Xenophobia and the Social Construction of the "African Other" In Post-Apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Xenophobia has remained a persistent and destabilizing feature of South Africa's post-apartheid social landscape, manifesting most visibly in recurrent episodes of violence against migrants from other African countries. This study examined xenophobia as a socially constructed phenomenon through which African migrants are constituted as the "African Other" and positioned outside the moral boundaries of national belonging. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, the study conceptualized hostility toward migrants as an outcome of social categorization, in-group consolidation, and out-group derogation embedded in historical legacies, institutional practices, and everyday discourses of citizenship and entitlement. Using a qualitative interpretive design and secondary data drawn from academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports covering the period 1994–2024, the study employed thematic analysis to identify dominant patterns in the construction of migrant identity. The findings indicated that African migrants are systematically produced as non-belonging subjects through legal and symbolic classifications, framed as economic and moral threats through scapegoating narratives, and subjected to normalized forms of exclusion and episodic violence legitimized by weak institutional accountability and community-level moral justifications. The study further demonstrated that these processes serve important identity-stabilizing functions by reinforcing national in-group cohesion under conditions of socio-economic insecurity. Beyond their domestic consequences, such constructions undermine the symbolic and practical foundations of African integration by weakening Pan-African identity, eroding inter-state trust, and constraining support for free movement and regional cooperation frameworks. The article concludes that xenophobia in South Africa constitutes not merely a social pathology but a patterned form of identity politics that reflects unresolved tensions in post-apartheid nation-building and poses a structural challenge to the realization of continental integration goals.

Keywords: Xenophobia; African Other; Social Identity Theory; Afrophobia; National Identity; Post-Apartheid South Africa; African Integration**.**

INTRODUCTION

The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a profound political and symbolic rupture in South Africa's history. The dismantling of institutionalized racial segregation was accompanied by a powerful moral narrative of reconciliation, inclusivity, and renewed commitment to Pan-African solidarity. South Africa's re-entry into continental and global affairs was framed not merely as a diplomatic normalization but as a return to Africa, grounded in the historical support that African states had provided to the anti-apartheid struggle. In this context, the democratic transition was widely interpreted as inaugurating a new phase of African unity, cosmopolitanism, and shared postcolonial destiny. Yet, three decades later, this emancipatory promise is sharply contradicted by the persistence and periodic eruption of xenophobic violence, overwhelmingly directed at migrants from other African countries. These recurrent episodes, occurring most notably in 2008, 2015, 2019, and 2021, reveal a deep-seated social pathology in which fellow Africans are constructed as alien, dangerous, and undeserving of belonging within the post-apartheid nation.

This contradiction poses a fundamental theoretical and empirical puzzle. How has a society whose democratic identity was forged through transnational African solidarity come to reproduce intense forms of exclusion against

African migrants? Why are foreign Africans discursively and socially positioned as the "Other" in a polity that constitutionally enshrines human dignity, equality, and non-racialism? Existing explanations often privilege proximate causes such as unemployment, poverty, crime, or weak migration governance. While these factors are undoubtedly significant, they are insufficient to account for the durability, moral intensity, and symbolic coherence of xenophobic sentiment. Xenophobia in South Africa cannot be adequately understood as a series of episodic reactions to material scarcity alone; rather, it must be theorized as a socially constructed phenomenon rooted in historical memory, political discourse, identity formation, and structural inequality.

This study advances the argument that xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa is best understood through the lens of the social construction of the "African Other." Drawing on social constructionist, postcolonial, and social identity perspectives, it conceptualizes xenophobia not as a spontaneous expression of fear or competition, but as the outcome of historically sedimented processes of categorization, boundary-making, and symbolic exclusion. The "African Other" emerges through discursive and institutional practices that differentiate citizens from non-citizens, insiders from outsiders, and legitimate from illegitimate claimants to space, resources, and recognition. These distinctions are neither natural nor inevitable; they are produced, normalized, and reproduced through social interaction, political rhetoric, legal regimes, and everyday practices of belonging.

Social constructionism, as articulated by Berger and Luckmann, emphasizes that social reality is constituted through shared meanings that become institutionalized and taken for granted. Applied to migration and identity, this perspective foregrounds how categories such as "foreigner," "illegal," or "migrant" acquire moral and political valence through processes of labeling and typification. In the South African context, African migrants are frequently represented not merely as non-citizens, but as culturally inferior, economically parasitic, and criminogenic. Such representations crystallize into a collective common sense that legitimizes exclusionary attitudes and, in extreme cases, physical violence. The "African Other" is thus not simply a demographic presence but a symbolic figure onto which anxieties about social change, economic precarity, and national belonging are projected.

Postcolonial theory further illuminates the historical and epistemic foundations of this process. The construction of Otherness is a constitutive feature of colonial modernity, through which hierarchies of race, civilization, and worth were established and normalized. Although apartheid formally ended, many of its epistemic structures remain embedded in social consciousness. The apartheid state not only racialized space and opportunity but also cultivated a sense of South African exceptionalism, positioning the country as economically and culturally distinct from the rest of the continent. This legacy has persisted in subtle but powerful ways, informing contemporary narratives that depict South Africa as more "modern," "developed," or "orderly" than its African neighbors. Within such a symbolic economy, African migrants are readily cast as bearers of backwardness, disorder, and threat, thereby reproducing a hierarchical intra-African Othering that mirrors colonial racial logics.

The social construction of the "African Other" is also deeply intertwined with processes of social identity formation. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their membership in social groups and that positive in-group distinctiveness is often maintained through the derogation of out-groups. In post-apartheid South Africa, the project of nation-building has entailed the consolidation of a territorially bounded civic identity, anchored in citizenship and legal belonging. While officially inclusive in its constitutional articulation, this identity has, in practice, been accompanied by the reification of boundaries between "South Africans" and "foreigners." African migrants, particularly those from neighboring countries, are positioned as an out-group whose presence is perceived to dilute resources, undermine social order, and threaten cultural cohesion. Through everyday talk, institutional practices, and political discourse, these distinctions are naturalized, fostering an "us versus them" mentality that renders exclusion morally intelligible.

Economic insecurity and structural inequality provide the material conditions within which these symbolic processes acquire emotional force. South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies globally, with high unemployment, especially among youth, persistent poverty, and stark spatial inequalities rooted in apartheid geography. Frustration–aggression theory offers a useful psychological complement to social constructionist analysis by explaining how blocked aspirations and perceived deprivation generate aggressive impulses that are often displaced onto vulnerable and visible targets. African migrants, concentrated in informal settlements, low-

wage sectors, and small-scale entrepreneurship, become proximate and symbolically available objects of blame. Yet, crucially, frustration alone does not automatically translate into xenophobia. It is through socially constructed narratives of causality and culpability that economic distress is reinterpreted as the consequence of migrant "invasion" or "exploitation," thereby legitimizing scapegoating and collective hostility.

Political and institutional discourses further entrench this construction of Otherness. Migration governance in South Africa has been characterized by bureaucratic inefficiencies, securitized rhetoric, and uneven enforcement, which collectively produce a regime of precarious legality for many African migrants. Official categories of "illegal" or "undocumented" are imbued with moral stigma, reinforcing perceptions of criminality and undeservingness. Political actors, particularly in moments of electoral competition or social unrest, have at times mobilized nationalist and exclusionary rhetoric, implicitly or explicitly attributing socio-economic problems to foreign presence. Such discursive practices do not merely reflect popular prejudice; they actively participate in its production by authoritatively defining who belongs and who does not.

The social construction of the "African Other" thus operates at the intersection of historical memory, identity politics, economic marginalization, and state practice. It is sustained through what Bourdieu would term symbolic power: the capacity to impose categories of perception that are misrecognized as natural. Once internalized, these categories structure everyday interactions, shaping how migrants are seen, spoken about, and treated. Xenophobia, in this sense, is not an episodic aberration but a patterned outcome of deeper processes of social classification and moral boundary-drawing.

This phenomenon carries profound implications beyond domestic social cohesion. It directly undermines the normative and practical foundations of African integration. Continental and regional frameworks, such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area, are premised on the principles of free movement, mutual recognition, and Pan-African solidarity. The construction of African migrants as threatening Others within one of the continent's most influential states erodes these principles at both symbolic and material levels. Symbolically, it fractures the imagined community of Africa by privileging narrow national belonging over shared continental identity. Materially, it disrupts mobility, weakens trust between states, and generates diplomatic tensions that compromise cooperative projects. From a neo-functionalist perspective, xenophobia represents a form of negative social spillover, in which domestic identity conflicts impede the functional integration expected to arise from economic and political interdependence.

By foregrounding the social construction of the "African Other," this study seeks to move beyond reductive accounts that attribute xenophobia solely to poverty, crime, or policy failure. Instead, it situates xenophobic attitudes and practices within a broader theoretical framework that emphasizes the production of meaning, the politics of belonging, and the استمرار of postcolonial hierarchies in contemporary African societies. The central contention is that xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa is not merely a reaction to the presence of migrants but a manifestation of an unresolved crisis of identity, in which the boundaries of the nation are continually re-drawn through the exclusion of those deemed not fully "of the nation," even when they are undeniably of the continent.

In advancing this argument, the study contributes to scholarship on migration, nationalism, and African integration by demonstrating how processes of Othering operate within postcolonial states that simultaneously espouse universalist ideals and reproduce exclusionary practices. It underscores the need to interrogate not only the material conditions of migration but also the symbolic and discursive structures through which belonging is constructed and denied. Ultimately, understanding xenophobia as a socially produced form of Othering reveals it to be not an anomaly within the post-apartheid order, but a constitutive tension within a national project that has yet to fully reconcile its democratic aspirations with its historical legacies and its continental identity.

Conceptual Review

This section clarifies the core concepts that structure the analysis of xenophobia and the social construction of the "African Other" in post-apartheid South Africa. It situates these concepts within broader theoretical debates

on othering, identity, nationalism, and postcolonial social relations, and establishes the analytical vocabulary through which the phenomenon is interrogated.

Xenophobia and Afrophobia

Xenophobia is conventionally defined as fear, hostility, or aversion toward those perceived as foreign or non-belonging to a national community. However, in the South African context, the term assumes a more specific and paradoxical character, as hostility is directed predominantly toward migrants from other African countries rather than toward Europeans, Asians, or North Americans. This selective pattern has led scholars to employ the concept of *Afrophobia* to capture a form of intra-African othering rooted not merely in foreignness but in hierarchical constructions of African identity itself. Afrophobia thus denotes a racialized and culturalized form of xenophobia in which black African migrants are positioned as inferior, uncivilized, criminal, or economically parasitic, despite sharing continental and, in many cases, phenotypical identities with the host population.

Conceptually, xenophobia in South Africa cannot be reduced to interpersonal prejudice or episodic violence. It constitutes a social formation: a patterned system of meanings, attitudes, and practices through which foreign Africans are collectively represented as threats to security, employment, morality, and national cohesion. It is sustained through institutional classifications (legal/illegal, documented/undocumented), political discourse (citizens versus foreigners), and everyday narratives that naturalize exclusion. Xenophobia, in this sense, is both an ideology and a social practice, embedding symbolic devaluation within material relations of power.

The "African Other" and the Logic of Othering

The concept of the "Other" derives from philosophical and postcolonial traditions that examine how identities are constituted relationally through difference. Othering refers to the discursive and institutional processes through which certain groups are constructed as fundamentally different, inferior, or outside the moral community of belonging. In colonial discourse, Europe defined itself through the production of Africa as its civilizational opposite. In post-apartheid South Africa, a similar logic operates intra-continentally, whereby "South Africanness" is symbolically secured through the construction of the "African Other."

The "African Other" is not simply a migrant subject; it is a socially produced figure embodying threat, disorder, and illegitimacy. This construction relies on several interrelated mechanisms:

1. **Categorical Distinction** – the rigid separation between citizen and non-citizen as morally unequal categories;

2. **Stereotypical Fixation** – the attribution of negative collective traits such as criminality, laziness, or cultural backwardness;

3. **Moral Exclusion** – the implicit denial of full human and civic worth, rendering violence or deprivation against the out-group socially tolerable.

Through these mechanisms, African migrants are not merely positioned as outsiders but as *non-belonging subjects*, whose presence is framed as an anomaly within the national body. Othering thus functions as a technology of boundary-making through which the post-apartheid nation imagines and defends itself.

Social Construction and the Production of Belonging

From a social constructionist standpoint, categories of identity and difference are not given but produced through historically situated practices of meaning-making. Belonging is not an objective condition derived solely from geography or ancestry; it is a normative status conferred through discourse, law, and social recognition. In South Africa, the boundaries of belonging are drawn through constitutional citizenship, bureaucratic documentation, and everyday cultural narratives that define who is "from here" and who is not.

The construction of the "African Other" therefore involves the sedimentation of meanings through repeated representation and institutional reinforcement. Once stabilized, these meanings acquire the appearance of common sense, enabling society to perceive exclusion as natural rather than political. Social construction operates not only at the level of elite discourse but also through quotidian practices: language, rumor, community mobilization, and informal moral judgments. Xenophobia emerges when these constructed meanings are activated in contexts of economic stress, political uncertainty, or social change, transforming symbolic exclusion into material hostility.

National Identity and Post-Apartheid Belonging

Post-apartheid South Africa is formally grounded in a civic, non-racial conception of the nation. Yet, in practice, national identity remains territorially bounded and deeply shaped by the historical legacies of apartheid, migrant labor systems, and racialized spatial ordering. The nation is imagined as a scarce moral and economic community, within which access to rights, resources, and recognition is implicitly hierarchized. Foreign Africans are positioned at the margins of this imagined community, not merely as non-citizens but as quasi-illegitimate occupants of national space.

This process reflects a broader tension between Pan-Africanism and territorial nationalism. While the African liberation struggle was transnational and solidaristic, the postcolonial state operates through juridical and symbolic mechanisms that prioritize exclusive sovereignty and bounded citizenship. The "African Other" thus becomes the constitutive outside through which South African national identity is stabilized, even as this stabilization contradicts the normative commitments to African unity and shared postcolonial destiny.

Scapegoating, Frustration, and Symbolic Displacement

Conceptually, xenophobia also draws on the logic of scapegoating, whereby structurally generated frustrations are displaced onto socially vulnerable groups. High unemployment, inequality, and service delivery failures generate diffuse resentment, but the structural sources of these conditions are abstract and politically distant. The "African Other," already symbolically marked as illegitimate, becomes a convenient repository for blame. Scapegoating is therefore not merely psychological but socially organized, relying on pre-existing categories of difference that render certain groups plausible targets of collective anger.

Xenophobia and African Integration

Finally, the construction of the "African Other" must be situated within the broader project of African integration. Continental frameworks such as the African Union and the African Continental Free Trade Area presuppose a minimal level of mutual recognition, mobility, and shared identity. Xenophobia, as a practice of symbolic and material exclusion, undermines these foundations by fragmenting the imagined African community and reproducing hierarchical distinctions among Africans themselves. Conceptually, it represents a crisis of Pan-African belonging, in which national identity is secured through the negation of continental solidarity.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

This study is anchored on Social Identity Theory (SIT) as formulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979) as the principal theoretical lens for explaining xenophobia and the social construction of the "African Other" in post-apartheid South Africa. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and that social categorization into "in-groups" and "out-groups" is a fundamental cognitive and social process through which meaning, status, and belonging are organized. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), groups strive for positive distinctiveness, which is often achieved through comparison with and devaluation of relevant out-groups, particularly in contexts of perceived competition or threat.

Applied to the South African context, Social Identity Theory provides a robust framework for understanding how African migrants have come to be constructed as an out-group against which national identity is defined and defended in the post-apartheid era. The process of democratic nation-building has involved the consolidation of a territorially bounded civic identity centered on South African citizenship. While this identity is constitutionally inclusive, it simultaneously generates symbolic boundaries between "South Africans" and "foreigners." Through social categorization, African migrants are placed outside the moral and political community of full belonging and are perceived as less entitled to social, economic, and symbolic resources.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that in conditions of socio-economic strain, intergroup boundaries become more salient and exclusionary. South Africa's persistent unemployment, inequality, and competition over housing, informal trade, and public services intensify perceptions of zero-sum relations between citizens and non-citizens. These material pressures heighten in-group solidarity among South Africans while reinforcing negative stereotyping of migrants as job stealers, criminals, and cultural outsiders. Such representations serve to protect the positive identity of the in-group by justifying the marginalization of the out-group.

Social Identity Theory further illuminates how xenophobia operates as a collective identity practice rather than merely as individual prejudice. Through processes of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, hostility toward African migrants becomes normalized and morally legitimized as a defense of national space, resources, and identity. The "African Other" is thus socially produced as a category of non-belonging through shared narratives, everyday interactions, and institutional practices that continuously reaffirm the symbolic boundaries of the nation.

In the post-apartheid setting, these dynamics are reinforced by historical legacies of apartheid-era classification and spatial segregation, which normalized rigid boundary-making and hierarchical differentiation. Although race is no longer the formal basis of exclusion, the logic of categorical separation persists, now reorganized around nationality and legal status. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain how these inherited modes of social classification are reactivated, transforming African migrants into symbolic outsiders through whom the post-apartheid nation stabilizes its sense of self.

At the continental level, the theory also clarifies the tension between Pan-African ideals and domestic identity formation. Pan-Africanism presupposes a supra-national in-group in which Africans recognize one another as members of a shared historical and political community. However, when national identity becomes the primary and emotionally salient basis of belonging, continental identity remains weak and abstract. Consequently, African migrants are excluded from the national in-group and positioned as an out-group, despite shared histories of colonialism and liberation.

Within this theoretical framework, xenophobia in South Africa is conceptualized as the outcome of social categorization, in-group consolidation, and out-group stigmatization operating under conditions of socio-economic insecurity and unresolved historical inequality. By foregrounding the relational and symbolic dimensions of identity construction, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a coherent explanation for how fellow Africans are transformed into the "African Other" in a post-apartheid society that normatively proclaims equality, non-racialism, and continental solidarity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory research design aimed at interrogating how xenophobia and the social construction of the "African Other" are produced, reproduced, and legitimized within post-apartheid South Africa. Given the theoretical orientation of the study and its concern with meanings, identities, and discursive processes, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate for capturing the symbolic, historical, and interpretive dimensions of Othering that cannot be adequately measured through purely quantitative techniques.

Research Design

The research was anchored in a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is socially constructed and that meanings are generated through interaction, discourse, and historically situated practices.

This design enabled an in-depth examination of how African migrants are represented, categorized, and positioned within national narratives of belonging and exclusion. Rather than treating xenophobia as a set of isolated violent events, the study conceptualized it as a patterned social phenomenon embedded in structures of identity, power, and historical memory.

Sources of Data

The study relied primarily on secondary data drawn from multiple sources to ensure analytical depth and triangulation. These included:

i. Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and doctoral theses on xenophobia, Afrophobia, migration, nationalism, social identity, and postcolonial theory in the South African and broader African context.

ii. Policy and Institutional Documents: Texts from the South African government, the African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) relating to migration governance, social cohesion, and xenophobic violence.

iii. Official Reports and Databases: Reports from the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS), Xenowatch, UN agencies, and civil society organizations documenting patterns of xenophobic attacks, public attitudes, and institutional responses.

iv. Historical and Archival Materials: Documents tracing apartheid-era migration control, labor systems, and identity construction to contextualize contemporary forms of Othering.

The time frame of the materials reviewed covered the post-apartheid period from 1994 to 2024, with particular emphasis on periods surrounding major outbreaks of xenophobic violence (2008, 2015, 2019, and 2021).

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by critical interpretive and social identity perspectives. The process involved several stages:

i. Familiarization: Systematic reading and re-reading of all selected texts to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and discursive constructions related to African migrants and national belonging.

ii. Coding: Texts were coded around key analytical categories derived from the conceptual and theoretical framework, including:

- Othering and boundary-making
- In-group and out-group constructions
- Afrophobia and racialized nationalism
- Citizenship, illegality, and moral exclusion
- Scapegoating and economic threat narratives

iii. Theme Development: Codes were organized into broader thematic clusters that captured how African migrants are socially constructed as outsiders, competitors, and threats within dominant narratives.

iv. Theoretical Interpretation: The themes were interpreted through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), focusing on processes of social categorization, in-group favoritism, and out-group derogation, as well as the postcolonial reproduction of hierarchical African identities.

This analytical strategy enabled the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of xenophobia to a theoretically grounded explanation of how symbolic boundaries of belonging are constructed and sustained.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed several strategies:

- Triangulation: Multiple sources of data (academic, institutional, historical) were used to corroborate interpretations and reduce source bias.
- Theoretical Saturation: Analysis continued until no new conceptual insights emerged regarding the construction of the "African Other."
- Reflexivity: The researcher remained critically aware of the positionality inherent in interpreting sensitive issues of identity, migration, and nationalism, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in evidence and theory rather than normative

RESULTS

The analysis revealed that xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa is not merely an episodic reaction to migration but a structurally and symbolically patterned process through which African migrants are constituted as an out-group and positioned outside the moral boundaries of national belonging. Three interrelated thematic results emerged from the data: (1) categorical construction of non-belonging, (2) economic and moral scapegoating, and (3) normalization of exclusion and violence. Together, these findings demonstrate how the "African Other" is socially produced and stabilized within the post-apartheid social imagination.

Categorical Construction of Non-Belonging: Producing the "African Other"

The first major finding of the study reveals that xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa is fundamentally rooted in a categorical process through which African migrants are socially and institutionally constructed as non-belonging subjects. This process operates through legal, political, and cultural systems of classification that draw rigid symbolic boundaries between "citizens" and "foreigners," thereby transforming nationality into a moral hierarchy of entitlement and exclusion. The literature consistently shows that these categories do not merely describe legal status but function as powerful social markers that define who is perceived as legitimately belonging to the national community and who is not.

Scholars such as Neocosmos (2010) argue that post-apartheid citizenship discourse has produced a form of "exclusive nationalism" in which the category of the citizen is endowed with moral superiority, while the foreign African is constructed as an outsider whose presence is tolerated only conditionally. This distinction is embedded in state practices and public narratives that frame South Africa as a bounded moral community under threat from external intruders. Landau (2011) similarly demonstrates that administrative labels such as "illegal migrant" and "undocumented foreigner" have become socially saturated with meanings of criminality, disorder, and untrustworthiness, extending far beyond their technical legal definitions. These labels operate as symbolic shortcuts through which African migrants are associated with deviance and illegitimacy, even in the absence of evidence.

From a social identity perspective, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory helps explain how such categorizations structure intergroup relations. By defining South Africans as the in-group and African migrants as a salient out-group, social classification systems generate boundaries that are both cognitive and moral. In-group membership becomes linked to full access to rights, resources, and recognition, while out-group status is associated with conditional inclusion and vulnerability. Crush and Ramachandran (2014) note that this binary is particularly powerful in South Africa because citizenship is widely interpreted not only as a legal status but as a marker of authentic belonging, historical entitlement, and moral priority.

The literature further indicates that the construction of non-belonging is reinforced through everyday discourse and political rhetoric. Nyamnjoh (2022) observes that foreign Africans are routinely described in popular and political language as "amakwerekwere," a derogatory term that linguistically marks them as incomprehensible, culturally alien, and socially inferior. Such naming practices function as tools of symbolic distancing, stripping migrants of individuality and reconstituting them as a homogeneous and suspect category. This discursive homogenization facilitates what Matsinhe (2011) describes as "moral exclusion," whereby migrants are placed outside the circle of social obligation and empathy.

Institutional practices further consolidate this categorical Othering. Studies by the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS, 2017) show that immigration enforcement in townships and informal settlements frequently operates through racialized and national profiling, with black African bodies being routinely interrogated, searched, and required to prove legal status. These practices communicate a powerful social message: African migrants are presumed illegal until proven otherwise, while citizens are presumed legitimate by default. Such presumptions reproduce what Dube (2023) terms "bureaucratic xenophobia," in which the state itself becomes an agent in the social production of non-belonging.

Historically, scholars trace these patterns to apartheid and colonial modes of classification. Mamdani (1996) and Crush (2008) demonstrate that the apartheid state institutionalized systems of population control that categorized African labor migrants as temporary, expendable, and fundamentally non-belonging. Although the legal architecture of apartheid has been dismantled, its classificatory logic persists in reconfigured form. The migrant is still imagined as a transient presence whose claim to space, work, and protection is always provisional. This historical continuity reinforces the perception that African migrants do not properly "belong" to the post-apartheid nation, even when they have lived in South Africa for decades.

The construction of non-belonging is therefore not accidental but systemic. It is produced through overlapping regimes of law, discourse, and everyday practice that continuously reaffirm the boundary between "us" and "them." As Misago (2019) notes, this boundary is activated most intensely during periods of socio-economic stress, when citizenship becomes a scarce symbolic resource and exclusion serves to protect the in-group's sense of entitlement. African migrants, already positioned as categorical outsiders, become convenient targets for the defense of national space and moral priority.

Economic and Moral Scapegoating: Framing the "African Other" as a Threat

The second major result indicates that the social construction of the "African Other" in post-apartheid South Africa is sustained through processes of economic and moral scapegoating, whereby African migrants are discursively framed as the primary cause of unemployment, poverty, crime, and social decay. The literature demonstrates that this framing transforms structural socio-economic problems into personalized blame, enabling the redirection of collective frustration toward a visible and vulnerable out-group.

A substantial body of scholarship links xenophobic sentiment in South Africa to conditions of economic insecurity, particularly high unemployment, informal sector competition, and unequal access to housing and public services (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014; Landau, 2011; Moyo & Zanker, 2021). However, these studies emphasize that material competition alone does not automatically generate hostility. Rather, economic strain becomes xenophobic only when it is interpreted through socially constructed narratives that identify migrants as illegitimate competitors and usurpers of resources. Neocosmos (2010) argues that migrants are symbolically positioned as "job stealers" and "service burdens," despite empirical evidence that structural unemployment is rooted in historical inequality, skills mismatches, and macroeconomic constraints rather than migration.

This process reflects what Misago (2019) describes as the "politics of blame," in which responsibility for socio-economic failure is displaced from the state and structural conditions onto foreign nationals. Political rhetoric and community-level discourse frequently portray African migrants as unfairly benefiting from social services, dominating informal trade, and undercutting local wages. Such narratives construct a zero-sum moral economy in which the well-being of citizens is imagined to be directly undermined by the presence of outsiders. The

migrant thus becomes not only an economic competitor but a moral offender who is seen as violating the implicit social contract of entitlement reserved for nationals.

From a social identity perspective, Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain that in contexts of perceived threat, in-groups seek to preserve positive distinctiveness by attributing negative outcomes to out-groups. The stigmatization of African migrants as criminals, fraudsters, or social parasites serves to reinforce in-group cohesion and moral superiority. Studies by Gordon (2017) and Matsinhe (2011) show that crime narratives are particularly powerful in this regard, as they link migrants to disorder and insecurity, thereby justifying heightened surveillance, exclusion, and, in some cases, vigilante violence. These representations are rarely supported by systematic crime statistics but persist because they fulfill a symbolic function: they render social anxiety intelligible by attaching it to an identifiable Other.

The literature further highlights that scapegoating operates simultaneously at economic and cultural levels. Nyamnjoh (2022) and Tafira (2020) note that African migrants are often portrayed as culturally incompatible, unhygienic, or unwilling to integrate, reinforcing perceptions of moral deficiency. Such cultural stigmatization complements economic narratives by depicting migrants as not only competitors for scarce resources but also as bearers of undesirable values and practices. This dual framing intensifies their symbolic distance from the national in-group and legitimizes their exclusion from the moral community.

Frustration–aggression dynamics provide additional insight into why scapegoating becomes particularly intense in marginalized urban spaces. Research by Landau (2011) and Chibwe and Gumede (2022) demonstrates that xenophobic violence is most prevalent in informal settlements and townships characterized by poor service delivery, overcrowding, and chronic unemployment. In these contexts, structural deprivation generates diffuse anger that is redirected toward migrants, who are perceived as immediate and accessible targets. However, as Dube (2023) cautions, such displacement is not automatic; it is mediated by pre-existing symbolic constructions that mark migrants as illegitimate and expendable. The moral framing of migrants as undeserving thus becomes a necessary condition for the translation of economic frustration into collective hostility.

Normalization of Exclusion and Violence: Institutional and Social Legitimation of Othering

The third major result indicates that the categorical construction of non-belonging and the scapegoating of African migrants culminate in the normalization of exclusionary practices and, in extreme cases, collective violence. The literature shows that xenophobic hostility in South Africa is not merely the product of spontaneous crowd behavior but is embedded in social norms, institutional practices, and moral narratives that render discrimination and violence against foreign Africans socially intelligible and, at times, tacitly justified.

Several scholars have demonstrated that repeated waves of xenophobic attacks have become routinized within South African society, creating what Landau (2011) terms a “culture of violence against outsiders.” Rather than being treated as extraordinary breakdowns of social order, such incidents are frequently framed as understandable reactions to economic hardship, crime, or state failure. This discursive framing shifts the focus away from perpetrators and toward structural grievances, thereby softening moral condemnation and normalizing collective punishment of migrants. Neocosmos (2010) similarly argues that xenophobic violence is embedded in a broader “politics of belonging” in which the defense of national space and resources is implicitly legitimized, even when it takes violent form.

Institutional responses further contribute to this normalization. Research by the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS, 2017) and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2021) reveals persistent weaknesses in law enforcement and judicial follow-through in cases involving xenophobic attacks. Perpetrators are rarely prosecuted successfully, and crimes are often recorded as ordinary criminal acts rather than as hate-motivated violence. This pattern of impunity sends a powerful symbolic message that violence against foreign Africans is of lesser moral and legal consequence. As Misago (2019) observes, the failure of the state to decisively punish xenophobic crimes effectively institutionalizes exclusion by signaling that migrants occupy a marginal position within the hierarchy of rights and protections.

The literature also highlights the role of community-level moral economies in legitimizing exclusion. Studies by Chibwe and Gumede (2022) and Crush et al. (2017) show that in many townships and informal settlements, local residents justify the eviction of migrants, destruction of foreign-owned businesses, and collective intimidation as acts of "community protection." Such actions are discursively framed as necessary to restore order, reclaim economic opportunities, or discipline those perceived as illegitimate competitors. This framing transforms violence from a criminal act into a form of moral regulation, aimed at reasserting in-group control over space and resources. In this context, African migrants are positioned outside the moral community, making their victimization socially tolerable and, in some narratives, deserved.

From a social identity perspective, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory helps explain how in-group solidarity is strengthened through the symbolic and physical exclusion of out-groups. When migrants are constructed as threats to collective well-being, acts of exclusion and aggression can be reinterpreted as defensive measures that protect the integrity of the in-group. Gordon (2017) notes that such processes are reinforced by shared narratives of victimhood among citizens, who perceive themselves as marginalized and neglected by the state. Violence against migrants thus becomes a means of reasserting agency and restoring a sense of collective control, even though it ultimately reproduces cycles of insecurity and social fragmentation.

The normalization of exclusion is further sustained through everyday practices of discrimination that precede and outlast episodes of mass violence. Nyamnjoh (2022) and Matsinhe (2011) document routine forms of social distancing, verbal abuse, employment discrimination, and denial of services experienced by African migrants. These micro-level practices create an environment in which migrants are constantly reminded of their conditional and precarious status. Over time, such quotidian exclusions sediment into a moral order in which foreign Africans are implicitly ranked lower in the hierarchy of social worth, making more overt forms of hostility appear less shocking and more permissible.

Importantly, the literature underscores that this normalization is not confined to popular attitudes but is intertwined with state discourse and policy. Dube (2023) argues that securitized approaches to migration, which emphasize border control, raids, and deportations, contribute to a climate in which migrants are associated with illegality and danger. When the state itself frames migration primarily as a security problem, it reinforces public perceptions of migrants as threats and legitimizes coercive responses. This convergence of popular prejudice and institutional practice blurs the boundary between lawful governance and social exclusion, embedding xenophobia within the routine functioning of the post-apartheid state.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings demonstrate that xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa is not merely a reaction to migration or economic pressure but a socially structured process of identity construction through which African migrants are constituted as an out-group and positioned outside the moral boundaries of national belonging. Interpreted through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the results show that processes of social categorization, in-group consolidation, and out-group derogation interact with historical legacies and contemporary socio-economic conditions to produce the "African Other" as a stable figure of exclusion.

The categorical construction of non-belonging reflects the operation of social classification as a foundational mechanism of identity formation. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), individuals and groups derive positive self-definition from membership in salient social categories and seek to maintain favorable comparisons between the in-group and relevant out-groups. In the South African context, citizenship functions as the primary marker of in-group status, while African migrants are assigned to an out-group whose presence is framed as anomalous and morally inferior. This pattern is consistent with Neocosmos's (2010) argument that post-apartheid nationalism has generated an exclusionary politics of belonging in which the foreign African is constructed as a perpetual outsider, despite constitutional commitments to equality and non-racialism. The repeated invocation of nationality and legal status as criteria of entitlement illustrates how social identity is juridically and symbolically anchored, transforming citizenship from a legal category into a moral boundary.

Economic and moral scapegoating further intensifies these identity dynamics. Social Identity Theory posits that under conditions of perceived threat or competition, in-groups seek to protect positive distinctiveness by attributing negative outcomes to out-groups. In a context marked by unemployment, inequality, and competition over housing and informal economic opportunities, African migrants become convenient targets of blame. The portrayal of migrants as job stealers, criminals, and social burdens serves to enhance in-group cohesion and moral superiority, thereby reinforcing the symbolic boundaries of national belonging. This interpretation aligns with empirical studies showing that xenophobic attitudes are less a function of actual displacement than of the social interpretation of scarcity through narratives of foreign culpability (Landau, 2011; Misago, 2019).

The normalization of exclusion and episodic violence represents the practical expression of these symbolic boundaries. Once African migrants are firmly positioned within the out-group and associated with threat and deviance, their marginalization becomes socially intelligible and, in some contexts, morally defensible. Tajfel and Turner (1979) emphasize that rigid intergroup boundaries and widely shared negative stereotypes increase the likelihood of hostility and collective action against out-groups. The routinization of discriminatory practices, weak institutional accountability, and the framing of collective attacks as acts of "community defense" illustrate how out-group derogation is translated into social practices aimed at boundary enforcement. This dynamic reflects what Matsinhe (2011) describes as moral exclusion, whereby certain groups are placed outside the sphere of social obligation and protection.

Beyond interpersonal prejudice, the construction of the "African Other" is embedded in a broader process of national identity stabilization. Through contrast with an externalized out-group, the post-apartheid nation reaffirms its sense of coherence, entitlement, and sovereignty. African migrants, despite shared histories of colonial domination and liberation struggles, are excluded from the national in-group and positioned as permanent outsiders. This indicates the limited internalization of a supra-national African identity within everyday social practice and the dominance of territorially bounded nationalism over Pan-African consciousness.

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, the weakness of continental identification relative to national identity helps explain why Pan-African ideals have not translated into inclusive social relations. While regional integration frameworks promote the free movement of people and the recognition of shared African belonging, the emotionally salient and institutionally reinforced category remains that of the nation-state. Consequently, African migrants are incorporated into the cognitive schema of "them" rather than "us," undermining the symbolic foundations of continental solidarity and cooperation.

Implications for African Integration

The social construction of the "African Other" in post-apartheid South Africa has far-reaching implications for the broader project of African integration. Continental and regional initiatives, particularly those advanced by the African Union (AU) and sub-regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), are premised on the normative ideals of Pan-African solidarity, free movement of people, and the gradual formation of a shared African identity. These frameworks assume that Africans will increasingly perceive one another as members of a common political and moral community. However, the findings of this study indicate that within South Africa, one of the continent's most economically and politically influential states, national identity remains the primary and emotionally salient basis of belonging, while continental identity is weakly internalized. From a social identity perspective, this imbalance undermines the formation of a supra-national in-group and sustains the categorization of fellow Africans as out-group members.

At the symbolic level, xenophobia fractures the imagined community of Africa by reproducing hierarchical distinctions among Africans themselves. The construction of African migrants as culturally inferior, economically parasitic, and morally suspect contradicts the foundational Pan-African narrative of shared historical struggle against colonial domination and racial oppression. Instead of a collective "we" that transcends territorial boundaries, the dominant social categorization privileges the nation-state as the primary in-group and positions non-nationals as outsiders. This fragmentation of identity weakens the cultural and psychological foundations upon which regional integration depends. Without a minimal sense of shared belonging, formal agreements on mobility, trade, and cooperation remain technocratic instruments lacking deep social legitimacy.

At the institutional level, the persistence of xenophobic attitudes and practices complicates the implementation of key continental initiatives, particularly the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the AU Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons. These frameworks require not only legal harmonization but also social acceptance of cross-border mobility and the presence of non-nationals in domestic labor markets and urban spaces. The categorization of African migrants as threats to employment, security, and social cohesion generates political resistance to liberalized migration regimes and fuels public opposition to policies perceived as diluting national sovereignty. From the standpoint of Social Identity Theory, such resistance reflects the prioritization of in-group protection over supra-national cooperation, with the nation-state remaining the dominant reference group for the allocation of rights and resources.

The findings further suggest that xenophobia undermines South Africa's role as a continental leader and norm entrepreneur. As a state that has historically projected itself as a champion of African unity and multilateralism, recurrent hostility toward African migrants erodes its moral authority and soft power within regional and continental fora. Diplomatic tensions triggered by xenophobic violence, including protests, retaliatory measures, and strained bilateral relations, disrupt trust and cooperation among African states. Trust is a critical relational resource for integration, as it facilitates policy coordination, conflict resolution, and the pooling of sovereignty. The construction of the "African Other" within South Africa thus generates negative externalities that extend beyond domestic social relations to affect inter-state dynamics and the credibility of integration commitments.

At a socio-economic level, xenophobia constrains the mobility of labor and entrepreneurship that is essential for regional development. African integration strategies envision the circulation of skills, capital, and innovation across borders as drivers of growth and structural transformation. However, when migrants are stigmatized and exposed to discrimination or violence, their participation in local economies becomes precarious, and cross-border networks are weakened. This limits knowledge transfer, undermines informal and formal trade linkages, and reduces the potential gains from economic interdependence. The social exclusion of migrants therefore has direct implications for the functional integration of markets and production systems.

More broadly, the persistence of Afrophobia reflects a crisis of Pan-African identity formation. While elite-level discourse and institutional frameworks promote the idea of a shared African destiny, everyday social categorizations continue to privilege narrow national belonging. Social Identity Theory suggests that for a supra-national identity to become salient, it must be supported by tangible benefits, frequent interaction, and symbolic reinforcement. In the absence of these conditions, national identity retains its primacy, and out-group perceptions of fellow Africans persist. The South African case illustrates how the failure to cultivate an inclusive continental in-group allows historical hierarchies and nationalist boundary-making to reproduce themselves, even within a formally post-racial and postcolonial order.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa is not an accidental or episodic social problem but a systematically produced outcome of how national identity, belonging, and difference are socially constructed. The study established that African migrants are constituted as the "African Other" through enduring processes of categorical exclusion, scapegoating, and moral distancing, which are embedded in legal classifications, political discourse, and everyday social practices. These processes position African migrants outside the symbolic boundaries of the national in-group and render their presence socially and morally conditional.

The analysis demonstrated that the primary foundation of xenophobia lies in the rigid citizen–foreigner dichotomy, through which South African identity is stabilized by defining who does not belong. This categorical construction of non-belonging transforms citizenship from a legal status into a moral hierarchy, in which nationals are perceived as legitimate claimants to space, resources, and protection, while African migrants are framed as intruders and competitors. The study further found that socio-economic frustrations arising from unemployment, inequality, and service delivery failures are displaced onto this already stigmatized out-group, producing narratives that portray migrants as job stealers, criminals, and social burdens. These narratives do not merely reflect economic anxiety but function to protect in-group identity and entitlement.

Moreover, the findings revealed that such symbolic exclusion is normalized and, at times, translated into collective violence through weak institutional accountability and community-level justifications that frame xenophobic actions as acts of defense or moral regulation. As a result, the "African Other" is not only socially marginalized but placed outside the circle of moral concern, making discrimination and victimization appear socially intelligible and, in some contexts, permissible.

Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the study therefore concludes that xenophobia in South Africa operates as a form of identity politics, in which in-group cohesion and positive self-definition are achieved through the derogation and exclusion of a salient out-group. African migrants become the symbolic boundary through which national belonging is affirmed and protected, particularly under conditions of socio-economic insecurity and unresolved historical inequality. This confirms that xenophobia is not simply about migration but about the struggle over the meaning of nationhood, entitlement, and belonging in the post-apartheid order.

Finally, the study concludes that the social construction of the "African Other" has profound implications for the project of African integration. By positioning fellow Africans as outsiders, South African society undermines the normative foundations of Pan-Africanism and weakens the prospects for the emergence of a shared continental identity. The dominance of territorially bounded national identity over supra-national African belonging limits social support for free movement, regional solidarity, and cooperative integration initiatives. In this sense, xenophobia constitutes not only a domestic social crisis but also a structural constraint on Africa's broader integration agenda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address xenophobia and the social construction of the "African Other" in post-apartheid South Africa, and to strengthen the prospects for African integration.

i. There is a need for deliberate educational reforms that integrate Pan-African history, migration studies, and citizenship education into school and university curricula. Such reforms should emphasize shared histories of colonialism, liberation struggles, and interdependence among African societies. By strengthening supra-national African identity alongside national identity, educational institutions can contribute to weakening rigid in-group/out-group categorizations and fostering a sense of inclusive belonging.

ii. Government should review and reform migration and citizenship policies to reduce the symbolic and institutional stigmatization of African migrants. This includes simplifying documentation processes, ensuring fair and humane immigration enforcement, and clearly separating migration management from criminal justice. Rights-based migration governance can reduce the perception of migrants as "illegal" and morally suspect, thereby weakening the categorical construction of non-belonging.

iii. Targeted social cohesion and intercultural dialogue programmes should be implemented in townships and urban informal settlements where xenophobic sentiments are most pronounced. These programmes should bring together citizens and migrants in cooperative economic, cultural, and civic initiatives, enabling sustained interaction and reducing reliance on stereotypes. From a social identity perspective, such contact can expand in-group boundaries and promote the re-categorization of migrants as members of a broader community.

iv. Since economic frustration provides fertile ground for scapegoating, policies aimed at reducing unemployment, inequality, and service delivery gaps are essential. Government and development agencies should support inclusive local economic development strategies that integrate both citizens and migrants, particularly in the informal sector. By addressing material insecurity and promoting shared economic benefits, the zero-sum logic that fuels out-group hostility can be weakened.

v. Political leaders at national and local levels should refrain from rhetoric that scapegoats migrants or frames them as security and economic threats. Instead, public communication should emphasize constitutional values, human dignity, and Africa's integration goals. Regulatory frameworks should also discourage the use of xenophobic language in political campaigns, as elite discourse plays a critical role in legitimizing or delegitimizing exclusionary attitudes.

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