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This is Africa: How young African TikTok trends challenged Afropessimism during COVID-19

ABSTRACT

Afropessimism, or the western media tradition of covering Africa in stereotypically negative ways, has continually served to strip the continent of representational nuance and agency. While Africa experienced its own COVID-19 challenges during the pandemic, the Afropessimistic outlook of total collapse and carnage did not become a reality. In fact, with the popular uptake of TikTok as the pandemic wore on, Africans began social media trends that kept many globally entertained as they navigated new lockdown realities. This study looks at three of these TikTok trends, namely #JerusalemChallenge, #DontRushChallenge and #DontLeaveMeChallenge. Through textual analysis, the study explores if and how these trends provided counternarratives to Afropessimism. With dominant themes such as humour and dance emerging, findings suggest that these trends offered content that can be read as contributing to challenging Afropessimism through cultivating African digital agency and representation.

KEYWORDS

African digitality
digital agency
African digital activism
#JerusalemChallenge
#DontRushChallenge
#DontLeaveMeChallenge

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the *New York Times* came into controversy with many African social media users after publishing a contentious article about the continent's COVID-19 response. Written by Maclean (2021) and titled 'A continent where the dead are not counted', the article imposed findings about Nigeria's COVID-19 response, and statistics thereof, upon the entire continent of 54 countries.

Among those most vociferous in response to the piece was Siyanda Mohutsiwa, who had previously given a viral TED Talk (Mohutsiwa 2016) about how young Africans were finding their voice through Twitter. Mohutsiwa's Twitter thread in response to the *New York Times* article featured 22 tweets and has garnered just under 5500 retweets and almost 11,000 likes (as of July 2022). In the thread, Mohutsiwa contrasts the *New York Times*' coverage of Asia's COVID-19 response – which she calls good journalism – to that of their Africa coverage which she critiques for being unbalanced and reductive.

Afropessimism, as practised through western media's collapsing of Africa into a single homogenous entity, is not a new practice. Over the years, Afropessimistic coverage of the continent has continually served to strip the continent of nuance and agency. With the emergence of social media, Africans have however developed new ways to cultivate representational agency to challenge Afropessimistic stereotypes (Mkono 2019). And young people, by virtue of being digital natives, have tended to lead the way.

AFROPESSIMISM

Afropessimism is a practice of representation (B'beri and Louw 2011) and references a sense of pessimism about Africa's capacity to overcome developmental challenges relating to health, development, governance and poverty (Nothias 2012), among other issues. African crises, therefore, feed into dominant representations of Africa and Africans as 'the dark continent' characterized by tribalism, violence and incompetence (Ahluwalia 2000). Afropessimists have essentially concluded that Africa is destined to fail by virtue of being run by corrupt leaders who resist working within the politics of neo-colonialism (B'beri and Louw 2011) and as such, represents an emergent western view of postcolonial Africa (Evans and Glenn 2010) often brought into discussions about Africa's representation in western media (Nothias 2012).

'This is Africa' (or the acronym TIA) – a phrase described as 'a sardonic response to African apathy and brutality' – has entered popular digital discourse via blogs and websites discussing Africa (Evans and Glenn 2010: 26) and has become a shorthand format of referencing such Afropessimism. 'This is Africa' was largely popularized in the early 2010s through the Hollywood movie, *Blood Diamond*, as a trope referencing rampant corruption and perceived danger across the continent (Dokotum 2014).

AFRICAN YOUTH DIGITAL CULTURE: THE RISE OF TWITTER

Even as they constitute the majority of Africa's population, African youth have tended to exist on the margins of discourse around political, economic, social and cultural processes (Akor 2017). New digital tools and platforms have long been recognized for their role in generating new forms of community and engagement which blur the boundaries between the private and the public (Hull et al. 2010), enabling the emergence of virtual social spaces that are not

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geographically located, and which allow for the construction of hybrid cultures (McEwan and Sobre-Denton 2011). The popularity of social media means that more people are now connected through the internet and social media. For many users, this has facilitated an orientation to the world that allows them to be simultaneously global and local, and thus participate in a form of global citizenship. As such, digital activism via social media is increasingly creating space for Africa's young people to find their voice, as well as to create active meaning-making of their own lives (Inyabri et al. 2021).

Nigerian youth have, over the years, used different social media platforms and services to organize protests. A prime example of this is the 2012 youth-driven fuel subsidy protests which began as a result of the Nigerian government unilaterally removing the subsidy on petrol, leading to a 120 per cent increase in its price. As a result, Nigerian youth took to social media – particularly Blackberry Messenger (BBM) – to organize (Akor 2017). Within the next three days, protests had spread from the major cities of Abuja, Lagos and Kano to the rest of Nigeria, with an unprecedented turnout and even participation of the middle class, often absent from such large-scale protests. The fuel subsidy protests were probably the largest demonstrations to have ever happened in Nigeria by that time and their magnitude would have been unimaginable in the absence of the sort of organizing that Twitter allowed for (Cole 2017). While ultimately unsuccessful in its demands, the subsidy protest paved the way for various youth-led social media movements and moments that continue today. This is in evidence through the far-reaching impacts of the 2020 #EndSARS protests to end Nigerian police brutality. Facebook, Instagram and again – perhaps most importantly Twitter – were instrumental for young Nigerians' organization at this time (Ekoh and George 2021). Twitter is, thus, an instrument of modernity used by Africans to share their life experiences, with the biggest impact being in the realm of politics (Royston and Strong 2019).

Despite social media use still being concentrated among Africa's 'digital elites', Twitter is an indisputable discursive force in Africa's social media terrain (Royston and Strong 2019). Another example of this is Zimbabwe's 2016 #ThisFlag campaign, a popular but short-lived hashtag-driven social movement against political misrule. Most participants using the hashtag on Twitter are thought to have been either local middle-class Zimbabwean elites or Zimbabweans in the diaspora (Dendere 2019); both groups that play a pivotal role in Zimbabwean politics and protest culture, just as the middle class and diaspora of Nigeria do within their own national context. The popular uptake of social media for political engagement is therefore seen as moving middle-class activism into a 'a new developmental phase' which can be furthered through promotion of class unity (Orji 2016: 141).

Twitter has also facilitated space for Africans to build community, entertain and challenge Afropessimistic stereotypes (Cheruiyot and Uppal 2019). The amorphous group of Kenyans known as 'Kenyans on Twitter', or #KOT, that initiates and discusses various political issues via Twitter (Nyabola 2018) provides a pertinent example. When Kenya is derided by western media, or when a national tragedy strikes, #KOT and its ancillary hashtags have had focused impacts, such as getting western news media to apologize for nonfactual reportage on the country (Kaigwa 2017; Tully and Ekdale 2014) and crowd-funding for issues of social concern (Nyabola 2018). When CNN referred to Kenya as a 'hotbed of terror' in the 2015 build up to US President Obama's visit to the country, #KOT rallied under the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN to share their disapproval of the broadcaster's framing. In the 24 hours after the

news story, the hashtag was used more than 75,000 times (Nyabola 2018), and as a result of the overwhelming response, CNN International's Managing Director, flew to Kenya to apologize personally for the report (at the time, Kenya was a major advertiser on CNN's international channel).

Beyond its political potential among African youth, Twitter has also been central to 'intracontinental discourse' (Royston and Strong 2019: 252) and promoting collective sociality through humour and other cultural devices. #IfAfricaWasABar is a hashtag that went viral on Twitter in 2015 as it crowd-sourced the perspectives of Africans about different countries within the continent through personalizing them as stock characters in a bar (Cheruiyot and Uppal 2019). As mentioned previously Mohutsiwa, the then 22-year-old Twitter user from Botswana who was credited with initiating the #IfAfricaWasABar, hashtag went on to give a TED Talk the following year about how young Africans develop agency and find their voice through Twitter. Her talk, which has over 1 million views to date, notes that by the end of the week when the hashtag had begun to trend, #IfAfricaWasABar had generated about 60,000 tweets. Among a range of uses, participants employed the hashtag to poke fun at intra-African stereotypes, call out government misrule, bring humour to geopolitical tensions and lack of knowledge among Africans themselves about certain African countries and to acknowledge countries that had made significant sociopolitical progress (Mohutsiwa 2016). Thus, the hashtag served to connect Africa and its diaspora around the various complex facets of their Africanness. Twitter 'wars' between African nations, more commonly referred to as #Tiwars, are another light-hearted feature of intracontinental sociality. These usually emerge when a national of one country speaks uninformedly about another African country, or during sporting events where two African countries face each other in a match.

The disruption of sensationalist and Afropessimistic narratives about Africa is a central feature of African Twitter's contrarian discourse (Royston and Strong 2019). But also just as important is the platform's utility for Africans to generate humour and foment connections with nationals of other African countries.

AFRICAN YOUTH DIGITAL CULTURE: THE RISE OF TIKTOK

A recent significant shift in audience demographics has occurred as newer social media platforms have begun to proliferate. While Facebook and Twitter users now tend to be in their 40s, Instagram is attracting users in their 30s and TikTok is attracting those in their 20s and younger – often referred to as Gen-Z (Haenlein et al. 2020). Facebook is seen largely as a platform that followers use to stay in touch with close community, while Twitter is generally deemed a source of news and information. Instagram and TikTok are arguably more geared towards entertainment. Nevertheless, activism, knowledge-building and information exchange are also important features of these newer platforms. For example, these platforms contributed to a resurgence of #BlackLivesMatter following the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020. Because of the visual nature of presentation of the social media narratives Instagram and TikTok convey, they stand a greater chance of gaining the attention of the news media and contributing to shaping the narrative around Black victims of American police brutality (Eriksson Krutrök and Åkerlund 2022).

As mentioned, TikTok is Gen-Z's domain. As such, it affords researchers an opportunity to 'observe the process of generational self-definition in

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a social context' through the self-representations that Gen-Z shares on the platform (Stahl and Literat 2022: 2). Furthermore, young people's online participation increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing them to stay globally connected and engage in mediated forms of entertainment and knowledge exchange through social media channels. As routines were disrupted, social media took on a new importance, offering a sense of connectedness and community (Murru and Vicari 2021) and contributing to what Ostrovsky and Chen refer to as 'youth resocialization in a pandemic society' (2020: 730). This, along with the popularity of other platforms like Snapchat and Twitch, has given rise to the emergence of a range of new young social media influencers (Haenlein et al. 2020).

One such social media influencer is the Senegalese Italy-based TikTok sensation, Khaby Lame. Stitching his own videos with problematic 'life hack' videos and hardly ever speaking, Lame provided humorous commentary by performing a signature shrug of his shoulders accompanied by a look of bemusement. As Horowitz and Lorenz observe:

Using the social media app's duet and stitch features, Mr. Lame, 21, capitalized on the momentum of viral and often absurdly complicated life hack videos [...] by responding to them with wordless, easy-to-understand reaction clips in which he would do the same task in a much more straightforward manner.

(2021: n.pag.)

In June 2022, Lame became the TikTok user with the highest number of followers across the whole platform. He currently has 147.1 million followers (as of July 2022).

Another such influencer is the then-teenage Kenyan Instagrammer, Elsa Majimbo, whose rise was largely driven by the COVID-19 pandemic as her sarcastic Instagram videos offered funny and relatable commentary on social dynamics during these times. For instance, in one of her early lockdown videos Majimbo pokes fun at people who keep insisting that 'We are going out after lockdown' and quips, 'Are *we* going to pay for my Uber?' (Majimbo 2020, emphasis added). In a 2021 cover-story interview with *Teen Vogue*, King observes the universal appeal of the aesthetic that led to Majimbo's continental and global virality:

Her props weren't fancy. No filters were used. [...] Usually, her setup involves a face-to-camera take in a spare room of her family's Nairobi home, potato chips in hand, and thin, black 90s-style sunglasses on her face. Viewers weren't transported to another world but more so were made to rationalize the ridiculousness of the one they were in.

(2021: n.pag.)

As of July 2022, Majimbo has 2.5 million Instagram followers and 1.2 million TikTok followers. She has further been engaged by international media and brands including Valentino, Comedy Central, Bumble, the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards and Netflix's sub-brand Strong Black Lead.

Another similar sensation is the 30-year-old Nigerian, Charity Ekezie, who has become popular for producing content that pokes fun at stereotypes and tropes about Africa. Her videos are usually sarcastic but humorous responses

to users who ask her reductive questions about the continent. In an interview with Chaigne, Ekezie notes:

I decided to just try another approach, by responding in a funny way to someone who asked me if we had water. So, one day I was with my cousins at my house in the village. And I was like, 'Let's make a TikTok. Let's do something sarcastic. Let's dress up like maidens and go to our village river and make a video'. And I thought, 'Wait, we should write on that video: "When they say Africans have no water"'. And the reaction was crazy.

(2022: n.pag.)

This format largely informs the style of her videos. In one of her videos, posted on 27 January 2022, Ekezie responds to a user who asks, 'Africa has internet and tiktok?' She sarcastically responds that Africa in fact does not have the internet and that in order to be able to produce TikTok videos, a community chief priest visits every family and does an incantation that mystically makes the internet appear on your phone. As she says this, a character appears behind her, ululating and blowing a white powder in her direction. She looks at her iPhone and immediately begins to squeal with delight that it is now connected to the internet. As of July 2022, the video has 10.9 million views, while Ekezie has 1.3 million TikTok followers.

Another dimension to TikTok is its more communal basis as the #african-tiktok hashtag shows. Through this hashtag, users post content about shared African cultural practices, experiences and themes, and other popular entertainment. By March 2022, the hashtag had 1 billion views, which had grown to 1.4 billion views by May 2022 and 2.1 billion views by July 2022. Further analysis shows the existence of #KenyanTikTok (6 billion views), #NigerianTikTok (6.6 billion views), #GhanaTikTok (3.3 billion views), #UgandaTikTok (1.8 billion views), #ZimbabweTikTok (38.1 million views), #MalawiTikTok (60.5 million views) and #SouthAfricanTikTok (985.8 million views), among others. As such, young Africans are connecting and creating a digital space and practice that speaks to their local (or national), continental and diasporic settings, thus indexing information about a range of issues and information, which can be searched globally.

The most important attribute of digital media is how it allows for social relationships to be mediated in new ways via the devices, applications and platforms that facilitate this (Bernal 2021). Young Africans are, thereby, finding creative ways to speak for themselves – and to each other – in important ways that challenge Afropessimism. An example, with 5.9 million views (as of July 2022), is the #AfricansInUkraine hashtag which was able to shed light on the circumstances of Africans in Ukraine at the beginning of the 2022 Ukraine crisis. Young Africans can now simultaneously participate in global conversations – such as around the Ukraine war – while promoting content about their own local experiences.

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND DATA COLLECTION

This study sought to understand if, and how, three popular social media trends on TikTok contributed to young Africans' countering of Afropessimism at a time when media framed the COVID-19 pandemic as being likely to have its worst impacts on the African continent. Below follow more details around how data were chosen and collected.

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Purposive sampling is sometimes referred to as purposeful or subjective sampling and is a technique whereby the researcher employs subjectivity to select data or participants from a designated realm. This form of sampling is informed by the researcher's judgements of what data will prove to be most effective and yield the richest findings. In this way, purposive sampling is the opposite of random sampling in which the researcher relinquishes any control over what data or participants are chosen. For this study, the data that were sampled was done so purposively in that the researcher first looked at preselected hashtags that were deemed to be in line with the guiding principles of the study. The selected hashtags were #JerusalemaChallenge, #DontRushChallenge and #DontLeaveMeChallenge, which are discussed in greater detail in the following section.

#JERUSALEMACHALLENGE

The #JerusalemaChallenge was sparked by an Angolan dance troupe's viral dance routine to the South African hit song 'Jerusalema' by 26-year-old Master KG, featuring Nomcebo Zikode, who is 36. The #JerusalemaChallenge hashtag inspired countless videos from around the world of people dancing to the song in a similar sequence and challenging others to do the same. Because of its socially distanced choreography, the #JerusalemaChallenge allowed for COVID-19-safe collective entertainment in otherwise isolating times. By October 2020, a few months into the trend, content with the #JerusalemaChallenge hashtag had almost 200 million TikTok views, with the song itself gaining over a billion video views and sound-tracking over 800 million creations on the same platform (Hissong 2020). As of July 2022, the hashtag had 677.8 million views on TikTok.

#DONTRUSHCHALLENGE

The #DontRushChallenge began at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when then-20-year-old Nigerian student, Toluwalase Asolo, and a group of her friends initiated it as they prepared to travel their separated ways to quarantine in different parts of the United Kingdom (where they were studying). In the videos, which were soon going viral globally, participants are coordinated in a sequence that sees them passing a makeup accessory to each other and transforming from a makeup-less look to a more glamorous aesthetic. In a *Glamour* magazine article about the viral trend, Cacciatore and Schallon note that the challenge, which is named after the song, 'Don't Rush' (by UK artists, Young T and Bugsey) to which it plays 'has been replicated by everyone from beauty bloggers to drag queens', as well as New York's essential workers (2020: n.pag.). By their time of writing their article – in May 2020 – the #DontRushChallenge hashtag is reported to have yielded more than 2 million views on TikTok and Instagram. As of July 2022, #DontRushChallenge has had 1.2 billion views on TikTok.

#DONTLEAVEMECHALLENGE

The #DontLeaveMeChallenge represents yet another viral social media hashtag that appeared in 2020. Its emergence is attributed to 31-year-old Nigerian comedian, Josh2Funny (also known as Josh Alfred), and has spawned a series of videos in which participants engage in dialogue and riddle off puns

and other wordplays, as they run from each other shouting, 'Don't leave me!', thus giving the challenge its name.

In a Buzzfeed article with Onibada, Josh2Funny notes the importance of the camera operator shouting, 'Don't leave me!' in the challenge:

'I think it was the way my hype-man Bello said "don't leave me", is what made it funny and catchy for people', said Alfred. Coupled with the fact that puns are always engaging and a bit of a brain-tasking game, I think that's what grabbed people's attention and why people are giving it a try.

(2020: n.pag.)

As of July 2022, the hashtag has yielded 2.2 billion TikTok views.

DATA ANALYSIS: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

One can think of social media videos and posts as texts, and so one can apply textual analysis towards understanding them. Textual analysis is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of, and communicate, life and life experiences (Allen 2017). Often, the messages within these texts are influenced by, and are reflective of, larger social structures; they therefore either reinforce or challenge the historical, cultural and political contexts in which they have been developed. Thus, a wider understanding of social context and structures that influence the messages within texts is essential for deeper analysis. Researchers conducting textual analysis understand there can be a variety of interpretations as 'interpretation of texts depends on contextual information such as genre, wider discourses in culture and intertexts' (McKee 2003: 131) and the researchers' own knowledge of the culture within which texts circulate.

In order to conduct this textual analysis, a set of criteria was created to tabulate the content about the videos chosen from the selected TikTok and Instagram influencers and hashtags. The criteria included captions associated with the videos, the number of video views and engagement and the genre and/ themes broached. Themes were surfaced iteratively as the videos were watched and analysed. Thereafter, videos were grouped and coded according to themes identified, in an attempt to analyse patterns.

FINDINGS

A total of 72 TikTok videos (24 per hashtag) were analysed. Eight themes emerged from the analysis. These were (1) humour, (2) parody, (3) fashion and lifestyle, (4) dance, (5) celebrity, (6) public awareness, (7) culture and (8) corporate communication. As Table 1 shows, these themes were dispersed across the hashtags, with some being dominant for a specific hashtag (e.g. the theme of humour was coded 24 times for #DontLeaveMeChallenge, five times for #DontRushChallenge and once for #JerusalemChallenge). It is also important to note that videos did not always merely satisfy one theme or fit within a single categorization. For example, as Table 1 shows, the total number of times that #JerusalemChallenge was thematically coded is 34. This means that of the 24 videos analysed for the hashtag, some were coded under more than one theme and fulfilled multiple themes.

Some themes, like dance or fashion and lifestyle, were easier to categorize than others. For example, the distinction between humour and parody

needed careful consideration as both offer comedic value. For the purposes of the study, however, parody was defined as when a content producer made an impersonation of someone else or employed obvious mimicry to some sort of comedic effect.

It is increasingly challenging to differentiate between a celebrity and a social media influencer, as both tend to enjoy access to large audiences and have significant public profiles. As Palomeque Recio (2020) observes, social media influencers occupy a unique position within the consumption and cultural production sectors as they can commodify and promote themselves within those sectors, according to the amount of celebrity capital they have accrued. As such, they can be read as celebrities, because of their possession of this celebrity capital. However, for the purpose of this study, a distinction was sought between the two.

A celebrity was therefore defined as someone who had a significant public profile which was not as a result of social media, but other outlets such as traditional media (TV, cinema) or sport, pageantry and other such areas of publicity. This was an important distinction to make because – by virtue of the data collection method used – most of the top videos that the search yielded were published by users with significant followings (often of millions) who could be read as social media influencers. Therefore, thematically coding their videos as containing the element of celebrity would have significantly skewed the data. Furthermore, it would have been difficult to differentiate their celebrity element from that of celebrities who are not so by virtue of social media influence. Such distinctions can, of course, become challenging when one considers that a social media influencer can thereafter become a popular TV celebrity, for example. But in this case, the distinctions were somewhat easier to make (by running Google searches of influencers to see if their influence reached beyond the social media domain).

Culture was yet another theme that led to some deliberation about the definition. As many aspects of the videos analysed could be classified as cultural, depending on what definition was employed, the theme was narrowed down to any representations that portrayed cultural hybridity or mixing in terms of adaptation of the challenges.

Table 1: A summary of the themes emerging and frequency per hashtag.

Theme	#JerusalemChallenge	#DontRushChallenge	#DontLeaveMeChallenge
Humour (31%)	1	5	24
Parody (4%)		1	3
Fashion and lifestyle (12%)		12	
Dance (32%)	22	9	
Celebrity (8%)	3	5	
Public awareness (6%)	6		
Culture (4%)	1	1	2
Corporate communication (2%)	2		

HUMOUR AND DANCE

Humour and dance were the most recurrent themes across the videos analysed with humour constituting 31 per cent of the total thematic focus and dance 32 per cent. It must be noted that each theme's high recurrence was largely driven by a single hashtag; in the case of humour, 24 of the 30 times this was coded for was attributed to the #DontLeaveMeChallenge hashtag. And in the case of dance, 22 of the 31 times it was coded for was connected to the #JerusalemaChallenge hashtag.

This is hardly surprising as each hashtag relied on a certain dominant theme to become viral. The clever wordplays that the #DontLeaveMeChallenge generated lent themselves to humorous associations. For example, in one of the videos analysed, a man postures as though he is a pastor speaking to a congregation. He asks one of his audience members to give him a key, which he puts in his back pocket. He asks the audience member if he wants his key back and he says yes. He then reaches into his pocket and gives him back a chocolate, to the audience's confusion. He then shows the brand of chocolate to the camera (a Yorkie) and then says, 'I gave you back your key [a wordplay on Yorkie]'. His audience erupts into noise and a drum plays.

Similarly, with the #JerusalemaChallenge being a dance challenge, it naturally lent itself to featuring a dominant dance theme. For instance, one video features a caption that reads, 'Working off that thanksgiving meal with dance'. In the video, a group dances to the Jerusalema Challenge routine, with the song playing in the background. One participant holds a plate of food in her hands as she dances, just as the Angolan dance troupe in the original choreography does. In another video, a group organized like a flash mob dances to the 'Jerusalema' song and choreography outside a London subway station.

Nonetheless, there was still overlap of these themes across hashtags; humour was coded five times for the #DontRushChallenge and once for the #JerusalemaChallenge, while dance was coded nine times for the #DontRushChallenge. An example of the humour employed in the #DontRushChallenge is provided by a video in which popular South African influencer, Lasizwe Dambuza, attempts to participate in the challenge. However, when he waves a makeup brush over the camera, cuing the usual transition, nothing changes. He then calls out to a friend to inform that 'this thing' (the makeup brush, one assumes) is not working properly. The friend responds that it works fine and that the real problem, is in fact, Lasizwe. In another, the user does the challenge but transitions to look like different people (by using filters) which is confusing to her.

As the #DontRushChallenge also features a popular dance track, some users simultaneously danced and participated in the makeup transitions, while some entirely abandoned taking part in the makeup challenge and only danced. For example, in one video two participants dance to a remixed version of the original 'Don't Rush' song. There is no exchange of makeup accessories, or any transitions.

While the theme of parody showed up much less frequently in the analysis (at just 4 per cent), it is discussed here because of its close associations to humour. For example, in one #DontLeaveMeChallenge video, the user is dressed like Donald Trump and dons a wig and has spray tanned his skin. He speaks (also like Trump) and engages in a series of word plays with the person shooting the video shouting, 'Don't leave me!' and 'Take me with you!'

FASHION AND LIFESTYLE

Thematically, fashion and lifestyle only emerged within the #DontRushChallenge. In one video, a sequence of women engages in the challenge, using makeup accessories, blush palettes and even an orange to cue the transitions. They all transform to wearing African-themed vibrantly coloured clothes. In the final three transitions, the women use champagne to cue the changeover to the next participant, with the last two participants sipping from giant glasses. The video conveys both a strong fashion and makeup aesthetic, while also speaking to a lifestyle of comfort and luxury.

In another video, an American user who is a makeup influencer follows the format of the original video for a virtual prom: the caption to the video reads 'Me and my friends getting ready for PROM! Virtually...'. As the video was posted in May 2020, the idea of a virtual prom would have made sense to many given that the world was in lockdown with minimal access to physical events. The video sees participants (some of whom were identifiable as other makeup and cosmetics influencers) using makeup accessories to transition from a simpler aesthetic to wearing makeup and donning ballroom gowns, suits other fancy attire and suits.

CELEBRITY

Celebrities only featured within the #JerusalemChallenge and the #DontRushChallenge. In a video for the #JerusalemChallenge, Nomcebo Zikode (the vocalist on the 'Jerusalem' song) initiates the former Ivory Coast and Chelsea FC footballer, Didier Drogba, into the dance sequence. He follows her initial moves as she encourages him by saying, 'Drogba, Drogba' and then dances along with her. In another video, Erin Holland, a former Miss World Australia and Indian Premier League cricket presenter, is seen dancing in front of a stadium audience as soon as the 'Jerusalem' song begins to play. The audience cheers her on. In one #DontRushChallenge video, American actor, Tia Mowry, holds her daughter and dances as she goes through a makeup transition and change of clothes. Another video features Maisie Smith, an English actor and singer who has appeared on 'Eastenders' and 'Strictly Come Dancing'.

PUBLIC AWARENESS AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Public awareness and corporate communication were themes that only emerged within analysis of #JerusalemChallenge. Of the six videos thematically coded for public awareness, three feature hospital staff in scrubs dancing to the challenge. While not overtly stating a public safety or awareness message, it is evident that many healthcare workers – while bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic – took part in different social media entertainment challenges to convey a light-hearted but serious message about staying safe during those times. Other users, however, used the opportunity differently. In one video, a user is topless and shows off a six-pack. He plays with his dreadlocks, then removes a stethoscope from around his neck as he smiles into the camera. 'Jerusalem' plays in the background, but to a more laid-back pace. The Spanish in-video caption translates to say 'follow me comment and let's say together no to racism. VIVA Africa'. While this could be read as the user largely engaging in self-promotion, this too can be said of most of the videos analysed. Nonetheless, his messaging against racism suggests a use of the trending hashtag to promote a more political message.

Corporate communication was also, in many ways, linked to messaging around the COVID-19 pandemic. In one of the videos thematically coded thus, and posted in January 2021, the crew of an Austrian Airlines flight re-enacts the #JerusalemChallenge as they dance amid the grounding of international flights. A cabin crew member is seen moving through the empty cockpit with a face mask covering part of her face, further enforcing the message of masking up and staying safe so that flight travel can once more resume. In the other video coded thus, the flight crew of Air Madagascar dances to the #JerusalemChallenge, alongside members of the general public, sometimes next to a parked aeroplane of the airline.

CULTURE

One video thematically coded under culture within the #JerusalemChallenge features Nomcebo singing to the song. The in-video captions move to translate the words to the song to Spanish as they are sung. Within the #DontRushChallenge, a user in a hijab waves the makeup brush at the camera. She transitions to a made-up look wearing an ornate traditional dress in the design of the fashion of the horn of Africa. She begins to dance, as though in traditional format; the video does not feature the 'Don't Rush' song, but rather a sound that is once, more typical of that region. A look at the user's bio reveals that she is geolocated to the Afar Triangle and features the flags of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti.

Two further instances of the theme of culture are observed within the #DontLeaveMeChallenge. In one video, the user makes various wordplays that refer to Islamic identity and features, with the person shooting the video giving chase and shouting out to the user in Arabic. In another video, a user makes use of another content producer's #DontLeaveMeChallenge video but provides Russian subtitles that translate the English wordplays.

DISCUSSION

Over the years, Africans have gained important social media traction for a range of political causes via platforms such as Twitter. While humour, as shown through the previously discussed hashtag #IfAfricaWasABar, has played an important role on Twitter, this has not been a dominant theme on the platform. The performance of humour provides young people an outlet to express their subjectivities via digital communication (Inyabri et al. 2021). And so the emergence of new social media platforms such as TikTok, in particular, is playing an important role in allowing for young Africans' articulations of humour as well as other thematic areas that are not necessarily linked to political activism and/ or social justice.

The trending hashtags analysed in this study all appeared at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when it was often suggested that the African continent would be hit worst by the pandemic. As western nations (such as the United States and the United Kingdom) struggled under increased disease burden, content such as the #DontRushChallenge, #DontLeaveMeChallenge and #JerusalemChallenge hashtags kept global social media audiences entertained and sometimes, even socially aware.

This study is obviously not intending to suggest that the emergence of these trends does not mean that Africa did not suffer its own COVID-19 crises. Rather, the emergence of these trends contributes to refuting simplistic

assumptions about what Africans can produce and engage in, especially in times when they are expected to lack any sort of agency.

The fact that a gospel Zulu song became an anthem for collective COVID-19 solidarity and entertainment is quite significant as many users would not have understood the words of the song or identified the religious genre it belonged to. But the song's creolization of African cultures, through its infusion of Angolan dance techniques created a hybrid African aesthetic that was easy for others to partake in. Given the restrictive regulations of the time – and limited opportunities for travel and engagement with other cultures and cultural spaces during COVID-19 – it makes sense that this trend would enjoy virality. As Kabir notes:

Like the revival of line dances during the Black Lives Matter protests, 'Jerusalem' went viral during the coronavirus pandemic because the dance challenge enacted a simple way to connect and build community: especially at a time when people were hungering for these possibilities.

(2020: n.pag.)

Online self-representation asks that researchers be concerned with issues such as how subjects represent themselves, what informs their decisions to represent themselves and how they secure an audience for their self-representation (Thumin 2013). While the purpose of this study was not to try to understand the content producers' motivations for producing social media content, it is important to think through how the initiators of each of these trends presented themselves and how this may have impacted how they secured an audience for their content.

As already discussed, the #JerusalemChallenge allowed for collective and safe sociality in otherwise isolating times. With its focus on comedic wordplays, the #DontLeaveMeChallenge also served to provide a humorous distraction from the monotony of COVID-19 lockdown life. Often featuring users' transformations from their home or work attire to more glamorous looks 'reminiscent of red-carpet walks' (Gunn 2021: n.pag.), it also makes sense that the #DontRushChallenge gained as much popularity as it did, given that most people who participated would have also been homebound and therefore unable to dress up and go out. As the findings showed, some who participated were makeup and cosmetics social media influencers. Naturally, engaging in the trend also leveraged their own personal brands. As Palomeque Recio (2020) observes, social media influencers are figures who wield great agency to show consumers how to make oneself while engaging in consumer culture by negotiating the symbolic capital of commodities.

A key question, therefore, emerges. Would these trends have gone viral were it not for COVID-19? That is difficult to evaluate, especially since TikTok enjoyed a lot of popular uptake as result of the pandemic. Such evaluation is further complicated by that fact that social media influencers – as opinion leaders – wield power to contribute to the construction of meaning during a collective crisis, offering guidelines for present and future behaviours (Palomeque Recio 2020). Social media are, therefore, enabling new modes of connection, interaction and identification of African voices (Pahl 2016) and offering Africans an opportunity to cultivate representational agency (Mkono 2019; Yékú 2017). So while not overtly seeking to challenge Afropessimistic stereotypes, these trends can be read as offering subliminal pushback against

ideas of Africa and Africans. Furthermore, they challenge the idea of global cultural trends as flowing from the West to the rest of the world.

Another point of query could be whether this can still be deemed African pushback if, as the findings show, these trends have generally been taken up and made viral by non-Africans.

With their large followings, TikTok influencers are generally more visible and interactive than regular users (Eriksson Krutrök and Åkerlund 2022). As such, part of the mechanism of virality is that a trend has to reach other influencers beyond a geographical or geopolitical space. Beyond promoting individual self-expression, TikTok also enables collective expression and sense of belonging (Stahl and Literat 2022). And as Mpofu observes, the COVID-19 pandemic created a 'global group identity' of sorts as it came to define shared human relations and experiences (2021: 3). He further adds that humour – and humour in the context of the pandemic – served to extend this group identity. Similar could be said of the other themes that the study emerged such as dance, and fashion and lifestyle, among others, which all relate to collective sociality.

As Adenekan et al. observe: 'African digital communities continue to explore new forms of self-articulation online, and the impact of their interventions often has felt liberatory' (2020: 5).

The above shows that African digital users are exploring – and finding – new and different gateways for articulating causes, building solidarity and challenging reductive notions about their lives, lifestyles and continent. In the process, they are expressing a much needed freedom.

CONCLUSION

Countering Afropessimism is not always overt or, even, intentional. Unlike the more direct approach of Siyanda Mohutsiwa, as discussed in the Introduction, or #KOT (Kenyans on Twitter), young Africans are spawning global digital trends via TikTok to similarly offer counternarratives about perceived lack of African agency. With the platform's strong audio-visual language, this offers space for content that entertains and connects users across various divides.

Across a range of platforms, it is evident that Africans are using digital media and digital platforms to cultivate agency and to share more dynamic and nuanced narratives, which challenge historical and recurrent stereotypes about Africa and Africans. This gives new life to the catchphrase 'This is Africa', but in ways that augur well for Africa and Africans' counters to Afropessimism.

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