Redefining Global Citizenship Through Young African Digital Narratives:

African digital cosmopolitanism on Instagram and TikTok

Fungai Machirori

Academic Fellows Report
November 2022
About this series

The Academic Fellows program has brought together 11 African academics based around the continent and the diaspora to investigate Africa's narrative across a range of mediums and topics that include social media, arts reinstitution, the impact of Covid-19, and spoken word poetry. The program brings academic rigour and an evidence-based approach to African No Filter's work to understand and shift harmful and stereotypical narratives about Africa. It forms part of a larger research agenda to understand narrative and its impact. It is co-funded by Facebook and supported by The African Union, AUDA-NEPAD and the New York-based Africa Centre.

About Africa No Filter

Africa No Filter is a donor collaborative that is working to shift stereotypical and harmful narratives within and about Africa. Through research, grant-making, community building and advocacy, our objective is to build the field of narrative change-makers by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms and driving disruption campaigns. The donor collaborative is funded by Ford Foundation, Bloomberg, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Luminate, Open Society Foundations, Comic Relief, the Hilton Foundation, the British Council and the Hewlett Foundation.

africanofilter.org info@africanofilter.org

About the Author

Fungai Machirori is studying for a PhD at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Faculty of Arts and Humanities. She is also a researcher and writer who is interested in how online spaces can be used to develop new narratives and concepts around collective and individual African identity.
CONTENTS

Executive summary ii
Key insights iii
1 Introduction 1
2 Literature review 2
   2.1 Cosmopolitanism 2
   2.2 Digital cosmopolitanism 3
3 Methodology 4
4 Findings 6
   4.1 The local, yet global, in African youth digital trends 7
   4.2 Comedy and entertainment 9
   4.3 Awareness raising 10
5 Discussion 11
6 Conclusion 13
Endnotes 14
With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, a sharp shift towards digital engagement was observed. Young people – through the newly growing TikTok platform and the more established Instagram – were able to make use of these digital spaces to create community and augment the reach of their messaging. Young African users were no less involved in this shift, with the emergence of globally viral African-initiated hashtags and trends like #JerusalemaChallenge, #DontRushChallenge and #DontLeaveMeChallenge. The digital humour and entertainment young Africans generated during Covid-19, when it was thought that Africa would suffer the worst effects of the pandemic, kept both the continent and parts of the Western world entertained. Such humour reveals digital agency driving an emerging “African” digital cosmopolitanism. By engaging in subversive content creation, these young digital users generated local and global viral trends and thus challenged the long-held idea that communication and culture flows only one way: from the West to the rest of the world.

Furthermore, young African digital natives were able to establish their own content as engaging and relevant, with Kenyan Instagrammer and TikToker Elsa Majimbo perhaps the most visible breakout influencer of this time. By deploying a cosmopolitanism that orients young Africans as global citizens, simultaneously rooted in local and global contexts, these young Africans also challenged – consciously or unconsciously – reductive narratives about Africa and Africans as almost entirely living in non-urban settings beset by poverty, disease and unrest. Gathering data from TikTok and Instagram, this study analysed the role that different influencers and hashtags played in helping young Africans challenge Afropessimism and curate their own African digital cosmopolitan practices. Based on textual analysis, multiple videos on Instagram and TikTok were grouped into genres, sub-themes and main themes, then analysed to unpack what the data revealed about the African youth digital narrative.
On social media, young Africans employ humour, sarcasm and entertainment to challenge and counter Afropessimism: Young Africans are tackling Afropessimism while also creating content of entertainment value. Being official “spokespeople” or gatekeepers against Afropessimism is not their main objective; they seek first to enjoy their digital presence.

By creating globally viral hashtags and trends that showcased their agency during Covid-19, young Africans challenged Afropessimist narratives at a time the world thought Africans would be silenced: With Western media rife with Afropessimistic narratives about the continent’s response to Covid-19, young African digital users were able to produce some of the most globally viral youth digital content of the time such as #JerusalemaChallenge which incorporated different African cultural aesthetics, as well as #DontRushChallenge and #DontLeaveMeChallenge.

**KEY INSIGHTS**

1. **Young Africans are presenting themselves as digital cosmopolitans:** They simultaneously have deep local roots and knowledge of local culture, as well as global connections and networks, often facilitated by digital routes.

2. **By inserting their own cosmopolitan practices into the digital space, young Africans are cultivating an African digital cosmopolitan practice:** This cosmopolitanism is characterised by digital agency and self-insertion into local and global narratives.

3. **Using TikTok and Instagram to augment this cosmopolitanism, young Africans are thus breaking down national and diasporic boundaries and engaging with other Africans globally:** The emergence of digital spaces and platforms like TikTok and Instagram is allowing for shortened and entertaining audiovisual exchanges among Africans. This is enabling more contact across nations and the African diaspora.

4. **On social media, young Africans employ humour, sarcasm and entertainment to challenge and counter Afropessimism:** Young Africans are tackling Afropessimism while also creating content of entertainment value. Being official “spokespeople” or gatekeepers against Afropessimism is not their main objective; they seek first to enjoy their digital presence.

5. **By creating globally viral hashtags and trends that showcased their agency during Covid-19, young Africans challenged Afropessimist narratives at a time the world thought Africans would be silenced:** With Western media rife with Afropessimistic narratives about the continent’s response to Covid-19, young African digital users were able to produce some of the most globally viral youth digital content of the time such as #JerusalemaChallenge which incorporated different African cultural aesthetics, as well as #DontRushChallenge and #DontLeaveMeChallenge.
In efforts to assert their voices within global discourse, young African creatives have increasingly taken to online content creation. In turn, this has led to the emergence of more African online content and communities, as well as hashtags and influencers that have trended continentally and globally.

This study looked at some of Africa’s popular TikTok influencers – namely Nigerian Charity Ekezie, Kenyan Elsa Majimbo and South African Lasizwe Dambuza – as well as popular TikTok and Instagram hashtags – #DontRushChallenge, #JerusalemaChallenge and #DontLeaveMeChallenge – to analyse if and how they counter Afropessimism and nurture an African digital cosmopolitan practice. Below, I provide a brief introduction to cosmopolitanism and digital cosmopolitanism.
2.1 Cosmopolitanism

Derived from the Greek word kosmopolitēs, meaning “citizen of the world”, cosmopolitanism is often deemed the greatest consequence of global citizenship. It is associated with an openness to cultural pluralism and fluidity, as well as engagement with multiple, diverse sociocultural practices and beliefs. Such openness leads to cosmopolitans developing “extra-local forms of belonging” that challenge the rigidity of identity markers like race, nationality and geographic location. This means that while they uphold local obligations, beliefs and responsibilities, cosmopolitans simultaneously remain aware of similar realities within physical and ideological spaces beyond their own localities. Thus, cosmopolitanism is characterised by an embrace of diversity and an appreciation of interconnectedness, with an accompanying openness to “others”.

Despite cosmopolitanism emerging from Western scholarship, the term is now also being used more and more within non-Western contexts, which appropriate postcolonial forms of cosmopolitanism, or what is sometimes referred to as “cosmopolitanism from below”. Over the years, normative cosmopolitanism – or cosmopolitanism as it was initially propounded – has experienced fervent pushback. One of the main reasons for this is the historical complicity of cosmopolitanism with amoral and oppressive systems such as colonialism and slavery, as well as its heavy affiliations with class elitism, privilege and other exclusionary socio-political practices. Also, as geographical mobility through travel is a feature often associated with cosmopolitanism, it is sometimes seen as a classist practice of the (Western) highly educated who are of good financial standing. It is then little wonder that the idea of global citizenship – as embraced by normative cosmopolitanism – is both championed by, and made accessible to, elites whose mobility is facilitated by “visa-friendly passports and credit cards”.

Cosmopolitanism from below, therefore, seeks to challenge this elitism. Characterised by embracing multi-layered identities, cosmopolitanism from below attempts to accommodate different cultural ways of thinking and acting, and of listening to the voices of those often erased from mainstream cosmopolitan discourse, particularly those of the global South. Cosmopolitanism from below is not synonymous with the travel exploits of normative cosmopolitanism since one can be cosmopolitan without leaving one's birthplace and within contexts of stasis. All that is needed is “a fundamental openness to otherness… rooted in the imagination”. At the same time, cosmopolitanism from below nuances its approach to mobility and views travel – not just by elite travellers, but also that by students, migrants and refugees – as producing cosmopolitan outlooks that allow for broadened worldviews. Cosmopolitanism can thus be viewed as a “worlding project”, reconfiguring power relationships across different localities.
Also, with its attentiveness to transnationalism, cosmopolitanism from below opens itself up to the possibilities of “solidarities from below” whereby individuals and groups from different parts of the world form political alliances of a networked character and featuring strong global social relations.

2.2 Digital cosmopolitanism

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. 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. The newer platforms, 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 such social media narratives, 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. As of May 2022, #BlackLivesMatter hashtag had 31.2 billion TikTok views and over 27.5 million posts on Instagram. On Twitter, the hashtag was used about 47.8 million times between 26 May and 7 June 2020.

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. An example of crowdsourced knowledge-building and information exchange is the popular TikTok hashtag, #BookTok, which grew from 3.4 billion views in February 2021 to 52.4 billion views by May 2022, with a notable increase in reading among those aged 18–24. As routines were disrupted, social media took on a new importance, offering a sense of connectedness and community and contributing to what Ostrovsky and Chen refer to as “youth resocialization in a pandemic society”. Along with the popularity of other platforms like Snapchat and Twitch, this resocialisation has given rise to a range of new young social media influencers.

New digital tools and platforms have long been recognised for their role in generating new forms of community and engagement that blur the boundaries between the private and the public, enable the emergence of virtual social spaces that are not geographically located, and allow for the construction of hybrid cultures. The popularity of social media means that more people – including Africans – 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 local and global, and thus participate in a form of global citizenship.

The internet is cosmopolitan in that it allows for fluidity and multiple forms of knowledge and knowledge-making. And so, in the digital era, there has emerged what Ponzanesi refers to as “a new citizen of the world, who is both rooted and routed, and whose global interactions are marked by the use of social networks”. As such, there is a growing body of work that looks at cosmopolitanism in the digital age.

And it is digital cosmopolitanism, from an African perspective, that this study seeks to assess.

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George Floyd, a Black man, was murdered in Minneapolis by a white police officer, after he was arrested on suspicion of presenting a counterfeit US$20 note. The footage of his murder was recorded by then 17-year-old Darnella Frazier on her mobile phone and went viral on social media.
METHODOLOGY

This study used purposive sampling\(^1\) of social media texts, that is, hashtags and influencers who met the criteria of the study in terms of their relationship to African digital cosmopolitanism. Criteria for selection included (i) the global virality of the user or hashtag; (ii) the African nationality or origin of the user or creator of the viral trend; and (iii) diversity of nationality or origin of the user or trend. By virtue of being an active user of social media myself, I had generally observed these hashtags and users emerge and become viral globally, thus making them good options for the study. A brief explanation of each hashtag/influencer is provided in Table 1.

### Table 1: Hashtags and users selected for analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trend/influencer analysed</th>
<th>Date(^i)</th>
<th>Platform/s</th>
<th>Brief context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#DontRushChallenge</td>
<td>22 March 2020</td>
<td>Tiktok, Instagram</td>
<td>Starting on Twitter(^i) at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, then-20-year-old Nigerian student, Toluwalase Asolo, and a group of her friends who were studying in the UK initiated the challenge as they prepared to be separated by Covid-19 protocols. 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 glamorous aesthetic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#JerusalemaChallenge</td>
<td>19 February 2020</td>
<td>TikTok, Instagram</td>
<td>The #JerusalemaChallenge was sparked by an Angolan dance troupe’s dance routine to the South African hit song Jerusalema (by 26-year-old Master KG, featuring No_mcebo Zikode, who is 36), which went viral on YouTube(^ii). The hashtag inspired similar videos from around the world of people dancing to the song and challenging others to do the same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#DontLeaveMeChallenge</td>
<td>24 March 2020</td>
<td>Tiktok, Instagram</td>
<td>The #DontLeaveMeChallenge, attributed to 31-year-old Nigerian comedian, Josh2Funny (also known as Josh Alfred), has spawned a series of videos in which participants engage in riddles, puns and other wordplays, as they run from each other shouting, “Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity Ekezie</td>
<td>13 April 2020</td>
<td>Tiktok</td>
<td>Nigerian Charity Ekezie, 30, has gained popularity for her videos which poke fun at stereotypes and tropes about Africa. Ekezie offers sarcastic but humorous responses to users who ask her reductive questions about the continent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa Majimbo</td>
<td>12 May 2020</td>
<td>TikTok</td>
<td>Driven by the Covid-19 pandemic, then-19-year-old Kenyan Instagrammer, Elsa Majimbo’s sarcastic Instagram videos provided funny, relatable commentary on social dynamics during the pandemic. In 2020, Majimbo then established her TikTok account, which reposted her lockdown Instagram content and new content unique to her TikTok account.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasizwe Dambuza</td>
<td>28 February 2019</td>
<td>TikTok</td>
<td>With 1.4 million Instagram followers and just over 758 000 YouTube followers, South Africa’s 23-year-old Lasizwe Dambuza has nurtured a growing audience for his humorous skits that provide humorous but incisive commentary on South African socio-political issues, as well as more general lifestyle and entertainment content.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^1\)Purposive sampling allows the researcher to apply their objectives and judgement when selecting data.

\(^i\) Date challenge started or influencer created account.
\(^ii\) The Twitter video had 2.1 million views and 22,100 retweets as of June 2022.
\(^iii\) The YouTube video had 18,369,863 views as of June 2022.
\(^iv\) The original Instagram video had 165,505 views as of June 2022.
Using textual analysis, I analysed 90 social media videos – 72 from TikTok and 18 from Instagram. I sought to analyse the language, symbols and other devices that users employed to engage with the trending hashtags that were studied. I did the same when analysing the content of influencers’ videos. In so doing, I desired to make sense of how these videos communicated life and life experiences, since such content can be influenced by and is reflective of larger social structures, for example the effects of Covid-19 and global lockdowns. As such, I also attempted to interpret the videos in terms of the historical, cultural and political contexts in which they developed.

The guiding questions informing this analysis were as follows:

- How, if at all, do young Africans’ online representations via TikTok and Instagram challenge negative media notions of Africa and Africans, commonly referred to as Afropessimism?
- How, if at all, do young Africans’ online representations via TikTok and Instagram promote a digital cosmopolitan practice? What are its main features?

To conduct this textual analysis, I used the following categories: (i) captions associated with the videos; (ii) the number of video views and engagement; (iii) the genre and themes broached; and (iv) descriptive commentary about the content of the videos (language, symbols and other devices) to provide a deeper contextual understanding of the content.

When a hashtag or username is entered into TikTok’s search bar (on the desktop version of the application), a grid of 12 videos appears, marked as the top videos. I assumed that TikTok’s algorithm randomly sorts through a username or hashtag to allocate these results. For the purposes of this study, I analysed only the first 12 videos displayed.

A limitation of the study was that because Instagram’s public application programming interface (API) only offers basic information about accounts and hashtags, much of the Instagram data gathered was of limited analytical utility. Also, Instagram does not offer a “Top Posts” search result for individual users or accounts, so I only looked for Instagram data to augment findings for the hashtags analysed. I therefore only studied influencer content on TikTok.
A total of 11 sub-themes emerged from the 90 videos and were coded a total of 128 times (some videos had more than one theme). The 11 sub-themes were as follows: (i) humour; (ii) dance; (iii) fashion and lifestyle; (iv) parody; (v) sarcasm; (vi) celebrity; (vii) public awareness; (viii) culture; (ix) controversy; (x) corporate communication; and (xi) marketing.

To allow for more general analysis, these sub-themes were then grouped under three broader themes: (i) entertainment; (ii) comedy; and (iii) awareness raising. Table 2 shows the group of sub-themes under a main theme, and the frequency with which they occurred.

Table 2: Main themes, sub-themes and their frequency in the data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main theme</th>
<th>Subthemes and frequency</th>
<th>Main theme frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Humour (40)</td>
<td>47% (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parody (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sarcasm (15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Fashion and lifestyle (10)</td>
<td>31% (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dance (23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrity (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controversy (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness raising</td>
<td>Public awareness (10)</td>
<td>22% (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Culture (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corporate communication (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marketing (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Findings under "marketing" were not deemed "corporate communication" because they were generally videos that had nothing to do with the hashtag being analysed and were deployed to market another product or service in hopes of such content going viral.*

I also attempted to get a sense of the location or nationality of users whose content I analysed, to assess the “worlding” capacities of these hashtags. Some users stated their nationality in their bios, or geolocated themselves to a place. Others used flags to represent their nationality, geolocation or an aspect of their cultural identity. Most of the users whose data was analysed tended to be influencers with large followings and other social media accounts to which they linked their Instagram or TikTok accounts. Where their location or nationality was not offered on one account, it was usually possible to find a reference on another of their social media platforms. For others, a Google search had to be conducted to find articles relating to the user and their nationality or location. Where all these attempts did not yield any insights, the user’s content was labelled as ‘Unclear’.

Table 3 summarises those insights.

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1 For example, a search for each hashtag in Instagram’s search bar yielded a grid of ‘Top Posts’ and ‘Most Recent Posts’. However, these ‘Top Posts’ seemed to be the top posts of at the time, versus of all time. As most hashtags and trends are now almost two years old, the richest content did not appear in the current ‘Top Posts’.

2 The results are not arranged by which video has the most views and do not represent the end of the search results as one can click on a ‘Load More’ tab to discover more content.
Nigerian initiator of the #DontRushChallenge), many of these users showed cultural pluralism; for example, one user is described in media as Syrian American, another posted both a US and Moroccan flag in their bio, while others showed religious (dressed in Islamic hijabs, for example) and racial diversity.

Further, while some users stuck to the original sequence of the trends, others created their own aesthetic, or spawned their own forms of entertainment to accentuate their dynamic African identity. For example in one

Thematic findings are discussed in greater detail in the following sections, but first an analysis of the global and cosmopolitan dynamics of the data is discussed.

4.1 The local, yet global, in African youth digital trends

The global range of user videos studied (as shown in Table 2) speaks to the international virality of the hashtags that were analysed. While users were geographically quite disbursed (and largely in the West), they were mainly centred in the US. But just as with Toluwalase Asolo (the UK-based

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Some users' videos were counted across more than one nationality; for example, one user who account was geolocated to the US, but who posted a video of another user who stated their location as France. This also included users who had more than one flag (as a cultural identifier) in their bios.
#DontRushChallenge video, a US-based user features a range of influencers who transition to appear in makeup and different African print outfits, sometimes sipping on champagne. In one video for the #DontLeaveMeChallenge captioned “Muslim edition”, the user develops various wordplays that refer to Islamic identity and features. The person shooting the video gives chase, shouting out to the user in Arabic. Another user (based in the UK) parodies how different African stock characters would dance to the “Jerusalema” song at a party. Some of the stock characters she parodies include “Aunties”, “Uncles”, “Slay Queens”, as well as Congolese, Zambians, Nigerians and Zimbabweans. As user caricatures national stock characters, she uses dance moves associated with each nation’s culture. While employing tropes about different Africans’ characteristics and personality traits at parties, the user is able to build a community of African “insiders” who understand the joke, thereby creating a conversation about the overlaps and distinctions between African cultures and challenging the idea of a heterogenous African identity. The location of some of these users, against the sort of content they produced, also suggested an African diasporic identity.

It cannot, however, be overlooked that the US is one of the biggest hubs of cultural production and reproduction. In a Glamour magazine article about the #DontRushChallenge, Cacciatore and Schallon note that the challenge – which plays to the song after which it was named, “Don’t Rush” (by UK artists, Young T and Bugsey) – has been reproduced by a range of users, including beauty bloggers and drag queens, and that “New York City’s essential workers even shared their own version of the video”. In one of the videos analysed, US-based actress Tia Mowry participates with a video that has garnered 6.5 million views and almost 4,500 comments on TikTok. In another video, a user who appears to be US-based (he describes himself as “TikTok Trump” on his other social media pages) dresses as Donald Trump, donning a wig and spray-tan. He speaks like Trump, engaging in a series of wordplays with the shooter of the video shouting, “Don’t leave me!” and “Take me with you!” Given that the video was recorded in 2020, in the build-up to the US elections, this can be read as a form of subliminal political messaging.

Other nations and regions also feature strongly in the data. In one video, the crew of an Austrian Airlines flight re-enacts the #JerusalemaChallenge as they dance amid the grounding of international flights. A cabin crew member is seen moving through the empty cockpit with a face mask over part of her face, further enforcing the message of masking up and staying safe so that flight travel can resume. In other videos analysed, subtitles in various languages including Japanese, Dutch, French and Spanish were provided.

The influencer content of Ekezie, Majimbo and Dambuza also spoke to globality, but in different ways. In the case of Ekezie, the nature of the content she produced already inferred that she was speaking, in part, to a non-African audience. As she explained in an interview with Chaigne:

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.

In a 2021 cover-story interview with Teen Vogue, mention is made of 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 involved 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.”

Majimbo's content that was studied was also of a sarcastic nature but did not seek to reach a specific audience. For example, in one of her videos, the in-video caption read, “Me arriving at a party 2 hours late” with Majimbo stating that she was not late but that rather, she allowed everyone else to arrive first. She then laughs out loud and dons a pair of shades, as per her signature practice. She continues to posit different scenarios about being late and adds, “If I say I am five minutes away, chances are I just woke up.” In another video, the in-video captions read “Any social setting”. Majimbo states she tries to be social and then remarks, “Wow”, before donning a pair of shades, laughing and then reclining onto her bed. She continues her monologue by questioning herself about why she goes to places and who the people she encounters there are. She laughs and bites into some chips. She further proclaims that she is not shy but does not enjoy the barrage of questions asked at social gatherings. She concludes by stating, “I am thinking about calling my Uber.” She then laughs and eats chips.

As such, there was a universalising element to Majimbo's anti-sociality that resonated with many users globally, as they navigated the pandemic. She has since 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.

Dambuza's continent can equally be read as universalising for its promotion of a certain aesthetic and lifestyle. In one video, he is seen wearing a long, sleek weave and makeup. He says his goodbyes to people and then enters an orange designer convertible. He asks for directions for how to get out of the parking lot and then remarks that it is raining outside before releasing the vehicle's roof. He continues to ask for directions and then thanks his audience. In another video, Dambuza is dancing with someone else. He makes gestures that suggest that he cannot keep up with the dance moves. As such, he represents “What my mind thinks I’m doing”, while the other participant represents “What my body is doing”.

4.2 Comedy and entertainment
Platforms like Instagram and TikTok represent spaces largely used for entertainment. Findings show that almost half (47%) of all the content analysed made use of the devices of humour, parody and sarcasm, while a further 26.5% was rated as entertainment (see Table 2). In trying circumstances, such during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is natural that many would have been seeking social media content that was humorous and entertaining. Young Africans were able to tap into this need and produce content of value; and they continue to do so. Some users – as in the case of Ekezie – were able to create humorous and entertaining content, while also offering deeper messaging about Afropessimism.

In many of Ekezie's videos studied, she follows a format where she responds to a comment from a user, who is presumably non-African, who asks a question that stereotypes an aspect of the continent. For example, in one video Ekezie responds to a user who asks, “Africa has internet and TikTok?” She replies that Africa in fact does not have the internet and that, to produce TikTok videos, a community chief priest visits every family and performs an incantation that mystically
makes the internet appear on one’s 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 her phone is now connected to the internet. In another of Ekezie’s videos, a user asks if there are makeup products in Africa, pointing to the sort of ignorance that some still have about the practices of Africans. So, for a trend like the #DontRushChallenge to emerge and go globally viral speaks back to such reductive understandings of Africans and their lifestyles.

Given the number of such queries that Ekezie continually responded to, there is a question around the performative ignorance that her followers may present just to get Ekezie’s attention. But regardless of whether this is the case, her outlandish responses to the queries suggested that she was not only sarcastically responding to an international audience, but also engaging an African audience to laugh along with her at the absurdity of the questions.

4.3 Awareness raising

Raising awareness about certain issues, products or services was another major purpose of the hashtags used, and of the influencers analysed. For instance, in one video, Ekezie responds to a commenter who writes, “I love all Africa and their culture”. The in-video caption reads “Another sign to visit Africa” and Ekezie is seen sashaying to popular 2010 World Cup song, “Waka Waka (This Time for Africa)”. She then transitions to wearing different traditional clothes from different parts of the continent, with the video concluding with captions reading, “We have a rich culture. We are resourceful. And our hospitality is top notch”.

And while mostly used for dance and entertainment, #JerusalemaChallenge also raised public awareness about Covid-19 with some dance sequences featuring hospital staff and paramedics, or grounded staff as per the Austrian Airlines crew discussed previously. The videos suggested a theme of unity and positivity, even amid the trying circumstances of the time.

Another significant use of the challenge was for companies’ corporate communications. In one video analysed, a company engages in the #JerusalemaChallenge with various staff in different environments (office workers and factory foremen) all engaging in the routine. (It must be noted that Master KG, the creator of the “Jerusalema” song, reportedly demanded licence fees from brands and others who produced similar corporate and marketing content, for making use of the song for profit.)

A fair amount of the content analysed on Instagram (10 of 18 videos) could be deemed self-promotion or marketing content. This was content where the user appropriated the hashtag or challenge being studied for its viral value, to promote their products or services.
DISCUSSION

The trending hashtags analysed in this study all appeared at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when a range of Western media suggested that the African continent would be hit worst. However, as Western nations (such as the US and the UK) struggled under increased disease burden, content such as the #DontRushChallenge, #DontLeaveMeChallenge and #JerusalemaChallenge kept global social media audiences entertained and aware. These challenges should not be underestimated for their subversion of the idea of what popular narratives Africans can produce and engage in.

The fact that a gospel Zulu song became an anthem for collective Covid-19 solidarity and entertainment is significant. Many users would not have understood the words of the song or identified the religious genre it belonged to. But the song’s Creolisation of African cultures, through its infusion of Angolan dance techniques created a hybrid African cosmopolitan aesthetic that was easy for others to partake of. Thus emerged a sort of “solidarity from below”, as discussed in the literature review. 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, “Jerusalema” 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.

One of the main features of digital cosmopolitanism is the emergence of a new citizenry with both global and local connections, a citizenry that is both “rooted and routed” as Ponzanesi is earlier quoted. Many of the trends were initiated by Africans in their countries where they lived at the time. This speaks strongly to the thesis that cosmopolitanism from below brings forward: cosmopolitanism does not have to be synonymous with travel and that one can be a cosmopolitan without leaving one’s birthplace.

And while the hashtags studied may be read as momentary acts of African digital cosmopolitanism, they contribute to the archive of knowledge about Africa, and the engagement of the rest of the world with the continent’s practices of cosmopolitanism from below. This is furthered by the work of individuals such as Ekezie, Majimbo and Lasziwe who all use their digital platforms to refute a one-dimensional idea of Africa. Collectively, by way of their different approaches to discussing themselves and their lifestyles, they contribute to a more nuanced idea about the continent and young Africans. Majimbo’s further elevation into global popular culture (through work with brands like Netflix and Bumble) represents an important shift in agency, as these usually Western-centric brands open up to engagement with African influencers.

So, what are the features of African digital cosmopolitan practices? From this study and its findings, one firstly observes a strong digital agency; that is, a capacity for young Africans to speak for themselves using new digital spaces. This is in sharp contrast to what some scholars have observed as a “write back discourse”, often steeped in victimhood and response to Western ignorance. Some people might argue that most of Ekezie’s videos fit into this reactive framework, but none of the ways that she responds suggest association with victimhood; instead she responds to woeful ignorance with
sarcasm and humour. Another feature of this cosmopolitan practice is local, continental and diasporic engagement and a sense of community among African digital users. For example, the growth of the #JerusalemaChallenge is charted from South Africa to Angola and then to the rest of Africa and the world. While the trajectory of the other two hashtags studied is not clear, it can be assumed that both trends were able to extend globally via the large population (and digital penetration) figures of Nigeria and Nigeria’s diaspora. Similarly, Majimbo’s continental rise beyond Kenya could be partially attributed to her April 2020 live digital chat with South African Glamour magazine, about a month into her new popularity. With local, continental and international reach, and a diverse African population, South Africa – with its more Western inflected outlook through its domestication of global cultural products like Glamour – is likely to have played an important role in leveraging Majimbo into the global fashion and lifestyle space.

A final feature of this youth digital cosmopolitan aesthetic is a seeming lack of encumberment with affectively speaking back to Afropessimism, or defining what Africa is, or is not. Apart from Ekezie’s videos, the young people analysed for this study present themselves simply as youth engaging in youth culture and providing entertainment and awareness. In previous digital eras – such as with the emergence of TED talks and other global spaces and stages where Africans might engage with the world – the imperative was largely to dispel myths and stereotypes about Africa in eloquent and analytical conversation. In a minute or less, these young Africans convey messages that are just as important as those of their predecessors, but that display less impetus to intellectualise the narrative or engage in ongoing dialogue and debate. As such, youth digital narratives are full of diversity, largely couched in humour and entertainment.

Previously, through blogs, TED talks and Twitter, it could be argued that the African diaspora largely constituted the voice of Africa in global culture. However, the proliferation of more digital spaces and platforms (like TikTok and Instagram) allows for shortened and entertaining audiovisual exchanges and less formally structured spaces, with lower entry barriers for more voices to talk about Africa and African digitality. This augurs well for Africans countering Afropessimism.

Young Africans present themselves as digital natives who are literate in the uses of newer social media platforms for the dissemination of their messages and content, and can augment their audiences and reach. Through their use of social media, and whether consciously or not, they bridge national and diasporic distances and nurture a collective African digital identity. An example of such practice is the #africantiktok hashtag on TikTok, which I discovered as I went about my data gathering. 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. Further analysis shows the existence of #KenyanTikTok (+3 billion views), #NigerianTikTok (+3.5 billion views), #GhanaTikTok (+1.9 billion views) #UgandaTikTok (+987.6 million views), #ZimbabweTikTok (+228 million views), #MalawiTikTok (+21.5 million views) and #SouthAfricanTikTok (+588.3 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.

Young Africans are therefore able to speak for themselves in important ways that challenge the long-held notion that information travels unidirectionally from the West to the rest of the world. As such, they build “solidarities from below” within their cosmopolitan practices. For example, with 5.8 million views (as of May 2022), the #AfricansInUkraine hashtag represents an important trend with Africans in Ukraine, and globally, shedding light on the plight of Africans during the current 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, with the local also being diasporic.
CONCLUSION

The emergence of TikTok as an important social media tool largely coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. In many ways, this was a saving grace for many young people globally as it allowed them to make new connections and stay informed and entertained. For African users, this digital moment contributed to important counternarratives to the idea of Africans lacking agency, especially at a time when many believed Covid-19 would ravage a continent already heavily associated by the West with malaise and incompetence.

As collective and individual voices have created viral content, an important repository for African knowledge, activism and entertainment has emerged. And with this, an African digital cosmopolitan aesthetic – founded in local, continental and global cultural exchange through social media – has gone viral.

With a continent as youthful as Africa, it is imperative that young Africans continue to lay claim to spaces such as TikTok and Instagram to articulate their own cosmopolitan practices, build community and solidarity and counter Afropessimism. And as this study shows, young Africans are creating important ways to do so through humour and entertainment; devices that have universal appeal.
ENDNOTES


8 Xu, W.

9 Rao, R. [page 170]


13 Eze, C, [page 219]

14 Glick Schiller, N.


16 Kurasawa, F.


22 Haenlein, M. et al.


25 Ponzanesi, S [page 1]


32 Ponzanesi, S.

33 Eze, C.


36 Nikabs, M. & Ndlovu, M.