

OPENING DOORS: AFRICAN FAN PERSONAS AND THE GROWTH OF FAN STUDIES PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, political affiliation has proven to be one of the most fruitful mechanisms to create division and derision amongst the voting masses. So polarising is the topic of politics that it has coined its own phrase – political divide. Drawing from insights in fan studies, this article explores toxic fan practices within political fandom, as highlighted by Petersen et al. (2023) and Le Clue (2024). It examines the participation and practices of online users/fans within South African politics by focusing on the use of #voetsekanc via X (formerly Twitter) as a case study.

In the constantly evolving landscapes of online communities, fan studies provides a lens to comprehend the complexity of participation and engagement, which can both empower and disempower individuals (Pearson 2010, p. 84). Despite this level of agency, the representation of African voices in fan studies is severely limited, which excludes the possibility of a comprehensive understanding of online dynamics within the African context. Therefore, this paper expands the scope of fan studies beyond Western perspectives and contributes to a more diverse scholarly discourse within this field of study.

KEY WORDS

Fan Studies; Global South; Participation; Political Discourse; Online Discourse; African Fan Studies

INTRODUCTION

The notion that human dignity is a matter of social justice is a widely held perspective that underscores the significance of treating all individuals with dignity, compassion, and impartiality. In digital environments, it becomes especially significant as interactions between users transcend these principles and boundaries. As such, this study aims to bridge fan studies and persona studies to facilitate an examination of how these ideals are reflected and negotiated in online spaces. Through an analysis of the discourse surrounding #voetsekanc, the study offers new insights into the interplay between personal identity and digital fan culture. In particular, this research proposes a focus on elevating the African voice within this framework and highlighting how online engagement and practices reflect the creation of specific personas. In this study, the focus rests on the online personas of users/fans that engage in political discourse via X using the #voetsekanc hashtag.

The expanding trans-medial landscape has created highly contextualised forms of participation and engagement within online communities and makes both fan studies and persona studies valuable tools for examining these phenomena. While fan studies encourage individuals to act as “prosumers” (Jenkins 2007, p. 357), they also potentially demotivate individuals as they are confronted by the challenge of navigating the complex dynamics that dictate the practices of these online spaces. While in both instances, individuals are provided with greater agency in shaping the media landscape, there exists a definite gap in the representation of the African voice in fan studies, which limits the extent to which we can fully understand the nuanced dynamics of online engagement and participation within African contexts. Therefore, advancing the comprehension of the African fan is essential for a broader understanding of online engagement and participation within the African context. To initiate a much-needed expansion of fan studies into the African context, I use #voetsekanc as a case study. This approach permits a detailed examination of the South African fan persona through the lens of both fan studies and persona studies and aims to enrich the understanding of fan dynamics within this specific cultural setting.

For most of the post-apartheid era, the African National Congress (hereafter ANC) has experienced victory in all the democratic elections held. However, the ANC, once helmed by near-mythical figures like Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, has now devolved into a political party saturated by corruption and ruled by cronyism (Mkhabela 2022). The approval rating of South Africa’s ruling party currently hovers around 41% (Mkentane 2022) and is in danger of collapsing from its position as South Africa’s majority party.¹ As such, a sentiment of distrust and resentment of the ruling party has begun to spread and make itself known on social media and is illustrated through the hashtag ‘voetsekanc’², which, translated, refers to a derogatory term meant to reject and/or drive away someone, in this case, the ANC. The origin of the hashtag can be approximated to a range of Twitter replies to Minister of Transport Fikile Mbalula’s ‘Good morning’ tweet on 10 August 2020 (Mbalula 2020). The responses, which included #voetsekanc, appeared rapidly and dominated the reply thread.

While only a microcosm of South African online political discourse, #voetsekanc induces a critical reflection of digital platforms, like X, as key spaces for expressing and mobilising public dissent. This study offers an opportunity to explore how online contemporary discourse is articulated and spotlights the evolving dynamics of political engagement in the South African context.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: FAN STUDIES AND PERSONA STUDIES

The intersection of fan studies and persona studies presents an attractive fusion of frameworks for understanding how individuals engage in and formulate their political identities. As fan studies historically focus on the participatory cultures of media fans (Jenkins 2009), it has been increasingly applied to political fandoms (Petersen et al. 2023; Le Clue 2024; Driessen et al. 2023). In these spaces, elements such as emotional investment and performative behaviours of fans have been demonstrated as key factors in shaping political discourse and subsequent identities (Reinhard et al. 2022), which may reflect the individual’s personal beliefs and value system. The choice of what an individual is going to be a fan of or what they are going to engage with is often driven by their own underlying emotions, belief systems, and attitudes (Petersen et al. 2023, p. 3). Thus, fan engagement contributes to the interpretation of media texts through various methods. These fan communities have the ability to create environments online where media content is discussed, dissected, and analysed. From these types of engagements, diverse viewpoints can emerge. To further comprehend fan studies, it is imperative to acknowledge that participation rests at the centre of the fan/fandom experience. Jenkins (2009) iterates that

while direct contribution is not an immutable element of being a fan, rather it is the realisation that contributing will be valued and is possible at any stage. Hills builds on this through the 'always on' phenomenon, which, through the upsurge of Web 2.0, has seen fandom shift towards becoming an integral part of everyday life (2017).

Fandom is not easily nor singularly defined, and because each fandom comprises different 'rules', they are unique microcosms (Busse & Hellekson 2006, p. 6). Duffett (2013) offers a broadened outline of fandom by positing that "[fandom] can heighten our sense of excitement, prompt our self-reflexivity, encourage us to discuss shared values and ethics and supply us with a significant source of meaning that extends into our daily lives" (2013, p. 50). Inherently, fandom has the ability to provide a sense of belonging that extends into and becomes part of the fabric of daily life. It underlines the impact of fandom as a significant source of personal fulfilment and identity formation. For instance, fan identities are constructed by fans themselves, and so too is how they perform through their engagement within the fan community (Evans & Stasi 2014). These identities are shaped and reshaped through interaction either with other fans or with the chosen media subject or object.

This construction of identity is particularly important under the guise of political fandom. Political supporters, or fans, do not only consume political content but keenly mould their identities to these environments (Le Clue 2024, p. 354). In parallel to fan studies, persona studies offers a lens through which to investigate the construction and performance of identities in various contexts. It shines an explicit spotlight on public or semi-public spaces where "the formation of the contemporary self is now constructed and displayed through technologies and forms of expression that resemble media forms" (Marshall et al. 2020, p. 2). Social media platforms, such as X, fall well within the category of public online environments, or spaces, where fans engage in the construction of performative personas such as, for instance, curating a specific political persona as a fan activist or 'protector'. This is a key practice in political fandom where the performance as fan activists is used as a mechanism/persona to encourage others to engage. In persona studies, the individual is compelled to "negotiate, remix, strategise, and articulate identity formations" (2020, p. 19) in the "projection and performance of individuality" (2020, p. 3).

Furthermore, in persona studies, the creation of the individual persona is driven by the awareness that "our online selves are deeply enmeshed within the economies of attention and the hierarchies of reputation" (2020, p. 17). This intrinsically links to fan studies where the evolution of online culture grants fans a level of authority or social hierarchy. As Kristensen et al. (2018) suggest, "new voices of cultural critique perform and compete in the digital public sphere, drawing on different types of authority and expertise" (2018, p. 4). Both fields emphasise the importance of attention, reputation, and social hierarchies that are created and maintained and further highlight their central role in shaping digital identity. Building on these shared characteristics, this article argues that political fans strategically craft public online personas that reflect political affiliation, values, and/or ideologies. These constructed personas are then performed within online communities, creating a dynamic intersection of political identities.

The study of online political engagement under the guise of fan studies is a well-researched area, with several scholars, such as Hinck (2019) and Dean (2017), investigating how individuals online perform fan practices in support or opposition of politicians or political parties. In the orbit of South African politics, these fan personas are influenced by the country's political history and the evolving role of the ANC (African National Congress) in contemporary politics. Supporters and critics of the ANC craft personas that reflect their struggles and issues

of dissatisfaction and discontent while navigating the complexities of online participation and engagement. Within these spaces, the rise of toxic fan practice often prevails and adds further complexity to the construction of a political persona. Towards a definition of toxic fan practices, it can be read as acts of “hostility and aggression – getting in people’s faces...naming and shaming,” (Proctor et al. 2018, p. 371). However, it is imperative that each fandom, and study thereof, be examined from its own perspective to establish its motivation and potential impact instead of blanketing all fandoms under one umbrella of toxicity. This speaks directly to the necessity of this study, which aims to provide a clearer understanding of political fandom from a non-Western perspective, instead of adopting the presumption that all political fandoms are created equal. In highly polarised environments political fandoms can be sites of exclusionary and even violent behaviour, where fans adopt toxic personas that fortify political divides. In the South African context, this is visible in the ways that ANC supporters and detractors engage in polarising discourses that speak to the tensions within the country’s political landscape.

Both fan studies and persona studies are, therefore, important factors towards understanding the dynamics of political fans and their online practices. However, current scholarship predominantly focuses on Western contexts and leaves a notable gap regarding African fan communities and how they create and perform their political personas. Therefore, this article centres on the experiences and perspectives of African fan communities by promoting a more inclusive understanding of fan practices and personas that expand beyond the Western perspective.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To understand how fans engage in online political participation and potentially construct an applicable persona to perform in these online environments, I examine the discourse in and around #voetsekanc on X. When writing about similar politically charged tags, #CrookedHillary and #LockHerUp, which were widely used during the run-up to the 2016 Presidential election in the United States, Booth (2019) describes these hashtags as being the “language of fandom: emotive, passionate, and focused on feeling rather than rationality” (2019, p. 42). While Booth’s description is highly applicable to the American context, it is important to appreciate that the dynamics of online political engagement in an African context could differ. Thus, by analysing #voetsekanc, this study investigates how online engagement might align or diverge from previously observed patterns in different contexts. In doing so, it offers an in-depth understanding of fan practices and persona construction in an unexplored setting.

If the intention is to recognise and understand what the African fan persona looks like within a specific context, there needs to be an awareness of how these practices are framed and presented within the online space. Therefore, for this examination, I have selected the #voetsekanc as the basis of the case study. The hashtag, ‘voetsekanc’, is a social media tag, or online label, distinct to South African users/fans that denotes an expression of dissent against the African National Congress, a major political party in the country. The term *voetsek* is a derogatory expression meaning ‘get lost’. It is important to note that this term does carry a humorous connotation when applied in a different context. However, in this context, the combination of this term with ANC, the popular acronym for the political party, is reflective of a widespread public frustration with the party’s governance. It originated in August 2020 as a reply to a government minister’s tweet, after which the hashtag was used to amplify political discontent and criticism. This hashtag was selected because it encompasses a sustained level of engagement from 2020 to date and provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics of online political engagement in South Africa by focusing on how such digital expressions of dissatisfaction contribute to the formation and performance of political personas within African

online communities. Specifically, the content of tweets, mentions, and replies that include the hashtag are analysed to understand connotations in terms of fan practices and the construction of personas. The choice was made to analyse tweets between 1 January 2024 and 31 August 2024. In addition to including the period during which the most recent national election has taken place, this date range is also considered to be acceptable based on the following criteria³:

1. *Historical Significance*: The time frame in question includes the months before and after the most recent national general election of 29 May 2024, which is, traditionally, a significant period in a political context.
2. *Representation of Opinions*: The tweets and replies from this particular time frame allow for the collection of a diverse range of perspectives and opinions, which allows for enabling a comprehensive consideration and examination of political discourse online.
3. *Data Availability*: The existence of substantial datasets of tweets and replies from the selected period presents a rich data sample that strengthens the reliability of the analysis.

While the initial data gathered comprised a significant number of tweets and replies, the final sample drawn was narrowed to 400 – 500 tweets and replies. This data set was deemed to be sufficient to ensure and maintain the feasibility of the analysis. The focus was primarily on original tweets and their replies that included #voetsekanc. All efforts were made to ensure the ethical integrity of the study. All research data has been anonymised to safeguard the privacy of the users. This study intends to explore the framing of online discourse around the highlighted hashtag. Therefore, the focus rests on an analysis of the content of the relevant tweets and replies only. Through a content and discourse analysis, I aim to highlight how these fan practices are framed and performed and how this compels the creation of specific personas to function within the highlighted online community.

CRAFTING PROTEST: COHERENCE AND HUMOUR

In analysing tweets and replies linked to #voetsekanc, a marked theme of coherence and clarity emerges. A vast number of tweets were grammatically sound, well-structured, and without significant spelling errors. This level of coherence is noticeably different to my previous studies on online audiences in the U.S., where online discourse often features more informal language, frequent highlighting via caps, and dubious spelling (Le Clue 2024; Le Clue & Vermaak-Griessel 2023; Le Clue & Vermaak-Griessel 2022). The observed differences in presentation between South African and American online discourse may be rooted in the diversity of cultural communication styles and contexts. South Africa comprises a multilingual landscape and its history of political activism could, as a result, could prompt the use of more coherent and clear communication as a method of ensuring inclusivity. Contrastingly, the American online discourse that I have studied appears to focus on individual expression, which could, arguably, be shaped by values such as freedom of speech. The American discourse also appeared sometimes to be rooted in a more combative approach which can favour a more derisive style of communication.

A prominent characteristic of the tweets analysed is the formal tone and the structured nature of the arguments used to critique political leadership. For instance, several tweets demonstrate clear articulation when commenting on the ANC government's policies or interrogating its ethical conduct. Tweets like "Below the belt from you (you are misleading the public for what purpose). CR [Cyril Ramaphosa] is pres of the whole nation. Any citizen should be allowed to critique him with respect." [sic] and another that asserts, "@PresidencyZA

@CyrilRamaphosa, the economy is where it is today because you are your useless, lying, lotting @MYANC @GovernmentZA have done NOTHING to improve the lives of ordinary Sans [South Africans]. You've just filled your pockets with taxpayers' money until there's none left. #VoetsekANC!" [sic] suggests an intentional choice to remain coherent and to ensure readability. The conscious decision of formality amplifies the impact of the critique and further positions the user/fan as a voice of authority within the conversation. By leaving out the ambiguity that can accompany the use of abbreviations and online slang, the users/fans emphasise their commitment to clarity and directness.

This is indicative of highly deliberative online practices and represents users/fans moulding their identities to align with the nature and tone of the discourse, thereby adapting their engagements and online identity to fit the 'norms' of the online environment. It is especially evident in tweets that utilise external references to support their statements. For example, one user/fan draws on a well-known saying – "...An evil man will burn his own nation to the ground to rule over the ashes ~ Sun Tzu" – before then aligning it to a critique of the government. The intentional curating of online behaviour reflects key principles of persona studies, which underscores how individuals construct their personas to effectively traverse the social dynamics of these online spaces. By curating their identities in this way, users/fans not only allow for the ability to participate meaningfully but also to position themselves to drive the online conversation. This showcases the interplay between the identity construction of persona studies and the participatory culture of fan studies.

Through the maintenance of this level of coherence, users/fans are deliberately constructing an online persona. And this illustrates that their engagement with #voetsekanc is more than just participation. It shows that it is a performance that reflects a distinct understanding of the norms and expectations of the online environment. While some tweets contain slight informalities, the overall tone remains consistently structured. A tweet that mentions "...votes vote anc again? Why'd you be so suicidal?" does use some informal contractions but continues to adhere to the expected structure and coherence. Similarly, another tweet maintains this balance of coherence and structure by presenting a complex argument against election strategies:

"I'm saying it again. Just before the election, these thieves in Gov't always come up with these benefits & awards & handouts. They do nothing in the years after winning the election but start dishing out before an election to buy votes. @zizkodway @CyrilRamaphosa #VoetsekANC"

This intentional performance is central to understanding the interplay between fan studies and persona studies within this context. The emphasis on coherence and clarity indicates the construction of a persona which prioritises purposeful participation. Where these South African users appear to prioritise coherence and clarity on the construction of their personas, thus indicating seriousness, some American users lean towards informality. This dichotomy between the two may be underscored by a multilingualism and differing cultural norms, as mentioned. The curating of these identities through formal and structured online discourse signals the intention of the users/fans to be perceived as serious and engaged participants. This, in turn, heightens their ability to shape and drive online conversation, which is a fundamental element of participatory culture.

Therefore, the coherence and clarity practised in this context become not only a stylistic choice but an intentional act and subsequent performance of identity. This observation of coherence and clarity across most of the dataset signifies a shared understanding and identification among users/fans to present themselves as authoritative voices. Their acclimation

to the normative discourse of the #voetsekanc online community also illustrates how personas are crafted to enable meaningful participation. Consequently, the intentional act of adopting and performing the norms of the online environment supports the fundamental premise of persona studies that defines persona as self-productive acts that are controlled by “the builders and owners of the platform through which it is enacted” (2020, pp. 21-22). This also underscores the participatory practices underlined in fan studies, and especially political fandom, that users/fans that perform in these spaces “dictate the dynamic of the conversation or type of communication on these platforms and within these communities” (Le Clue 2024, p. 354).

Another theme identified through the data analysis is the use of humour. The presence of humour in the tweets suggests a cultural tendency among South Africans to make use of wit as a form of political commentary. In this context, humour acts as a shield against the harsh realities of political discontent and enables users/fans to express dissent in a way that fosters a sense of solidarity within the online community. For example, tweets such as “The rate at which the ANC is voetsekking is just not enough #VoetsekANC” utilise playful language to critique the ANC’s perceived lack of progress. The use of the colloquial term ‘voetsekking’⁴ amusingly underlines a perceived inefficiency of the political party while simultaneously invoking the hashtag to situate the tweet with the broader discourse.

Similarly, another tweet humorously links the ANC’s productivity to non-existent dates: “I have realised that the only time the ANC Cartel have actually ‘worked’ & done something productive in their 30year rule of South Africa, was every year on 30th and 31st February #VoetsekANC2024 #VoetsekANC” [sic]. The use of the impossible date engages the community in a shared identification of discontent through humour. Users/fans added an additional layer of humour by using memes (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Memes tweeted to critique the ANC government

The use of memes is inherently considered to be playful and highly effective, shareable content “insofar as they can be sources of pleasure, fun, connection or anger and irritation, depending on the context” (Dean 2019, p. 260). The use of memes in this context intimates a playful type of engagement, and while these acts may appear trivial, the use and circulation thereof “can play a crucial role in political community formation” (2019, p. 259). Furthermore, the use of memes linked to a hashtag such as ‘voetsekanc’ can be considered as a beacon or calling card that enables other users/fans to easily identify the specific community.

In this context, the use of humour serves as a coping mechanism that allows users/fans to express discontent whilst also reinforcing the identity of the community. In this regard, the presence of humour is identified as a characteristic of the South African online political persona. As such, humour becomes a way of connecting and of enhancing group identity. This meshing of identity construction and participatory culture amplifies how users/fans navigate online spaces by using humour, in the South African context, as a mechanism for both critique and community building within online political discourse.

INTERPLAY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND IDENTITY

Conspiracy theories have become a significant feature of contemporary digital communities (Driessen et al. 2023; de Wildt & Aupers 2023), especially within online political environments. These theories serve as tools for users/fans to voice dissent against the status quo. In various instances, this type of engagement typifies the dynamics of online fandom, where participants are connected by shared beliefs and oppositional identities. In this case, conspiracies function as a central ‘text’ within the fandom and form a basis for interaction and reinforcement of the group identity. As Petersen et al. (2023) state, “forming online communities and contributing to conspiracy theories allows someone who feels like the world is going in the wrong direction a means to fight back in a personal and pleasurable way” (2023, p. 318).

In the context of the #voetsekanc discourse, conspiracy theories are utilised to interrogate the legitimacy of the South African government and the electoral processes. Through the lens of fan studies, these users/fans are seen as constructing and circulating ‘alternative texts’ where the ‘plot’ revolves around corruption. The tweet’s references to the rigging of votes, manipulation of voter rolls, and conspiracies involving foreign nationals imply broader fears and anxieties but are framed in ways that compel the implementation of this curated identity to facilitate active participation. Tweets like “IEC had one job today.... They had four years to plan this, and they still failed absolutely miserably. My mind is now made up. These elections are rigged. #voetsekanc” [sic] reflect not only a distrust of government institutions but also a suspicion of electoral rigging. It should be noted that no evidence of election rigging was ever found or presented. Nevertheless, this type of discourse is indicative of the broader online practices that undermine the legitimacy of democratic processes and frame the election as predetermined rather than free and fair. From the perspective of persona studies, this type of engagement showcases how users/fans perform an identity that emphasises scepticism and resistance, thereby creating and performing a persona of ‘disillusioned citizen’ that exposes corruption and serves as guardian of electoral integrity. Likewise, allegations of voter fraud and interference are indicated:

“#MOZAMBIQUE #CITIZENS IMPORTED FROM THEIR HOMES TO COME AND #VOTE FOR #ANC IN UPCOMING MAY #ELECTIONS , THEY ARE NOW STATIONED IN GAUTENG and Getting processed to have ‘VOTING CARDS’ ID CARDS BY A HOME AFFAIRS CONTRACTED ‘AGENT’ #nbz247 #VOETSEKANC ELECTIONS WONT BE FAIR IN SA” [sic]

This tweet demonstrates the fan activity of constructing and disseminating speculation and mirrors the way fans build theories around fictional worlds. However, in this example, the speculation revolves around real-world topics which could have real-life implications. Several tweets within the dataset call for violence and reference Operation Dudula, which has been identified as “a violent and vitriolic highly organised anti-immigrant social-political movement” (Tewolde 2023). References to “reclaiming our country” and “unleash[ing] dogs” alongside the use of #voetsekanc and particularly #operationdudula is a reference to violence given the make-up of the Operation Dudula movement. The direct engagement with vigilante groups and

calls for violence is indicative of users/fans who have adopted a distinctive and highly worrisome identity/persona to perform a decidedly toxic practice within this online community.

The practice of conspiracy theories also extends to claims of document tampering: “Why are there so many documents on the ground ?? The ANC is already making plans to rig the elections like their brothers in Zimbabwe #VoetsekANC” [sic]. The linking of the ANC with broader regional trends of autocratic governance, such as in Zimbabwe, frames the ruling party as untrustworthy and deceitful and thereby reinforces the conspiracy. These practices function like a type of fan fiction, where users/fans revise political scenarios and share these fictional accounts to bolster a collective identity within the online community. Furthermore, labelling the ANC as a “criminal syndicate” and a “domestic terrorist cult” highlights the extremity of the conspiracy theories.

Although not profuse, the inclusion of #DrainTheSwamp2024 was a notable observation within the dataset. The use of this hashtag echoes the discourse used by Donald Trump and his supporters during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. It denotes the spread of political conspiracy theories and how political personas and performances thereof can mimic behaviours and practices observed in other fandoms. Moreover, the use of hashtags such as these indicates how users/fans assimilate their online identities to form part of and perform within these online environments. Users/fans within the context of this study also construct an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ identity and shape themselves as ‘true’ South Africans set against a political elite: “Yes!! Because the #VoetsekANC has done nothing about the illegal population! SA can survive on a population of max 45 million. But we sit with a population of nearly 80 million because of illegal immigrants! The #VoetsekANC #VoetsekEFF need the useless eaters for votes” [sic]. This practice of identity-building through creating an ‘us vs them’ narrative is a toxic and central practice when considering the darker side of political fandom.

What is important to note about the collective power of conspiracy theories is that its pervasiveness is not reliant on one collective narrative but is instead “the result of collaborative practices, a collective intelligence of sorts that happens on many platforms and through many individuals and through a range of media texts” (Petersen et al. 2023, p. 325). Therefore, while remaining mindful of the context of this study, the use of conspiracy theories is also indicative of how storytelling techniques are woven together to form discourse that resonates within the community. These discourses reinforce cohesion and portray members as ‘protectors’ of their country. To further legitimise the conspiracies, violence and historical grievances are invoked by branding the president as a “killer” and a “murderer”, thereby framing him as unfit to lead. In these instances, the performative element of the persona is dressed up as activism that attempts to establish credibility through moral outrage. This performance of resistance is a key element of the identity of the #voetsekanc community, and it allows users/fans to present themselves as defenders of democracy to heighten their credibility and visibility within the community. Under the guise of these deceptive performances, it not only creates echo chambers driven by misinformation but also masks the underlying attempts of polarisation.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I aimed to explore the South African persona within the context of online political engagement via #voetsekanc. There is no intention to claim that this examination is indicative of all South African users/fans under the umbrella of political participation. The case study aligns with the broader objective of the paper: to investigate how identity and participation are negotiated in an online African context, thereby contributing to an expansion of fan studies and

persona studies. Specifically, the examination of #voetsekanc reveals a multifaceted South African online identity that is characterised by online practices that are more indicative of a communal resistance against the perceived failures of the ANC rather than direct interaction between users/fans. Nevertheless, while direct interactions may appear limited, the use of the hashtag performs as a unifying element that enables engagement and collective expression within this online community. It highlights the recognition among users/fans of the necessity to adopt a specific identity to facilitate participation within the digital environment.

The study further reveals how participatory culture reflects broader cultural and societal values and differences. It further highlights the complexity of identity construction, shaped by a combination of humour, conspiracy theories, and collective resistance. Where observed, American users create a more informal, spontaneous persona that suggests a cultural preference for performative engagement as a key strategy in their online discourse. In contrast, South African users, as shown in this study, emphasise coherence, clarity, and the use of correct English spelling, which highlights purposeful participation. These deliberate choices may be indicative of an intent to be perceived as serious and engaged contributors with an emphasis on inclusivity and credibility. These distinctions indicate that online participatory practices are significantly influenced by the cultural and historical context in which they are engaged. It offers a valuable direction for further comparative research in non-Western and Western contexts alike.

Further, through this case study, humour emerges as a critical tool for connection and the development of group identity. It allows users/fans to effectively make their way through the online environment while cultivating a sense of togetherness and shared recognition through humour. This serves not only as a coping mechanism in the face of discontent and disillusionment but also offers a way of articulating political critiques. While the element of humour is prevalent, it does not disguise the fact that the sentiments expressed suggest an online community fraught with despondency and negativity and raises critical questions about the implications of adopting an online identity that is predominantly mired in pessimism.

In addition, the conspiracy theories depicted through #voetsekanc also signify a deep-seated distrust that is occasionally underscored by xenophobic rhetoric. Moreover, when combining the relationship between humour, identity, and conspiracy theories, it demonstrates the complexity of online political participation in South Africa. Particularly, the use and engagement of humour serve not only as a coping mechanism but also as a tool for navigating the complexities of the political landscape. While the prevalence of conspiracy theories aligns with other political fandoms, such as those within the U.S. political landscape, the South African user/fan stands apart distinctly through the use of humour. This accommodation of humour in the face of serious discontent shows a desire for community and simultaneously demands accountability.

While the primary focus of this study was not on the specific identities or backgrounds of the users, the demographic makeup of users who engage with this or other hashtags could offer an additional layer of insight to this type of research. However, to authenticate user demographics is an inherently challenging task due to the limited availability of reliable data and users' ability to obscure their identities through pseudonyms.

The framework of persona studies and its application to this case study it provides a clear insight into how South African users/fans perform their roles within this community: as participants who perform as defenders of distorted realities who concurrently boost the spread of misinformation. This performance cultivates a sense of identity but also propagates polarisation among participants. The interplay between identity construction and the spread of

conspiracy theories underscores the precariousness of cultivating an online environment steeped in suspicion, intolerance, and misinformation.

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END NOTES

¹ The ANC lost its outright majority following the 2024 general election in South Africa (Akinwotu & Bartlett, 2024).

² Pronounced /'futsak/, /'vutsak/

³ This justification is modelled on a set of criteria used in a previously published article, *The New Normal: Online political fandom and the co-opting of morals* (Le Clue 2024)

⁴ 'Voetsekking', as a verb, adds a comedic layer to 'voetsek' as it suggest an active process of rejection.

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