

Article

“Leave Our Husbands Alone”: The TikTok Discursive Practices of South African Women in Spousal Relations with African Immigrants

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Abstract

South Africa has been receiving a high number of undocumented immigrants for years. As Africa’s second largest economy and the biggest in the South African Development Community region, it has witnessed a surge in illegal migration. Some undocumented immigrants marry local women, establishing spousal and familial relations. The government has taken a legal stand against undocumented immigrants. It deports thousands annually. A grassroots movement, *Operation Dudula*, has initiated efforts to locate undocumented immigrants. Its modus operandi has been condemned for lacking ubuntu. A void is left when undocumented immigrants are deported, leaving their families in South Africa. Some South African women have turned to TikTok to express their views on migration and familyhood. This study attempts to answer these questions: What are the TikTok discursive practices of South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants? In what ways do the women legitimise the relationships? How does TikTok function as a subaltern counter-public formation? Data were gathered through digital archival research and subjected to a multimodal critical discourse analysis. The findings show that the women celebrate the relations as an achievement. They construct them as pathways to prosperity. The women also invoked racial discourses to legitimise the relations. Through TikTok, they recontextualised discourses on migration by deconstructing dominant narratives that project African immigrants through lenses of criminality.

Keywords: South Africa; immigration; spousal relations; TikTok; discursive practices



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1. Introduction

There is a body of research on how legacy media have mediated migration ([Danso & McDonald, 2001](#); [Blinder & Jeannet, 2018](#); [Chiumbu & Moyo, 2018](#); [Sitto-Kaunda, 2024](#); [Raborife et al., 2024](#)), but the literature at the intersection of migration and social media is thin. Contemporary studies are also Eurocentric and seem to have been inspired by the European refugee crisis of 2015 ([Eberl et al., 2018](#); [Lecheler et al., 2015](#)). African scholars have been hesitant to dissect the implications of social media on migration discourses. This is even though countries like South Africa are receiving high numbers of undocumented immigrants from neighbouring countries like Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe, and West Africa. Digital media constitutes strategic socio-technological infrastructure that facilitates interaction and enables a digital life ([Lupton, 2018](#)). Migration has ignited rancorous debate, but extant research “displays significant omissions with analysts neglecting digital

and social media” (Walsh, 2022, p. 153). Online publics “play an increasingly important role in shaping public opinion on immigrants and migration” (Ekman, 2019, p. 606).

Undocumented immigrants have been coming to South Africa for decades. Many such immigrants establish spousal relationships and families with local women. A grassroots movement codenamed *Operation Dudula* emerged in 2025 and is carrying out door-to-door campaigns to locate undocumented immigrants and cause their deportation. In extreme instances, it has barred undocumented immigrants from having access to public hospitals or schools, and has shut down their businesses (Pongweni, 2023; Ntanzi, 2025). Such governmental and civic group operations do not consider the spousal relationships between local women and immigrants. A void is left when the undocumented immigrants are deported, leaving their families behind. Those affected have taken to TikTok to express their views. We examined the TikTok discursive practices of South African women in spousal relations with Zimbabwean or Nigerian immigrants. Our study answers the following questions: What are the TikTok discursive practices of South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants? In what ways do the women legitimise the relationships? How does TikTok function as a subaltern counter-public formation? The study is qualitative and adopts a case-study design. It was guided by the social media critical discourse analysis theory. Data gathered through digital archival research were subjected to a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA).

2. Mainstream Media Narratives on Migration

There is growing interest within the academy in how the media are reporting on immigration. Migration is “one of the decisive social-political topics worldwide” (Lecheler et al., 2015, p. 961) and remains “an interesting and relevant subject” for academic research (Blinder & Jeannet, 2018, p. 1445). This derives from the socio-economic and political impact that migration poses to the host country. The media have the power to influence audience perceptions on immigration and immigrants (Sitto-Kaunda, 2024; Raborife et al., 2024; Chiumbu & Moyo, 2018; Tarisayi & Manik, 2020; Lecheler et al., 2015; Blinder & Jeannet, 2018; Danso & McDonald, 2001). We note that the extant literature is limited to examining how legacy media have covered migration and their influence on citizens’ perception of immigrants. In a study on how the British press reported on migration, Blinder and Jeannet (2018, p. 1445) observed that the language used “had a causal effect” on public perceptions of immigrants. They, however, noted that how the media framed migrants’ status informed how the British perceived them. Media portrayal of immigrants as highly skilled influenced the British against perceiving them as illegals (Blinder & Jeannet, 2018, p. 1456). Blinder and Jeannet (2018, p. 1447) insist that “media portrayals are more likely to have far reaching effects on the construction of mental images of immigrants”. Lecheler et al. (2015, p. 695) also noted that “the way news media handle the migration issue can and does influence perceptions and attitudes”. They observed that media discourses on immigrants are problem-centred, and this flames negative perceptions. Media portrayal of immigrants as a threat to the host country’s culture or as competing for economic resources with citizens influences their attitudes towards foreigners (Costello & Hodson, 2011; Florack et al., 2003).

The South African media have adopted a similar editorial posture when reporting on immigrants and immigration. They have been “extremely unanalytical and uncritical”, thereby perpetuating negative stereotypes about immigrants contributing to xenophobia (Danso & McDonald, 2001). By calling immigrants “criminals”, “illegal” “aliens”, and “job stealers”, Danso and McDonald (2001) argue that the press promotes negative citizen perceptions. Ironically, such terms are never ascribed to undocumented Europeans and North Americans living in South Africa. These narratives criminalise, racialise and

Africanise immigration. The South African media have “wittingly or unwittingly” used narrative frames that justify the exclusion of foreigners, thereby entrenching the perception of insiders and outsiders, citizens and non-citizens (Chiumbu & Moyo, 2018, p. 136). Whereas media effects on citizens’ perception of foreigners are not instant, sustained anti-migrant narratives ultimately shape and structure attitudes towards non-citizens (Butcher, 2009, Dunaway et al., 2011).

Studies on media and migration are Eurocentric and peripherise Latin America and Africa, as observed by Lecheler et al. (2015, p. 699) when she emphasised the need to “break the existing geographical and cultural bias”. We filled this academic lacuna by examining how South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants discuss migration on the social media platform TikTok. Such an intervention is relevant and significant since “visual dimensions have not yet received the place it deserves” (Lecheler et al., 2015, p. 699). TikTok is a multimodal social media platform that enables the sharing of videos, audios, texts and pictures. Visuals “transport meanings often not explicitly addressed in the textual counterpart” (Geise & Baden, 2015 as cited by Lecheler et al., 2015, p. 700) and are decoded differently by individuals.

Digital Media Discourses on Migration

Owing to their virality and participatory characteristics, social media platforms have become significant avenues for debating migration (Raborife et al., 2024; Sitto-Kaunda, 2024). Whereas extant studies are fixated on how legacy media have mediated migration, research at the intersection of social media and migration is thin. Yantseva (2020) notes that social media debates on migration are dominated by discourses about how migrants threaten the host country’s cultural and economic wellbeing, thereby encouraging protectionist policies. Such discourses dominate social media discourses in countries such as Sweden, hitherto celebrated for their pro-migrant policies and exceptionalism. Online humanitarian discourses on migration are outweighed by protectionist narratives, which, in some instances, force European governments to reconsider their positions by tightening policies and sealing borders. In European contexts, social media provides avenues for the expression of racist and right-wing discourses (Yantseva, 2020; Pöyhtäri et al., 2019). This highlights the power of social media in shaping and structuring narratives and perceptions about migration. Social media “serves as transmitter of frames articulated by a variety of social forces that compete over the dominance of their frames and together formulate public discourse on a given topic” (Yantseva, 2020, p. 3). Thus, whereas social media has potential to advocate for pro-migrant policies, it can equally promote prejudicial frames about immigrants.

Ekman (2019) posits that social media facilitates the formation of affective groups that normalise anti-migrant discourses. Affective groups imply social media groups whose establishment is based on the sharing of emotions and sentiments. Such groups seldom engage in rational debate. Online publics harbour citizens’ “emotions of insecurity and generate anti-immigrant attitudes” (Ekman, 2019, p. 606); hence, affective social media groups amplify anti-immigrant attitudes (Farkas et al., 2018). The anti-migrant discourses hitherto marginalised by legacy media find expression on social media, enabling an assemblage of narratives that “other” non-citizens (Ekman, 2019, p. 607). The algorithmic clustering of digital media content mobilises citizens against migrants (Ekman, 2019). Ekman (2019, p. 609) notes that citizens supportive of migrants online are “depicted as mentally disabled and sexually frustrated”. This implies weaponisation of the strategic socio-technical infrastructure, which erodes social media’s potential to facilitate rational debate. In South Africa, social media is deployed by citizens to promote nativist discourses that other non-citizens, what Chenzi (2021, p. 503) terms “autochthons” versus “aliens”

narratives. It is limited to spreading tension between natives and non-citizens. [Mohlomi \(2020\)](#) points to the existence of tolerant and intolerant online perspectives on immigrants in South Africa. Tolerant netizens view migrants as victims of xenophobia. The intolerant perspective prioritises South Africans and “others” non-citizens.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by [KhosraviNik’s \(2018\)](#) social media critical discourse analysis theory. The SM-CDA is a scholarly response to the expansion of digital device use. It adapts the traditional critical discourse analysis to analyse how social media platforms have become new locales of power. SM-CDA is a critical analysis of social media discourses. Generally, CDA “examine aspects of society through the linguistic and discourse analytical lens” ([Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018](#), p. 2). SM-CDA provides a framework for the dissection of discourses generated and shared on social media spaces. It treats discourse “as forms of structured representations across a range of communication including the emerging meaning-making artefacts and practices across social media” ([KhosraviNik, 2023](#), p. 58). Social media provides multimodal participatory communication, “which could lead to a fully decentralised and democratised access to discursive power” ([KhosraviNik, 2023](#), p. 582). SM-CDA theory assumes that social media has revolutionised communication, ending the era of legacy media’s top-down communication and switching to a bottom-up discourse formation where netizens “draw on a range of semiotic resources to amplify their voices or even to recontextualise content” ([Kopf, 2026](#), pp. 221–222 citing [KhosraviNik, 2023](#), p. 2). Thus, social media has created “new possibilities for alternative points of view or for challenging social systems and power” ([Bouvier & Machin, 2018](#), p. 180), facilitating the “diversification of discourse”. The social networking platforms “function as mouthpieces for the people whose voices and version of the world are typically not represented in traditional top-down media” ([Kopf, 2026](#), p. 222). SM-CDA assumes that social media has shifted the loci of power ([KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014](#)) by giving the voiceless a voice to tell their own stories. This model aids our understanding of how South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants use TikTok to share their experiences, legitimise their relations and challenge dominant discourses on migration.

4. Methodology

The study is qualitative and adopts a case study design. Through purposive sampling, we selected 25 TikTok videos generated by five South African women whose content suggested that they were in spousal relations with African immigrants. The women’s identities are pseudo-named TikTok A (TA), TikTok B (TB), TikTok C (TC), TikTok D (TD), and TikTok E (TE). These were the most prominent accounts based on the number of followers and views. The TikTok account statistics showed that TA had 51,600 followers and 643,000 likes. We purposively selected five of the women’s most popular TikTok posts on the subject under study. TA’s most popular TikTok posts attracted a combined 449,000 views. TB had 39,800 followers and 404,500 likes, and her posts attracted a combined 247,466 views. TC had 8439 followers and 69,600 likes, and earned 246,894 views. TD had 52,700 followers, 1.1 million likes and 496,000 views, while TE had 18,000 followers and 190,200 likes, and her posts garnered 314,100 views. We confined ourselves to the five accounts and 25 videos shared between 2025 and 2026, as we were interested in the depth and not the breadth of understanding ([Guest et al., 2006](#); [Padgett, 2008](#)). The period witnessed increased anti-foreigner activities by civil groups in South Africa. The videos imply that the women were dating or in spousal relationships with Zimbabweans or Nigerians. Zimbabweans and Nigerians constitute a huge percentage of South Africa’s immigrant population. We treated

TikTok as a data repository for discourse analytical explication (Kopf, 2026). This involves “studying discourse material taken from social media to reach insights into how people from different backgrounds have grappled with certain issues” (Kopf, 2026, p. 223). To gather data for the study, we logged into TikTok and searched for the words “married to *makwerekwere*”, *jollofina*, “married to Zimbabwe”, “married to Nigerian” and “married to foreigner”. Initially, we retrieved a TikTok video codenamed TB. Owing to the algorithmic nature of digital media, TikTok flagged for our attention all content on South African women married to “*makwerekwere*”, which we archived; this constitutes the study’s population. TikTok’s multimodal mechanics enable the sharing of videos, providing rich semiotic resources for the SM-CDA. We subjected the videos to a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), as any critical evaluation of social media must consider the multimodal characteristics of data (Sakki, 2025; Karppinen, 2021; Bouvier & Machin, 2018). TikTok “offers a diverse range of multimodal communication tools, including visuals, audio, text, emojis, and special effects” (Sakki, 2025, p. 155). This justifies the deployment of the multimodal approach in the data analysis.

We watched the selected videos several times to familiarise ourselves with the content and its import. This was followed by a multimodal transcription of the videos, paying attention to rhetorical devices, visual elements (e.g., clothes, emojis), textual elements (font, colour), interpersonal elements (e.g., gaze), sound (e.g., music and voice tone) and even habits and actions (e.g., dancing). Sakki (2025) notes that the multimodal transcription of videos aids the search for patterns in data, which reveal meaning. Through the MCDA, we identified the content (what the women said in the posts), forms (how the women said it), and function (the implications of what they said socially and politically).

5. Findings

The study examined the TikTok discursive practices of South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants. It sought to establish how the women constructed and legitimised the relationships while examining the extent to which TikTok functioned as a subaltern counter-public formation. The findings show how the women celebrated the relations as an achievement, although society censured them. The women legitimised the relationships as pathways to prosperity. They also invoked racial discourses to justify the relationships—“if he was white, you would endorse the relationship”. The findings also demonstrated how TikTok functioned as a subaltern counter-public formation by affording the women a platform to contest dominant discourses about African immigrants.

5.1. Relations with Immigrant African Men Celebrated as an Achievement

South African women in spousal relationships with African immigrants construct and celebrate them as an achievement, despite disapproval from some sections of society. Ironically, they depict South African men as incompatible for matrimony. For example, TE constructed her marriage to a Nigerian immigrant as the best decision she had ever made. She shared her celebratory TikTok video at a volatile moment in South Africa, when violent demonstrations were rocking Eastern Cape following the alleged coronation of a Nigerian Igbo man as a king in East London. TE is married to an Igbo man. The video captioned “proudly Igbo wife” captures TE stepping out of a massive storeyed white mansion draped in expensive apparel. She had visited Nigeria with her husband. TE gets into a black Mercedes Benz and drives around an upmarket neighbourhood. Nigerian music is playing in the background. The video uses wide-angle shots to capture both the characters and their luxurious surroundings, emphasising wealth, confidence, and social status. The framing allows the viewers to appreciate the scale of the setting and reinforces the aspirational

lifestyle being portrayed. The camera also captures the surrounding environment, depicting multi-storey mansions lining the Port Harcourt streets. It is a defiant depiction of opulence.

TE shared another video of her mother-in-law teaching her how to prepare a Nigerian dish. The video is inscribed “Cooking with MIL (mother-in-law) is always fun. Proudly Igbo wife ❤️”. The video uses a casual medium and close-up shots to show the woman selecting ingredients and interacting with her mother-in-law. The camera follows everyday domestic activities, creating a sense of realism while emphasising family relationships and shared cultural practices. Nigerian music is playing in the background. The music reinforces traditional gender roles and cultural expectations regarding marriage, respect, and family life. The interaction between the woman and her mother-in-law symbolises family harmony, respect for elders, and the continuation of cultural traditions. The domestic setting further signifies the importance of family, heritage, and shared cultural practices. The video uses crosscutting between the mother-in-law and the woman’s cooking activities to emphasise their connection and mutual understanding. This editing technique highlights family unity and the transmission of cultural values across generations. The characters wear traditional Nigerian attire suitable for the kitchen and domestic setting. The simple, yet culturally significant, costumes contribute to an authentic representation of everyday Nigerian family life while reinforcing tradition and cultural identity.

Besides enacting an image of a happy marriage, the video captures the depth of Nigerian civilisation in accepting a non-indigene daughter-in-law when contrasted to South African society’s rejection of a non-native African son-in-law. TE implores South Africans to respect her marriage:

I ask you to respect us as well. We ask you to respect our choices. I am not against people who are fighting illegal immigrants. Yes, you have a right. This country is yours, but these bodies are ours and you have no right to tell us what to do with our bodies. We will not be silenced by your insults. Allow the law to take its course by dealing with illegal immigrants.

TE attributes her successful life to the Nigerian spouse when she posts a video captioned, “*Indlala yam*—my poverty 🇳🇮🇪🤔🤔🤔”. Thanks to my poverty. I threw myself to this ‘my friend’”. She is with her Nigerian spouse. They are wearing designer clothes and gold watches. Nigerians and migrants of Pakistan and Indian origin are colloquially referred to as “my friend” owing to their constant reference to “my friend” when talking. Again, the video uses wide-angle shots to capture both the characters and their luxurious surroundings, emphasising wealth and social status. Nigerian music is playing in the background. The soundtrack features contemporary “I’m with the culture” music, aligning the video with current popular culture and youth identity. The upbeat music creates a celebratory mood and positions the characters as fashionable and culturally relevant. The video employs shock editing, juxtaposing visuals of affluence with sarcastic on-screen text such as “Look at how poor we are, but I will stay.” This ironic editing style creates humour while drawing attention to social perceptions and expectations. The framing allows viewers to appreciate the scale of the setting and reinforces the aspirational lifestyle being portrayed. This is characteristic of other videos that TE shared on TikTok. TE’s use of the words “my poverty” in a video depicting opulence ridicules those denigrating her marriage. She also emphasises libertarianism discourses—freedom of choice regardless of a spouse’s origins.

Such defiance was accentuated by TA. She is also married to a Nigerian. TA shared a video of the couple and their children elegantly dressed in Nigerian attire—a confirmation of acclimatisation and acculturation. Nigerian music is playing in the background. The video depicts a blissful marriage. It is captioned, “*Ngimile la* for life with my ‘Southgerian

pikin' (I am standing here for life with my Southgerian pikin). "Southgerian" is a compound of South Africa and Nigeria. It implies a solid union. "Pikin" (piking) emphasises freedom of choice. The video uses a static medium-wide shot to capture TA, her husband, and their "Southgerian" children dancing together. The stationary camera allows the audience to focus on the family's interactions, expressions, and movements, creating a sense of authenticity and togetherness. The soundtrack includes the lyrics, "I am standing here, I'm not turning back," which reinforce themes of resilience, commitment, and pride. The music complements the family's joyful dancing and strengthens the video's emotional message. The scene is presented in one continuous take with no visible editing or cuts. This uninterrupted shot creates a natural, spontaneous feel and allows the audience to engage fully with the family's performance. The use of a single tripod-mounted shot creates a simple, yet intimate, visual style. The uncluttered composition places emphasis on the family's unity, happiness, and shared cultural identity rather than elaborate production techniques. The family dancing together symbolises unity, multicultural identity, belonging, and celebration. The static camera signifies stability and authenticity, while the song's lyrics communicate perseverance and confidence in one's identity and choices.

TA posted another video comprising a montage of pictures of her family in Nigerian attire. It is captioned, "We are Southgerians  ". The blessings I never knew I needed". She rebuffs "threats" on her life from South Africans disapproving of her relationship, saying, "Don't scare me with death and do not say I am defending foreigners. I am not afraid of your nonsense. Even if you guys hunt me down and will kill me". This depicts South Africa as an intolerant society that is disrespectful of other citizens' rights, even in private matters like matrimony. The video uses a montage of images depicting different seasons and moments over time. This sequence compresses time and illustrates the progression of experiences, creating an emotional narrative that follows the characters' journey. The soundtrack features "If That's What It Takes" by Celine Dion, whose emotional lyrics and orchestral arrangement reinforce themes of love, sacrifice, perseverance, and commitment. The lyrics, "I will risk everything, if that's what it takes", capture TA's defiance. The music deepens the emotional connection between the audience and the story. The video relies primarily on straight cuts rather than dissolves or elaborate transitions. The clean editing maintains the narrative continuity, keeps the pacing natural, and allows the viewers to focus on the unfolding story without distraction. The changing seasonal imagery creates a visually rich aesthetic that reflects the passage of time, growth, change and endurance. The varied settings enhance the emotional tone and contribute to the video's cinematic quality. The use of Celine Dion's song functions as an emotional signifier of unwavering love and resilience, suggesting that meaningful relationships can withstand life's challenges.

Such defiance was sustained by another TikTok, TC. She is dating a Nigerian. TC claims that her family is rich, an intimation that her relationship is not inspired by economic reasons. She is dressed in expensive apparel. A Nigerian song titled 'Game Changer' by Flavour of Africa plays as the video scans through an upmarket South African neighbourhood that she claims is home. The video is captioned:

Them: You are dating Nigerian for money and hunger!! And your family is ashamed of you. Meanwhile, homes we come from and still proudly Xhosa *ke sana*. You can say whatever guys but not hunger part or poor background. Some of us are coming from doing well families that worked hard to get to that. We are doing well ourselves. Our businesses are doing well but still we go for IDOGWU (Nigerian name) 😊😊. It is not hunger but what the heart wants .

The video is filmed in a single continuous shot with static framing, creating the impression of an informal, direct-to-camera conversation. This allows the viewers to

focus on the speaker's expressions and message. TC claims that South African men are abusive and do not provide for their spouses. The spoken dialogue is central to the video's message, presenting her personal opinions in a conversational and provocative manner intended to engage viewers and encourage discussion. The video contains no visible editing, reinforcing the impression of authenticity and spontaneity. The uninterrupted take suggests that the speaker is expressing her views directly without manipulation through post-production. TC appears in nightwear in a bedroom setting during the morning. The casual clothing and domestic environment create an intimate and relaxed atmosphere, suggesting that she is speaking candidly from her personal space rather than in a formal setting. The bedroom symbolises privacy, intimacy, and authenticity, encouraging the audience to perceive the speaker's comments as personal reflections. The relaxed attire signifies comfort and informality, while the direct-to-camera presentation positions the speaker as sharing her own perspective rather than delivering a scripted performance. TC invokes libertarian and humanism discourses when she asserts, "it is not hunger but what the heart wants". She underscores the sanctity of freedom of choice, a position she accentuates by re-emphasising that "some of us are coming from doing well families. . .our businesses are doing well but we still go for IDOGWU". The printing of the Nigerian name *Idogwu* in capital letters is expressive of defiance. TC sustains this defiance in another video captioned "When they think you will be ashamed dating only foreigners 🤔🤔". Proudly *Jollofina* Girl. She declares:

I am not ashamed of the fact that I am Xhosa. I am not ashamed of the fact that I date foreign man. You and (South African) boyfriend with Sexually Transmitted Disease. The man you must text first. The man who only texts you first if the weather is not doing the right thing, *uyayiboni weather injani?* (The weather is bad). A man you must remind that you are a woman you need to be taken care of. I go for a man that knows business. A man who jumps the border (illegal immigrant). A Man must have a serious criminal record; isn't you allege they sell drugs? Yet your local man has a criminal record of beating you up. People must be free to do what they want with their lives. If you choose to date poverty as a boyfriend, it's fine. So please, if you see me with my foreign man just leave us alone.

Jollofina derives from Jollof, a Nigerian rice dish. TC taunts South Africans predicting a disastrous end to her relationship. She insists that "no man had to fund me" and "no man had to make me", adding: "He found me already established and had to maintain *nje* my good health so that I sleep better at night. In the morning, I don't have to beg for a bare minimum tax. No". The video ends with TC adamant that she would date another African immigrant if her relationship with the Nigerian failed— "even if *Jollofina* goes back to country of origin, I will get another *Jollofina*". She warns South Africans threatening her by saying, "I don't care what you will say about me and my *Jollofina*". Again, the video is filmed in a single continuous shot. The static framing creates the impression of an informal, direct-to-camera conversation. This allows viewers to focus on the speaker's expressions and message.

Similar discourses dominate TikTok videos shared by South African women dating Zimbabwean immigrants, like TB and TD. For example, TB, whose name implies "foreigner's wife", emphasises freedom of choice when responding to a TikToker deriding her relationship, saying, "Where do you fit? (in my relationship with the Zimbabwean). My name says it all. I have my own reasons (for marrying a foreigner)". TB's name radiates defiance. She escalates similar rhetoric in another post, where she plays a Xhosa song, whose lyrics capture a conversation between a mother and daughter. The mother is refusing to recognise the daughter's marriage to a Zimbabwean. The daughter is adamant. It goes:

Daughter: Mom, I am dating a Zimbabwe man.

Mother: Shembe (clan name), but Shembe, my child you left all people for sure and fell for *kwerekwere*.

Daughter: Mom, he is also a person. What is more important is that he loves me and he treats me well.

Mother: I will not tolerate being embarrassed by you. You will have to choose if you stay here at home or go with your *kwerekwere*.

Daughter: Mom is this still my life if I am to live by the decisions that you take for me. Does it mean I have to lead a life that makes you happy by hurting my feelings. Please respond to me mom.

This is an invocation of libertarian discourses of the right to choice pitched against the anti-immigrant sentiments dominating some South African societies, as captured by the mother's remarks in the song, "You left all people for sure and fell for *Kwerekwere*". That the song ends with an unanswered question from the daughter is reflective of how such issues remain unresolved in South Africa. The video is filmed in a single continuous shot whose static frame creates the impression of an informal, direct-to-camera conversation.

TD, another TikToker, buttresses this position when she posts a video with her Zimbabwean partner, inscribed "Imagine not dating a Soko. It must be very depressing". Soko is her partner's clan name. A Shona song is playing in the background. The lyrics translate to "Babe, tell them you are in love with me. It pains them ❤️❤️". TD defiantly emphasises the right of choice when she captions the video "South African dating Zimbabwean man 🇳🇦" and further asserts:

I am a South African. Don't ask me in my comment section, where are you from? You sound like them or whatsoever. Are you spiteful or what? In your normal senses you don't know where I am from or how do I look? Or the name written down there, you don't know that or you wanna be spiteful or fun? I am a South African proudly in a relationship with a Zimbabwean guy. Someone who is coming from Zimbabwe, who is a foreigner in my country.

TD defends her choice, saying, "some guys are commenting about my post that they have smelly armpits but assuming the armpits are smelly, they are smelling for me and not you. I am with him 24/7. Why are you bothered?" She argues that, in a normal relationship, couples discuss and resolve problems, be they smelly armpits. TD slams South Africans mocking her partner as uncivilized, and insists, "I know I am happy with this person". The freedom-of-choice discourse is emphasised when she remarks, "Why do most people think that what they want in life is also what the majority want in life?" She sips red wine from a seemingly expensive glass as she talks—an expression of disdain and frustration with South Africans' "intolerant" culture. TD uses TikTok's multimodal mechanics to communicate her defiance. In one of the videos, she is in her bedroom wearing a black gown. Her shoulder is resting on her partner. The couple is listening to a Zimbabwean Shona song whose lyrics translate to, "Babe, tell them you are in love with me. It pains them". The black apparel depicts power and authority. The bedroom symbolises privacy and intimacy, prompting the audience to perceive her comments as personal reflections. Another video shows TD in bed hugging her partner. A Shona song, *Manhanga matete ndodya maruva* (an idiom that means "making the best out of a hopeless situation") plays in the background. The video is captioned, "My Zim man after eating for no reason 🇳🇦". The choice of the song seems deliberate, considering its inference to an alternative. It suggests that, by choosing a Zimbabwe spouse, TD made the best out of a hopeless situation. TD posted another video of the couple dancing to a Shona song by Zimbabwean musician Jah Prayzah titled

Gochi-gochi. It is a jolly song associated with celebrations. The video is inscribed, “*Dudula* will spoil all this 🥳🥳🇳🇬🇳🇬🇳🇬”. This implies that Operation *Dudula* is inconsiderate of women in spousal relations with immigrants. The couple is draped in black outfits, which contextually is expressive of sadness. Her videos are filmed in a single continuous shot whose static frame creates the impression of an informal, direct-to-camera conversation.

5.2. African Immigrant Men as Pathways to Prosperity

It also emerged that South African women depict relations with African immigrant men as pathways to prosperity. Such constructions portray South African men as incompatible for matrimony. These depictions inflame hate for women in spousal relations with African immigrants. It equally aggravates hate for the immigrant African spouse. Discourses depicting African immigrant men as enablers of spousal development dominated the TikTok videos studied. For example, TA posted a video of her university graduation ceremony, a milestone she attributes to her Nigerian spouse. The moment the university chancellor caps her to officially confirm her qualification, she screams, “my husband, thank you very much”. The video is captioned, “This is how you appreciate your husband. A special shout out to my husband”. A voice is heard in the video again proclaiming, “This is how you appreciate your husband”. The video also shows a picture of TA holding the certificate and looking her husband in the eyes. Attribution to the Nigerian sounds banal on the surface, yet contextually, it implies success attained courtesy of the immigrant spouse. The scene captures the graduation ceremony, using medium shots to focus on the graduate’s emotional expression and interaction with her husband. The framing highlights this significant milestone while emphasising their relationship. The graduate says, “My husband, thank you so much,” expressing gratitude and acknowledging her husband’s support in her academic journey. The dialogue adds authenticity and emotional depth to the scene. A still photograph of the graduate and her husband is inserted at the end of the video. This post-production technique serves as a visual conclusion, reinforcing the couple’s shared achievement and leaving a lasting emotional impression on the audience. The graduation regalia, the celebratory atmosphere, and the couple’s photograph create an aesthetic of achievement, success, appreciation, and family support. The visual style emphasises the importance of education and shared accomplishments. The caption “This is how you appreciate your husband” symbolises gratitude, partnership, and mutual support in marriage. The graduation ceremony functions as a signifier of perseverance and accomplishment, while the final photograph represents lasting love, unity, and the celebration of shared success.

TD sustains the narrative in a TikTok video dismissing South Africans condemning her relationship as “feeling the pain” of her success story. She claims:

If I was someone with four kids, unemployed and just drinking *nje* (boozing irresponsibly), you guys would be happy that I am with this Zimbabwean guy but now you see there is potential in me.

TD escalates this argument in another video, saying, “one thing with dating a Zimbabwean man, they date to build you in becoming a better woman”. In another post, she is buying designer apparel. It is captioned, “Me: Zimbabwean men are the best. Them: sound of a barking puppy”. This can be interpreted to mean that Zimbabwean men provide for their spouses. The barking puppy sound ascribed to “them” represents harmless noise from an intolerant society. She insists in another video that her partner provides for her welfare: “Trust a Zim man is taking good care of his lady. A girl that is taken care of *sana*, you just see. I give Zimbabwean guys 10 out of 10 for taking care of a lady”. These legitimisation discourses that appeal to spousal support also characterise TC’s posts. TC juxtaposes her

current successful relationship with a Nigerian with a failed previous engagement with a South African, stating:

I dated a man (South African) who used to eat at his mother's house leaving me in the bedroom hungry. He would come back and sleep. You are evil. You guys kill women. You guys beat women. I can't say no to you because you only spent 200 Rands on me. When I tell you that I am done with this relationship, you complain, oh you have used me. You can't stand rejection because of the 200 Rands provision, which to you seems like a big thing. I would rather date a man that will buy me a 50 K worth of a bag. When I say I leave, he says ok, I wish you well.

TC vows never to respect South African men, as they were unable to provide for their spouses and children. She claimed to have raised a child born out of a relationship with a South African alone, adding:

These are the same people I am told to respect. You disrespect any other woman that dates a foreign man saying they are busy with *makwerekwere*. *Amakwerekwere* are taking our women. Mina I am not your woman. You have a habit of claiming things that are not yours and you end up thinking that every woman dating a foreigner is your woman. I wish you guys can date them and find out that it's not poverty. They take care of women. It's in their nature. I wish you date them so that you stop this broken code that you are dating them for hunger. It's not for hunger. We have businesses but we still go for them.

TB reinforces this argument in a video showing her son cleaning a seemingly upmarket house. The boy is TB spouse's stepson. She asks: "Hi boy. How do you feel having a stepdaddy who is a *kwerekwere*? The son responds: "I feel happy." TB probes further, "That your stepdaddy is *ikwerekwere*". You were raised by *kwerekwere*? The son responds, "I am also one". TB then explains to the son how her Zimbabwean partner provided for him since he was a baby. Below is the conversation:

TB: You are also one? Since when have been a *Mkwerekwere*? You gonna get me jailed! He took care of you since you were three years old. So, when I am counting the young *Mkwerekweres*, should I count you as well? Your brothers?

Son: "Yes, count me. I am *kwerekwere*. Obvious.

T.B: "Is it nice to be a *Mkwerekwere*?"

Son: "Yes, it is".

T.B: You see him, he was taken care of by a *Kweres*"

The conversation demonstrates how African immigrant men are supportive of their South African spouses. TB makes the stepson the focal point of the conversation to emphasise this point. We see here the humanitarian construction of an immigrant African spouse. Conversely, the video implies that South African men evade fatherly responsibilities. The scene uses a casual medium shot of the son cleaning, creating an authentic and everyday portrayal of family life. The camera remains close to the action, allowing viewers to focus on the interaction and the son's natural behaviour. The dialogue challenges stereotypes associated with the term and conveyed acceptance, belonging, and pride in his multicultural family. The scene is presented without visible cuts, creating the impression that the conversation is genuine and unedited. The continuous take enhances the credibility of the video and encourages the audience to perceive the interaction as authentic. The use of a handheld camera produces natural camera movement, giving the scene a documentary-style realism. The sophisticated living room, with its tasteful décor and orderly appearance, reflects a comfortable, stable, and affluent family environment. It symbolises stability, success, and

family unity, challenging negative stereotypes about migrant families. The use of the term *kwerekwere*, a derogatory label for foreign Africans, is reappropriated in a positive context, symbolising acceptance, multicultural identity, and the strength of familial relationships beyond national boundaries.

5.3. Racial Discourses as a Legitimation Tool: “If He Was White, You Would Celebrate Me”

South African women also invoked racial discourses to legitimise spousal relations with African immigrants. This served to expose society’s hypocrisy, and the supremacist view with which it regards whites. TA appealed to the racial discourses when she posted:

So, in South Africa dating or being married to a black African man is a crime but if my husband was white my comment section would be full of ambulances Woow! Woow! (endorsements) Where is he from? Does he have a brother? Now, he is black, you guys won’t do this.

She then urged South African women in her situation to love their immigrant African spouses unreservedly. Dancing to a Nigerian song, TA asserted:

My South African sisters do not be ashamed of your partner. Love them loudly. Do not be ashamed because if he was white, you know it, people would glorify you. Love him loudly sweat pie.

The video uses a medium shot of TA speaking directly to the camera. The framing keeps the focus on her facial expressions and body language, creating a personal and conversational atmosphere while emphasising her views. The spoken dialogue highlights her perception of racial bias and differing societal attitudes towards interracial and cross-national relationships. The video is presented in one continuous take with no visible cuts or transitions. The uninterrupted recording enhances the sense of authenticity and allows viewers to focus entirely on the speaker’s message. TA is well dressed, with professionally applied makeup, presenting a polished and confident appearance. Her styling contributes to an image of self-assurance and credibility while maintaining a contemporary social media aesthetic. The direct-to-camera address symbolises openness and personal testimony, inviting viewers to engage with her perspective. Her polished appearance signifies confidence and self-presentation, while the discussion of differing reactions to black foreign partners versus white partners symbolises broader debates about race, xenophobia, social acceptance, and perceived status within South African society.

TD sustained the narrative when she posted, “I also want to say this thing, now it’s me a South African lady dating a Zimbabwean and I am busy posting my Zimbabwean person but there you get South African guys dating whites, not that I am racist or anything, dating coloureds, you the same people”. She claimed that some South Africans were “even dating Chinese”, adding:

This other couple is a South African guy with Chinese lady and stuff like that, you the same people. If I was dating a white person now, Oh cute. So nice. Now it’s a Zimbabwean, ah smelling armpits. Like why? We are Africans. Why are we hating each other. When it’s a South African dating a white, oh my God, you did a good thing. Now when it’s a South African lady dating a Zimbabwean, you say his boyfriend’s armpits smell. *Haa gweja. Haa Kwerekwere*. Guys you need to heal. Accept things as they are because they will never return to their countries.

TE raised the same argument, saying, “When a person is not married to a South African man, she is married to a foreigner who is who is white person, you love them so much. You like whites. I am a proud Igbo wife. I am a proud Nigerian wife. A proud *Jellofina*. A proud *kwerekwere* wife”. TC also castigated this hypocrisy and contended that, as victims of apartheid, South Africans should peacefully co-exist with African immigrants, noting:

This is the same generation that was so sad about their grandparents suffering during apartheid. You are doing the same thing that white people did to them. Now you are doing it to another fellow African. Same skin colour. Treating the same African person the same way your grandparents were treated by white people.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate how South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants use TikTok to challenge dominant anti-African immigrant discourses denied saliency by mainstream media. Thus, TikTok has “decentralised and democratised access to discursive power” (KhosraviNik, 2023, p. 582) by enabling women in such relations to “amplify their voices” and “recontextualise content” (Kopf, 2026, p. 221). An example is how South African women challenged dominant anti-foreigner discourses by demonstrating how, through spousal relations with African immigrant men, they lead high lives, with some having upgraded their academic qualifications. TA’s graduation post is a typical example. By attributing the attainment of a university qualification to her Nigerian spouse, TA contests dominant discourses in society viewing Nigerians through lenses of criminality. TE accentuates the argument by sharing videos of an opulent lifestyle with her Nigerian spouse. It is in this context that we argue that TikTok has created “new possibilities for alternative points of view” and for “challenging social systems and power”, enabling the “diversification of discourse” (Bouvier & Machin, 2018, p. 180). When the women invoke racial discourses to legitimise their relations with African immigrant men, they not only diversify the discourse on migration, but they also demonstrate how social media has shifted the loci of power by granting the voiceless a voice. TA’s post, “So, in South Africa dating or being married to a black African man is a crime but if my husband was white my comment section would be full of ambulances Woow! Woow! (celebrations)”, demonstrates how social media (TikTok) has become “new spaces of power” (KhosraviNik, 2023, p. 593). Power is equally challenged and exercised when TA urges South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants to “Love them loudly” and “not to be ashamed because if he was white, people would glorify you”, a position that TC reinforces when she remarks, “this is the same generation that was so sad about their grandparents suffering during apartheid. Now you are doing it to another fellow African”. TD’s claim that some South African men were “even dating Chinese” is suggestive of a patriarchal society failing to respect women’s rights, which she challenges courtesy of TikTok. Our findings demonstrate that TikTok offers avenues for the expression of “diverse discourses including those that run parallel or even counter dominant ones” (Kopf, 2026, p. 223). While dominant discourses suggest that African immigrants indulge in crime and “steal jobs” from South Africans, TC contested such a notion when she posted:

Which jobs are you saying foreign nationals are taking? Foreigners just found a market gap and filled it. Trust me I know most foreigners they don’t do drugs. If only you can learn from foreigners, *mina* (me) in such a short space of time I learnt from them and trust me, I am going to be a millionaire. I am using their teaching to become the next multimillionaire.

TA also challenged dominant discourses that depict African immigrants as “job stealers” when she posted:

I was in Singapore. 80% workers are foreigners. Asians respect each other. When I got to Kuwait, I was shocked. I am thinking where are the Kuwaitis. Everywhere you go to its Philippines, people from Jordan and Egypt. In supermarkets and restaurants, you find foreigners. Now the question that I want South Africans to ask each other is that what are foreigners bringing to the table that

makes South African business owners to hire them or prefer them than ordinary South Africans?

Whereas extant research suggests that social media promotes nativist discourses that other immigrants (Yantseva, 2020; Ekman, 2019; Farkas et al., 2018), our findings demonstrate how TikTok provides marginalised voices with a platform to challenge dominant migration discourses seldom captured by South African mainstream media. It confirms assertions by the SM-CDA theory that social media spaces like TikTok have revolutionised communication by allowing bottom-up discourse formation. As demonstrated in this study, ordinary South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants draw on a range of TikTok's semiotic resources to recontextualise the discourse on migration. For example, when TA claims that Singapore and Kuwait are dominated by immigrants from the Philippines, Jordan and Egypt, she challenges dominant discourses in South Africa implying that African immigrants are "stealing jobs" from locals by pointing to the globalisation of the labour market. This position was reinforced by TC when she demanded to know "which jobs" immigrants were taking from South Africans. Equally, when the women question why locals celebrate South African women's marriage to whites, but condemn those who marry African immigrants, they contest dominant discourses viewing European immigrants as superior to Africans.

7. Conclusions

The findings show that South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants celebrate them as an achievement. They construct the relations as pathways to prosperity and invoke racial discourses as legitimisation resources. The women challenge dominant narratives projecting African immigrants living and working in South Africa as a burden on society and the nation at large. The study opens new avenues into understanding how perceptions about migration are enacted and negotiated on TikTok. It also reinforces the research on the democratising potential of social media by demonstrating how marginalised voices, as represented by South African women in spousal relations with African migrants, appropriate TikTok to recontextualise discourses on migration, negotiate and challenge power. The study also provides a nuanced understanding of how ordinary citizens interpret migration. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how social media platforms like TikTok are rich sites for studying public discourse. Further, the study informs policymakers on the need for migrant integration. Whereas the study was limited to how South African women in spousal relations with African immigrants construct their relations on TikTok, future research may analyse netizens' reactions and perceptions about such marriages.

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