the sample of 200 tweets we analysed, the three most re-tweeted posts were the following:

– #IfAfricaWasABar Europeans would spike all the drinks then sell antidotes to everyone at a later date.

(Retweeted 1,298 times)

– #IfAfricawasABar South Africa would be that girl insisting she is not African.

(Retweeted 871 times)

– #IfAfricaWasABar Zimbabwe would be that unemployed guy who can surprisingly afford to turn up everyday.

(Retweeted 628 times)

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Firstly, analysis of the above-mentioned tweets indicates a combination of concepts: race, nationality, culture and stereotypes. However, it must be acknowledged that this interaction and dialogue between Twitter users as a response to Pan-Africanism points to an already existing imagined community of Africans. The bar, according to most tweeters, represented the continent, with the patrons representing characters mostly from African nations. The hashtag exchange inspired Twitter users to describe fellow Africans and share knowledge about social life, politics, culture and personalities of Africans from different parts of the continent. English was indicated in the language field of the metadata generated from Twitter for all 5,513 tweets we collected, while all the tweets were in English except one that was in Dutch. The broad themes that were identified centred around the tone of the tweets and how Africa was imagined, regarding issues, places and people.

THE TONE OF THE TWEETS: ALL IN JEST

When analysing #IfAfricaWasABar tweets, we were interested in their tone. Tweets focussing on pre-conceived and well-established stereotypes of being an African in general, or on any specific nationality were labelled as humorous while others were labelled as neutral or non-humorous. Tweets that considered Africa as a place or reflected on African identity were categorized as the ones commenting on an imagined community. The majority of

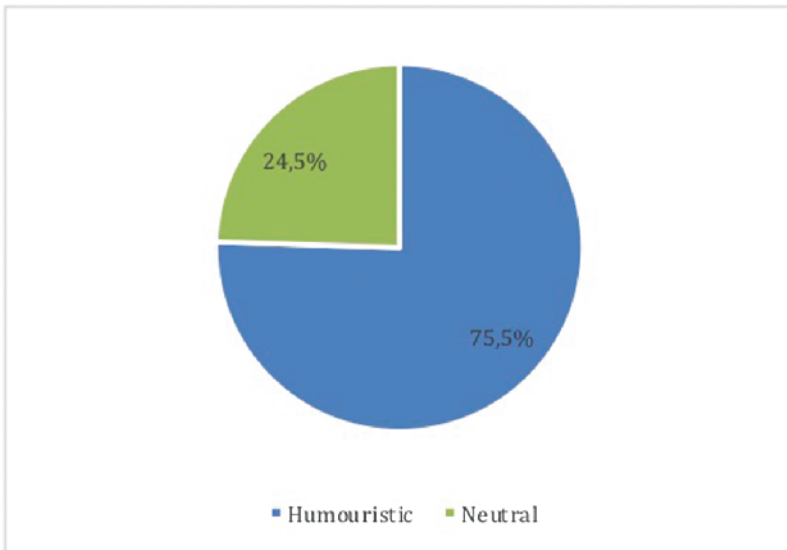


Figure 1: The tones of the tweets for #IfAfricaWasABar.

the tweets (75.5 per cent) took a humorous tone (see Figure 1 below), while the tweets that did not express a humorous tone made up 24.5 per cent, and mostly featured news headlines and links to the news articles or videos.

The humorous tweets mostly featured stereotypes. They included generalizations of Africans as victims of colonialism and the helplessness in which they find themselves. Others implied that Africans are living in perpetual poverty, are underdeveloped, are always dependent on the West, or have colonized minds. Some African nations were marked as victims of perpetual disasters such as the Ebola that afflicted some western-African countries in 2014, as shown for example in this tweet:

- #IfAfricaWasABar Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone would always be given the weird eye every time they coughed... you know that's true.
(Retweeted 19 times)

National stereotypes were implied through the jokes made about national characters and cultures. Nigerians were presented as fraudulent or crooked; Kenyans were tagged as drunkards, corrupt or dishonest; South Africans labelled as insecure and xenophobic; Somalis as dangerous; Ghanaians as disloyal and the Congolese and Moroccans as obsessed with the French or snobbish (because of Morocco's decision to opt out of the Organization of African Unity in 1984). The following tweets that were retweeted 22 and 23 times respectively illustrate global image of some stereotypes. The first tweet refers to Moroccans' self-image as being non-African, even though Europe sees them as 'African' and the latter tweet refers to 'Nigerian prince' (e-mail) scams:

- #IfAfricaWasABar Morocco would sulk, leave because he thinks he's better than everyone else only to be refused entry in the European bar.
(Retweeted 22 times)

- #IfAfricaWasABar Nigeria would pay everything from stolen credit card. (Retweeted 23 times)

Jokes were also made about serious issues like disasters. However, there were some positive generalizations about African nations. The tweets implied that certain nations had polite or attractive people, for example:

- #IfAfricaWasABar knowing how polite Tanzanians are, she would take off her shoes at the bar's entrance. (Retweeted 30 times)

AFRICA IMAGINED

We analysed tweets for the issues raised that described Africa and Africans. The highest proportion of tweets (30.5%) referred to issues regarding traits and the perceived characters of Africans from different parts of the continent (see Figure 2). Other prominent issues relating to Africa included: economic crises and poverty (11.5%); colonialism and the influence of the West in Africa 10.5%; geographical and political isolation of some African countries (9%); African unity (9%); politics and governance (6.5%); political conflicts (4.5%) and Africans in the Diaspora (3%). Others were xenophobia (1%), disasters (0.5%) and sports accounting for 1.5% of the tweets.

The fact that the highest number of tweets constituted those referring to national cultures and generalized characters of individuals from different African countries could be explained by Siyanda Mohutsiwa’s first tweet which urged tweeters to imagine Africa as a bar with various characters representing African nations. What was a marked feature of such tweets was the creativity of the jokes that were tweeted and shared. The tweets referred to characters of Africans in both a positive and negative light with some inconsistencies in the way African nations were described. At one point a Nigerian ‘would buy everyone several rounds with money it had borrowed’ and then another time he/she ‘would be the DJ’.

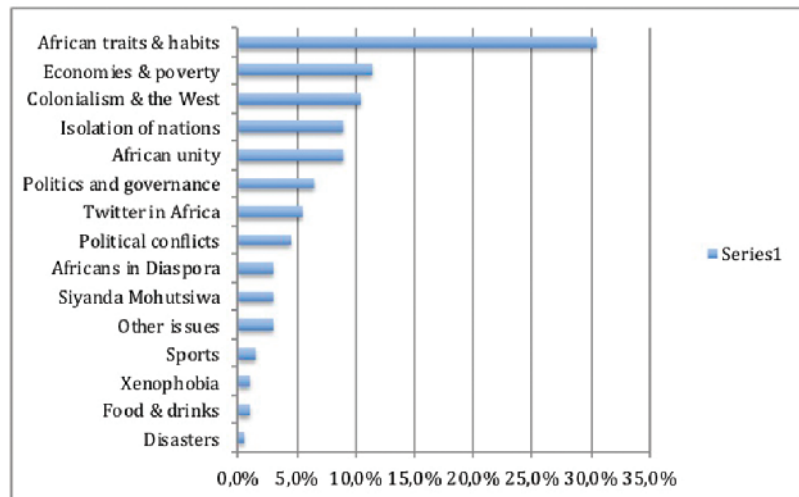


Figure 2: Percentage of tweets mentioning issues relating to Africa.

Other tweets raised issues to do with economic crises and poverty in African countries. Tweeters made fun of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe and the resultant hyperinflation in 2008 or the high cost of education and poverty in South Africa. Some issues were also presented as positives about the continent, such as Rwanda's economic success and the Tanzanian government's austerity measures. Additionally, broader economic issues afflicting the African continent were mentioned. They included poverty and underdevelopment, reliance on western aid and Chinese loans, as well as Africa's trade imbalance:

- #IfAfricaWasABar it would be sitting in a field full of barley, vineyard grapes and sugar for rum [...] but would import its drinks.
(Retweeted 13 times)
- #IfAfricaWasABar, it would be funded by the World Bank, built by Chinese, managed by Lebanese and supplied by South Africans.
(Retweeted 10 times)

Other tweets identified Africa's colonial historical challenges as well as neo-colonialism. Tweets made jokes about the exploration of Africa and its partition among European nations in the nineteenth century:

- #IfAfricaWasABar a European would wander in one day then say he owns the bar because he 'discovered' it.
(Retweeted 121 times)

The problems of the postcolonial states also featured in the tweets and included: exploitation of Africa's resources by old players (European nations and the United States) and new ones (China); intellectual property theft by the West; African states' dependency syndrome; western policies controlling African economies (such as through the Bretton Woods institutions); misrepresentation of Africa by global news networks; and Africa's colonial hangover and dependency syndrome. The most retweeted post in our sample (1,298 times) referred to Europe's exploitative mission in Africa (cited earlier). The tweet that referred to misrepresentation of Africa in the West seemed to have resonated with many users, due to the commonality of colonial history. The same applies to the following tweet, that reflects how tweeters were aware of being represented as a mass, rather than being reflected through the diversity that Africa holds:

- #IfAfricaWasABar it would have 54 branches, but Westerners (esp Americans) would think there was ONE bar Africa.
(Retweeted 10 times)

In addition, the geographical or political isolation of some African countries became the cause of jokes for tweeters. The countries of the Maghreb region – Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia – were mentioned in several tweets as different from the rest of Africa, and either felt odd in the African bar or took on a snobbish attitude:

- #IfAfricaWasABar Egypt, Libya, Morocco & Tunisia would be those girls that complain that they don't like it here, they club up the road.
(Retweeted 482 times)

Island countries and small ones were also mentioned as being isolated from the real Africa. These countries included Madagascar, Seychelles, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Lesotho. The following tweet refers to the fact that Madagascar is off the African mainland:

- #IfAfricaWasABar Madagascar would be that friend who couldn't get into the bar.

(Retweeted 12 times)

Other issues mentioned were: the successes of Africans in the diaspora; xenophobia, in reference to attacks on African immigrants in South Africa; sports and the prowess of some African nations in football and athletics; and food and drinks that define Africa such as Jollof rice (a staple in West Africa), Star Radler (Nigeria's beer brand) and Tusker (Kenya's beer brand).

WHO IS AN AFRICAN?

In our analysis we were further interested in the description of an *African*. We coded the location of tweeters and the African countries mentioned, to ascertain who considered themselves qualified to comment on *Africanness*. Tweets from the North America time zones (see Figure 3) made up the highest percentage (30.5 per cent).

The tweets from South American time zones represented 28.5% of the tweets while Africa time zones constituted 21%, indicating that a maximum number of residents from the sample of 200 tweets resided outside Africa. Europe, Middle East and Asia represented 7.5%, 3% and 0.5%, respectively. Of all the 200 tweets analysed, eighteen did not have time zone information.

Since we selected a sample of the most retweeted tweets, the location may not be representative of all the posts that utilized the #IfAfricaWasABar. At the same time, we recognize that the profile locations are self-reported and therefore may not necessarily be accurate. Time zones UCT (Coordinated Universal Time) – are determined by Twitter and user account settings. They

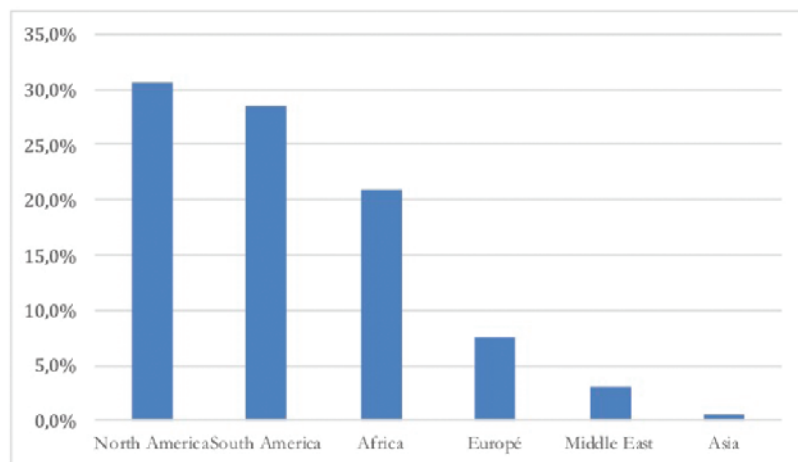


Figure 3: The location of tweeters as represented by time zones.

can be useful for approximating regions but are problematic. While exploring methodological challenges associated with locational information on Twitter, Graham et al. (2014) conclude that many users' settings may be entered incorrectly. In this study, we were interested in determining whether tweets were sent from within the African continent or not. We omitted tweets without time zone information (fifteen out of the 200 tweets).

Although our intention was not to check the time zones against the profile locations, we were interested in getting a glimpse of specific locations self-reported by tweeters. Overall, global capitals reported by users included London, Washington DC, Toronto and Doha. African cities mentioned included Nairobi in Kenya, Kigali in Rwanda, Abuja and Lagos in Nigeria, Kampala in Uganda and Accra in Ghana, as well as Johannesburg and Durban in South Africa. Indeed, Portland Communications' studies based on geolocated tweets in Africa have found a running pattern of Twitter usage in Africa where annually a big percentage of tweets are sent from mainly English-speaking countries – Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Ghana – as well as Arabic-speaking Egypt (see Portland-Communications 2015). In our sample, Arabic-speaking Egypt did not feature as a location cited by users, perhaps explained by the fact that the hashtag and the tweets that followed it were mostly in English.

Along with the location of twitter users, we coded all mentions of African countries. The most mentioned countries were mostly anglophone with the first four being, Nigeria (10.5%), Ghana (7.2%), Uganda (7.2%) and Kenya (6.6%). In total, 34 out of the 54 African countries were mentioned in the tweets sampled. There were, however, several tweets that made reference to Arabic-speaking and francophone countries. These countries included Morocco (4.6%), Egypt (3.9%), Algeria (3.3%), Tunisia (2.6%), Cote d'Ivoire (2.6%) and Mali (0.7%). The only Portuguese-speaking nation mentioned was São Tomé and Príncipe with 0.7%.

The bar could have involved participants with access to new technologies. It was also apparent that there was an imagination of a modern bar – where the drinks are served on the counter, or at a table by bartenders, and include wines and spirits. The idea of a local village beer joint (under a tree at the village where men gather in the evenings to sip liquor from a pot using straws made from reeds) was out of the picture for most tweeters. The tweet exchange suggested that the engagement involved the affluent, urban and perhaps young Africans.

Furthermore, we analysed the tweets for specific personalities mentioned for their association with Africa (see Table 1). The rationale for this was also to trace a theme of Pan-Africanism through recognition of common heroes, and famous personalities that either hail from Africa or are associated with a Pan-African identity. Siyanda Mohutsiwa, the initiator of the tweets, received more mentions, mostly in direct references to her tweets about the hashtag. Other personalities mentioned were African leaders – Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe's President), Jacob Zuma (South Africa's President) and Omar al-Bashir (Sudan's President). Jokes made about the leaders referred to the politics in their nations. Mugabe was mocked for overstaying in power, while Zuma was linked to corruption and al-Bashir was teased over his indictment at the International Criminal Court in The Hague:

- #IfAfricaWasABar Bashir is the guy everybody hides when the cops come in looking for him.

(Retweeted 58 times)

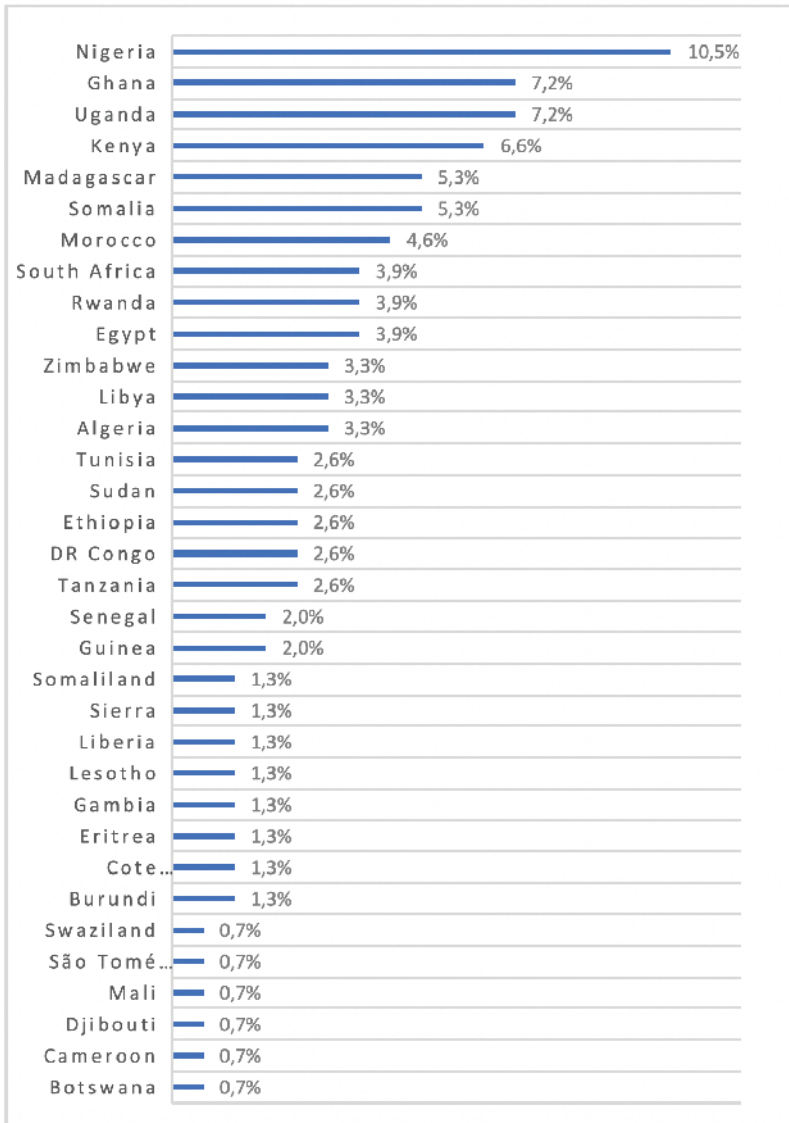


Figure 4: Frequency of mention of African countries.

- #IfAfricaWasABar Mugabe would be the guy who keeps requesting the DJ to play Get down.

(Retweeted 569 times)

Another leader mentioned was former US President Obama whose jokes centred around his success in the United States, influence in Africa and how Kenyans saw him as their 'best export' to the West:

- #IfAfricaWasABar Obama is the light skinned cousin that made it to university who orders a sprite & lectures u on the dangers of alcoholism.

(Retweeted 284 times)

Personalities	Mentions
Siyanda Mohutsiwa	7
Robert Mugabe	4
Barack Obama	3
Jacob Zuma	1
Omar al-Bashir	1
Alex Song	1
Bill Cosby	1

Table 1: Frequency of mentions of personalities through #IfAfricaWasABar.

- Kenyans using the Obama name nonstop to pick chicks as if the west ever cared about them #IfAfricaWasABar.

(Retweeted 14 times)

Obama's African heritage was more pronounced than the fact that he was African American. Similarly, a tweet that mentioned African American actor and stand-up comedian Bill Cosby appears to have been made in jest by suggesting that: '#IfAfricawasABar Nigeria would be Bill Cosby' (retweeted thirteen times), perhaps in reference to his character or the allegations of sexual assault against him in 2016. Another personality tweeters mentioned was Cameroonian footballer Alex Song.

DISCUSSION

In an increasingly shrinking world due to technology, identity is usually seen through a universal lens that focuses on the macro rather than the micro image, which might have been the reason behind #IfAfricaWasABar – to imply Africa as one entity, a bar, that allows entry to all nations of the African continent.

In our analysis, we found that the Twittersphere was dominated by participants from anglophone countries and those of the diaspora (not living in Africa), indicating that Pan-Africanism is still a discussion that does not include the common man in Africa. In fact, the differences in opinions of participants allowed for a range of views to be expressed, from collective memories of colonialism to focusing on differences in various nations. So, while the concept of African unity on an emotional level of a collective memory cannot be ruled out, since the most retweeted tweet referred to Africa's colonial past, something that almost all African nations share, the next most retweeted post was about xenophobia, in reference to violence against African immigrants mostly in South Africa. This reveals that Africa is certainly a single entity on one level, but with distinct identities that are still heavily contested.

In fact, the most retweeted tweets concerned the themes of colonial past, xenophobia, dictatorships and governmental failures and successes of African migrants in the West through, for example, Barack Obama becoming US President. With such vast differences, and with no mention of the issues of gatekeeping in the bar such as rules of entry, fees and who controls it, it could be argued the serious issues highlighted were only cited in jest. The exchange on Twitter therefore did not indicate unity of various nations in Africa in tackling common challenges. However, it must be acknowledged that with a different wording or different concept used to discuss Pan-Africanism; for

example, a school or university as opposed to a bar, the kind of interaction might have been completely different.

The Pan-Africanism referred to through the tweets was continental – a unity of countries South and North of Sahara, although Twitter users mainly in the diaspora were part of the conversation. The tweets did not address racism but instead focused on the oppression of the colonialists, exploitation of African resources and poverty in Africa, as well as misrule of the post-independent African nations. While race was not apparent, tweeters mentioned the injustices meted on Africans by western powers as well as xenophobic attacks against African migrants, often reported in South Africa. Further, some tweets playfully characterized the racial differences between the predominant populations of North Africa, mostly of Arab descent, from those of sub-Saharan Africa. Despite cultural and racial difference between the mostly black sub-Saharan Africa and the North, tweeters still identified common political and social challenges as continental. The thinking around a new form of Pan-Africanism is that its solidarity is directed towards addressing common challenges such as human rights as well as social and political injustices (Njubi 2001; Kasanda 2016). Instead, the traditional understanding of Pan-Africanism emphasizes racial solidarity against white oppression.

Indeed, the tweets showed an engagement with the critical issues that afflict Africans today, and humour appeared to be the coping mechanism or an escapism strategy in the face of a harsh sociopolitical environment, findings which are supported by studies of humour in Africa (see e.g., Obadare 2010). Furthermore, the tweets reflected creativity of the tweeters in constructing an image of Africans (as represented by different nations).

The tweets played up negative attributes as well as misconceptions about African nationalities. Stereotypes provide fodder for generalisable jokes about Africa, especially if the motive is to catch the attention of a diverse group. In our sample, the most retweeted of the exchanges employed jokes from social or political issues covered in the news and available on various online platforms. But more than just providing comic relief, tweets engaged humour in highlighting sociopolitical issues such as democracy, political conflicts, economic crises or xenophobia.

Humour here, referring to a bar, became a powerful metaphor for understanding the 'nature and dynamics of social relationships' (Obadare 2009: 245). Humour therefore might be one way of coping with the abundance of negative news of a continent in distress over corruption, ethnic conflicts, epidemic diseases and resource exploitation by western and eastern powers.

However, while stereotypes in themselves suggest differences, jokes about them could instead suggest the solidarity of participants who see themselves as having common problems, challenges, cultures or attributes (Taiwo 2016). Furthermore, by actively creating the jokes about a common subject and addressing a particular group, tweeters imagine themselves as a community with shared interests and a willingness to engage (Gruzd et al. 2011). Humour has been shown to have a unifying element in that it makes people who engage in it see themselves as sharing common attributes (Solomon 1996; Andrew 2012). Humour's role in a social relationship is important here because, as Jenkins et al., argue, it is 'a vehicle by which people articulate and validate their relationships with those with whom they share the joke' (2013: 204). Yet, humour is sometimes accused of trivializing serious political issues or becoming an obstacle to constructive engagement and discourse (Jenkins 2008).

CONCLUSION

#IfAfricaWasABar was an attempt at imagining the African continent as one. Twitter users engaging with this hashtag imagined themselves as one community discussing issues pertaining to African identities in both a light-hearted and serious manner.

Our findings show that the collective action to discuss Pan-Africanism through the metaphor of a 'bar' does not present a representative picture, due to the nature of the participants, who are primarily from anglophone countries and have access to technology. Our findings demonstrate that the type of conversations on Twitter through the hashtag were about sub-Saharan Africa, confined to English-speaking countries and originating outside of Africa, indicating input from the diaspora. It is important to note here that Twitter by its very nature is an English dominant platform, like the Internet broadly speaking, and this perhaps explains why anglophone countries had a high presence in the conversations.

The thread that runs across all forms of Pan-Africanisms is a solidarity that emanates from common social, political and economic challenges endured by individuals who identify themselves as African, whether through cultural connection, geographical location or similar colonial background (Kasanda 2016). Therefore, beyond shared geographical, cultural or genetic roots, there exist common aspirations for social equity, justice and freedom (Kasanda 2016; Musila 2016). In our findings, we see a new kind of Pan-African identity discourse whose agenda of social justice and freedom is best articulated through social media conversations. Skin colour or ancestral roots as factors of unity appear to fade on digital platforms, while focus shifts to globalized social and political challenges. A common identity hinged on shared challenges does not necessarily imply harmony and coexistence as studies show, for example, 'digitized hate speech' based on ethnicity in some African countries (Kimotheo and Nyaga 2016). At the same time, just as any other identity, Pan-Africanism is not a monolith concept and incorporates both self-effacing humour and incisive social critique to bind Twitter users in a community that reflects itself as it defines itself.

Finally, more than humorous conversations, the tweets about Africa raise issues that people grapple with every day such as political conflicts, corruption, poverty and economic crises. Yet Twitter affords users an imagined community through which they could collectively entertain themselves but also define who they are and what challenges they share. While ideas on one African identity may not have coalesced on the Twittersphere, there is, however, the danger that Twitter may reinforce stereotypes, since our analysis of the #IfAfricaWasABar tweets demonstrates that Africans refer to each other with what appear to be generalizations.

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