

## Global Tweets, COVID-19 Outbreaks and Xenophobic Discriminations of Africans in China

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**KEYWORDS** Africans. China. COVID-19 Pandemic. Global Tweet. Racial Discrimination. X.com

**ABSTRACT** The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted global systems, leading to a surge in xenophobic attacks against Africans in China. This study investigates global tweets from January 2020 to June 2020 to understand the pertinent issues and recurring tones of discourse during the incidents. Utilising media dependency theory, the role of x.com as a platform for protest and crisis communication was analysed. Digital ethnography was employed to gather qualitative and quantitative data from purposively sampled tweets. Most tweets addressed the origins and spread of COVID-19, the socio-economic impacts of the attacks, and the responses from various stakeholders. The predominant tones were pessimistic, characterised by distrust, fear, and anger. Furthermore, social media was confirmed as useful for raising awareness and shaping public opinion, particularly during crises. The study recommends the development of media literacy skills, and the implementation of strong local and international policies to address the public health and social crisis.

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the global community's economic, political, socio-cultural, and health systems. Scholars agree that the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic threatened human existence in low and high-resource countries (Adom 2020; Gyanwali 2020; Renzaho 2020; Chen et al. 2024). In addition, statistics reveal that countries such as the United States, India, Russia, Mexico, China, Spain, Italy, and Brazil had significant numbers of deaths with over 7 million deaths recorded globally (WHO 2024). Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as one of the deadliest plagues in the history of mankind.

In recent times, there have been increasing cases of xenophobic attacks against Africans in China, which has raised concerns among policymakers, healthcare experts, educators, and social scientists in the global community. Importantly, scholars observed that these attacks were targeted mostly at Black Africans compared to other racial descents in Africa (Ouassini et al. 2022; Obianagwa et al. 2023). It therefore becomes important to understand the rationales, characteristics, and how future occurrences can be ameliorated.

Importantly, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have become essential platforms for information dissemination and public debate (Segeber and Bennett 2011). For example, X (formerly Twitter) has emerged as the most popular platform for sharing breaking

news, individual experiences, emotions, and personal opinions about current events (Chandrasekaran et al. 2020; Mustaqim et al. 2020). Interestingly, the attention of scholars around the world has turned to X (formerly Twitter) data to assess the media framing of topical issues like global warming (Loureiro and Alló 2020), nuclear weapons (Allen and McAleer 2018), assessment of disaster damage (Kryvasheyev et al. 2016), and vaccination during the pandemic (Okorie 2022), among others.

Particularly, the increasing cases of xenophobic victimisation in some regions of the world have led to an outcry on popular social media platforms. For example, scholars observed that there have been several social media posts particularly, 'Tweets' on X (formerly Twitter) about xenophobic attacks against Africans in China (Hariharan 2021; Ngcamu and Mantzaris 2021; Dhungana et al. 2022). In essence, the global media systems, especially through the instrumentality of social media have promoted health communication to sensitise global audiences about virus outbreaks while sharing breaking news, individual experiences, and personal opinions about current events.

There have been several comprehensive studies about the COVID-19 outbreak in health communication. Several of these focused on vaccination and health education during the pandemic (Okorie 2022), while others explored fake news and the COVID-19 pandemic (Apuke and Omar 2021; Uwalaka et al. 2021). Nevertheless, there are limited studies on the outbreaks and connected social

issues recorded during the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 period such as xenophobic attacks on Black Africans in China. This study, therefore, investigated the global tweets about xenophobic attacks against Africans in China during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this study explored this socio-cultural issue through the prism of media dependency theory to understand the potential use of Twitter for protest communication against xenophobic attacks against Africans.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Determine the pertinent issues of global tweets about xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak
2. Examine the recurring tones of global tweets about the xenophobic attack on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak

### Research Questions

The research questions this study aims to answer are as follows:

1. What are the pertinent issues of global tweets about xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak?
2. What are the recurring tones of global tweets about the xenophobic attack on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak?

### Hypothesis

There is an association between the pertinent issues and the recurring tone of global tweets about xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical anchorage for this study was the media dependency theory developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976 (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976). The thrust of this theory stipulates that individuals in most modern societies will rely on or depend on the media for information and education during crises such as war, pandemics, and natural disasters (Lowrey 2004; Kim 2020; Salman 2021). According to this theory,

the power of media is greater when individuals depend on the media for news and information (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976). In addition, individuals will seek more information from the media to be more enlightened about the crisis.

In this digital age, social media has emerged as one of the broad categories of the media. It comes in several categories such as social network sites (SNSs), media-sharing platforms, microblogging sites, discussion forums, messaging, and chat applications (Coetzee et al. 2016). There are more than 100 social media platforms in the Internet space. However, the five most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok (Statista 2024). In recent years, X (formerly Twitter) has become a media for political activism, resistance, mobilisation, and massive information dissemination during crises.

As it relates to this study, the pandemic has influenced most individuals in the global community to seek out health information for safety and prevention. In addition, the COVID-19 lockdown led to the increasing use of social media platforms such as Twitter for news and information (Obi-Ani et al. 2020; Sharma et al. 2020; Mittal et al. 2021). For example, this situation exposed the tweets about xenophobic attacks against Africans from April 2020 to June 2020 (Dhungana et al. 2022). Particularly, these tweets not only revealed but also raised concerns about the harsh health conditions faced by Africans in China, which could trigger contracted cases of COVID-19.

In the same vein, the tenet of this theory is in line with the objectives of this study, which expounds on the use of X (formerly Twitter) as a health communication platform for the news and information about the predominant issues and sentiments about xenophobic attacks against Africans in China.

### COVID-19 and Xenophobic Attacks

The severity of COVID-19 affected the economic, social, and health systems in China as in other parts of the world. Scholars have observed that the Communist government in China adopted several stringent measures to mitigate the threat of the deadly virus (Chen et al. 2021; Cheng et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2021). In addition, several international organisations have proffered effective health communication to curb the pandemic in China

(Mheidly and Fares 2020; Ratzan et al. 2020). Hence, China has adopted several health protocols and interventions to curb the COVID-19 pandemic.

Particularly, China was negatively affected by different variants of COVID-19 (El-Shabasy et al. 2022). In March 2023, several global media outlets reported the emergence of another deadly variant of COVID-19 (Lambrou 2023; Zheng et al. 2023). The prevalence of this variant has led to another public concern to strengthen health protocols for mobility and international migration in China (Li et al. 2021; Martin and Bergmann 2021). Moreover, China experienced new deadly viruses, like COVID-19, which can spread to other countries in Asia and the rest of the world.

Additionally, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about the issue of xenophobic discrimination especially against Africans residing in China to the fore. Several scholars observed that many Chinese were victims of xenophobic attacks in many parts of the world because the pandemic is believed to have originated in China (Hennebry and Hari 2020; Reny and Barreto 2022). For example, several media reports revealed how the Chinese were discriminated against in several European countries (Li et al. 2021).

Likewise, there were increasing media reports about how the Chinese were engaging in xenophobic attacks against African residents in China. For example, scholars like Ouassini et al. (2022) and Obianagwa et al. (2023) revealed how Black and African migrants were discriminated against based on certain health protocols not only blaming them as responsible for the disease but with an intent to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in China. Although the menace of xenophobia over the years is beyond China, it can however be argued that the Chinese engaged in acts of discrimination against Africans, which by implication is an act against the fundamental principle of human rights (Obianagwa et al. 2023). In essence, there is a connection between the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in China and the surge of xenophobic attacks recorded in the same period.

### **Global Tweets: Issues and Tone on COVID-19 and Xenophobia Against Africans in China**

Social media, especially X (formerly Twitter), provides a valuable lens through which to analyse public sentiment and discourse on these issues.

The social platform (X) was particularly identified as a predominant means for protest communication to condemn discrimination against Africans at the break of the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al. 2021). It is perhaps the most popular platform for sharing breaking news, individual experiences, and personal opinions about current events through tweets, retweets, comments, tags and hashtags, and other forms of engagement (Mustaqim et al. 2020). For example, hashtag campaigns were created and sponsored on Twitter by groups and individuals in reaction to the Chinese discrimination against Africans during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, several posts were made on the issues of COVID-19 and discrimination against African communities in China, particularly in Guangzhou (Xu et al. 2021).

Media discussion during this period centres around the actual source of the pandemic, its impact on social, economic, and political life, and the acts of racial discrimination across the world particularly by the Chinese against African migrants (Liu et al. 2021; Workneh 2022; Obianagwa et al. 2023). Likewise, it was observed that the tones of engagement during this time were mostly negative in terms of anger outbursts, blame-shifting, frustration, condemnation, complaints, and fears among others. Nevertheless, there remains a dearth of a comprehensive investigation on the global tweets particularly, on the xenophobic attacks on black Africans in China at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This study adopted digital ethnography to generate qualitative and quantitative data about global tweets of xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The type of digital ethnography used for this study was the conceptual perspective (Forberg and Schilt 2023). This type of analysis is used to investigate the key concepts affecting the phenomenon.

Notably, the digital ethnography approach for this study was the analytical approach. The analytical approach is used to conduct an intrinsic analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data in line with the study's objectives (Caliandro 2018). The analytical approach is used to evaluate the data to proffer valuable contributions to policy intervention and sustainable development.

Equally important, the sampling design adopted the purposive sampling technique to select the top 30 global tweets about the xenophobia attack on Africans in China during the COVID-19 pandemic (Okorie 2022). The timeline of this research investigation was from January 2020 to June 2020. The choice of the timetable was in line with the rise and fall of the xenophobic attack.

For contextual validity, the inclusion criteria of this study were global tweets with the phrases “xenophobic attack of Africans in China” were accepted. In contrast, tweets with words such as “discrimination of Africans in China” or “discrimination of Blacks in China” were rejected. Furthermore, all retweets and reply posts were not included to avoid redundancies and repetitions.

Interestingly, the three metrics for the measurement of global tweets in this study. These metrics were the global tweets’ prominence, engagement, and sentiments (Zhang et al. 2021). First, the prominence depicts the top tweets according to the Twitter algorithm. Second, engagement depicts the reactions and comments of the global tweets. Third, sentiments refer to Twitter users’ emotional disposition and opinions about the issue. Chi-square analysis was used to ascertain the association between the nominal variables that is, the pertinent issues and the recurring tone of global tweets about xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak). Furthermore, a contingency coefficient measure was used to determine the significance and direction of the association between the variables.

## RESULTS

This empirical investigation generated quantitative and qualitative data about global tweets of xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the pandemic. The results were presented and analysed in line with the research questions, which were

also in line with the metrics of social media measurement: prominence, engagement, and sentiments.

Table 1 depicts the global tweet on COVID-19 outbreaks and xenophobic discrimination against Africans in China. It consists of the selected tweets, the sources, the date of the tweets, and the engagement pattern particularly likes, comments, likes, and retweets. The Table shows that most of the global tweets were mostly from Africans, international and local government agencies, and media agencies. Likewise, most of the tweets focus more on the cause and origin of the outbreak, the spread of the xenophobic attacks against Africans in China, the impacts socially, politically, and economically, and responses from individuals, government, and international organisations. For example, a post by Suzanne claimed the pandemic has exposed the racial indolence against Black Africans in China. Similarly, the Vanguard Newspapers confirmed that the COVID-19 fears sparked xenophobia in China against Africans during the early days of the pandemic.

Table 2 shows pertinent issues of the global tweets about the xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Five key issues were identified, which are, issues about the source and origin of the outbreak, the spread and growth of the outbreak and the adjoining attacks on Africans residing in China, the economic, social, and political impacts of the outbreaks, the responses of government, local and international institutions and individuals, this includes condemnations that was also indicated as a response. Particularly, about 10 percent of the sampled tweets centred on where the pandemic started, and about 20 percent focused on the spread and growth of the disease and the adjoining violent attacks on Africans residing in China. About 30 percent were on the social, political, and economic implications of the attacks, while the majority of about 40 percent tweeted on the individuals,

**Table 2: Pertinent issues of global tweets about xenophobic attacks**

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Pertinent issues of global tweets</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Source/origin of the outbreak	3	10.0
2	Spread and growth	6	20.0
3	Impact (economic, social and political)	9	30.0
4	Responses (government and institutional)	12	40.0
	Total	30	100.0

*Source:* Authors 2024

**Table 1: Global tweet on COVID-19 outbreaks and xenophobic attacks**

S. No.	Tweet caption	Source	Date	Comments	Likes	Retweets
1	Need to evacuate Kenyans from China	God's Child	April 9, 2020	0	1	0
2	Origin of the xenophobic attack	Paul Owor	April 11, 2020	10	73	14
3	The Current Xenophobic attacks should be condemned	China Africa Advisory	April 12, 2020	1	6	6
4	AU should organise an emergency meeting about attacks	Adaramewa	April 13, 2020	0	1	0
5	The inactions of the African Union about xenophobic attacks in China	Eastern Race	April 14, 2020	6	33	37
6	Foreign secretary denies issues of xenophobic attacks	Iceliking	April 18, 2020	0	0	0
7	The need to increase pressure against attacks	Xi-man	April 19, 2020	0	1	1
8	CNN is yet to report the attacks	City Boy	0	0	0	0
9	The pandemic has exposed the racial indolence against Black Africans	Suzanne	April 20, 2020	0	7	2
10	Chinese blame Africans for the virus spread	Bank Marthews	April 28, 2020	1	15	2
11	Increasing reports of xenophobic attacks on Africans	Coda Story	May 4, 2020	0	9	1
12	Catholic priest condemns retaliation	Africazilla	May 16, 2020	0	0	0
13	Actions of the Kenyan President about attacks	Rein	April 19, 2020	15	260	98
14	Inactions of the Chinese government about xenophobic attacks	Kenshin	May 18, 2020	1	0	0
15	The pandemic exposed the attacks of Africans in China	Camillo	June 29, 2020	0	6	2
16	Ugandan mother living in China can barely feed her children because of COVID-19-fueled xenophobia.	The Chronicles	April 11, 2020	38	265	331
17	COVID-19 originated in China and there is no justification for this racist behaviour	Trevor Ncube	April 16, 2020	39	236	122
18	China must stop the xenophobic attacks on Africans spreading in its cities.	Mukhisa Kituyi	April 11, 2020	211	4000	1500
19	China invented a deadly virus, and Africans are now being feared. This isn't just xenophobia.	Jidenna's Twinny	April 12, 2020	11	29	29
20	Coronavirus fears spark xenophobia in China against Africans	Vanguard Newspapers	April 12, 2020	5	35	20
21	Guangzhou had confirmed 114 imported coronavirus cases as of Thursday, 16 of which were Africans.	OpIndia.com	April 13, 2020	7	190	102
22	China is doing everything to make sure Africans take the fall for the Chinese virus.	Aji Bussu Onye Mpiaawa azá	April 17, 2020	5	36	37
23	It is despicable and criminal to see the abuse of Africans in China in a xenophobic way and blame them for the coronavirus.	Solomon Kassa	April 19, 2020	2	3	37
24	Chinese nationals were allegedly refused entry into a shopping mall in Namibia in revenge for the racism Africans are facing in China.	Chukwuebere	May 13, 2020	26	202	267
25	African community targeted in China virus crackdown	The New Vision	April 11, 2020	22	177	62
26	Chinese Ambassador meets the African Union Deputy Chairperson over the attack on Africans in China	African Union	April 15, 2020	43	198	86
27	On suspected coronavirus-related xenophobia, African diplomats mount pressure on China	Pulse Ghana	April 13, 2020	1	100	7
28	African community targeted in China virus crackdown	News24	April 11, 2020	24	34	39
29	Africans in China are on edge as coronavirus sparks anti-foreigner sentiment	Adomonline	April 11, 2020	1	36	2
30	The Chinese people are now kicking Africans in China from their homes over suspected imported COVID-19 cases	Sergio	April 9, 2020	4	73	13

Source: Authors 2024

institutional, and government responses to the attack, these are mostly in the form of condemnation of the attack.

Table 3 revealed the recurring tones of global tweets about the xenophobic attack on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak. The data shows the tones were mostly pessimistic with 36.7 percent depicting fear, likewise, another 36.7 percent depicting fear while about 26.6 percent of the tweets depict anger.

**Table 3: The recurring tones of global tweets about the xenophobic attack**

S.No.	Tones of global tweets	Frequency	Percentage
1	Anger	8	26.6
2	Fear	11	36.7
3	Distrust	11	36.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Authors 2024

Table 4 displays that there is an association between the paired variables. The Table shows the linear association was significant ( $P < 0.005$ ). Therefore, the test confirms that there is a significant association between the pertinent issues and the recurring tone of global tweets about xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak.

## DISCUSSION

This digital ethnographic inquiry explores the xenophobic attacks on Africans in China at the outbreak of COVID-19 especially as expressed through on x.com (then Twitter) during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the study through the prism of media dependency theory and relevant literature answered two research questions.

The study identified the pertinent issues of global tweets about xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak as

discourse on the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of the pandemic, its impact and implications, and responses. This discovery aligns with studies of scholars like Umejei (2021), Okorie (2022), Ouassini et al. (2022), Brujia (2024) and Li (2024) who identified themes and media framing of COVID-19-related issues as the origin and source of the pandemic, misconceptions, expression of grievances, racial attacks and reappraisal, global awareness, campaigns and mobilisation, consequences, impacts, and implications. Nonetheless, the xenophobic attacks experienced by blacks in China at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic are not peculiar as there were similar attacks in several parts of the world, particularly against the Chinese whom many blame as the cause and origin of the disease. The studies of Govender (2017), Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020), and Hayek (2024), confirmed how the media frame issues in times of crisis largely determine the type of perception and reactions that will be experienced.

Similarly, the recurring tones of global tweets on the attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak were identified to be generally pessimistic and sentimental such as expressions of threat, distrust, fear, and anger as noted in this study. The observation is similar to those earlier made by other scholars (like McCauley et al. 2013; Mutua and Ong'ong'a 2020; Xu et al. 2021; Ittefaq et al. 2022; Chen et al. 2024). For example, observations made by McCauley et al. (2013) during the H1N1 Flu outbreak in 2009-2010 and Chen et al. (2024) for the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that news media coverage during crises naturally activates pessimistic tones, which unfortunately complicates the spread of the disease (Wang et al. 2024). In essence, the dissemination of sentimental and pessimistic messages by individuals, groups, and media entities, especially in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, can be considered normal. However, this is complicated by the viral nature and ease of proliferation of untrue information on social media platforms.

**Table 4: Chi-Square Test**

Categories	Values	Df	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)
Pearson chi-square	49.602a	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	53.003	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	25.020	1	.000
Number of valid cases	30		

Source: Authors 2024

Finally, the study revealed there is a significant association between pertinent issues and the recurring tones of global tweets about xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak. The hypothesis test showing that the strength and direction of the association were significant, implies that the type of issues that are being talked about greatly influenced the tone that was used in expressing it. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue is a health and social crisis, which was mostly expressed in a sentimental and pessimistic tone.

### CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of global tweets about xenophobic attacks on Africans in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the pertinent issues and recurring tones. The analysis, based on the media dependency theory, underscores the role of social media as a vital platform for information dissemination and public discourse during crises. The findings highlight several critical insights such as pertinent issues identified, recurring tones of tweets, and the association between issues and tone. By implementing the recommendations as identified, policymakers, social media platforms, public health officials, and researchers can contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable global society.

Importantly, future research could adopt alternative methodologies such as longitudinal or cross-cultural approaches, and technological tools that will expand the scope of the investigation to other social media platforms and compare their roles in crisis communication. In sum, this study provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between global crises and social issues, highlighting the significant role of social media in shaping public perceptions and responses. The findings call for comprehensive strategies to address both the immediate health threats and the underlying social tensions exacerbated by the pandemic.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need for robust local and international policy interventions to address the public health crisis and connected social issues like discrimination and xenophobic attacks. Particularly, relevant policymakers can implement stringent anti-

discrimination policies that specifically target xenophobic behaviours and provide protections for vulnerable and minority communities. Similarly, the pivotal role of social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), in shaping public discourse and mobilising collective action in an age of overall connectivity cannot be overemphasised. It is important to establish clear and accessible reporting mechanisms on social media for victims of social crises like xenophobic attacks to seek timely help and justice or more importantly execute laudable preventive measures. Nonetheless, it remains critical to address the limitations of social media usage such as the proliferation of fake news. This might involve developing media literacy skills that can identify and mitigate the spread of bigotry, racism, hate speech, fake news, and misinformation.

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**Paper received for publication in June, 2024**  
**Paper accepted for publication in December, 2024**