

**EXPLORING COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF THE NATIONAL PROSECUTING
AUTHORITY ON X REGARDING THE JULY 2021 SOUTH AFRICAN UNREST**

By

KHOLOFELO SOLOMON SEROTA MOGOTLANE

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SUPERVISOR: Dr Mopailo Thomas Thatelo

CO-SUPERVISOR: Dr Trevor Hlungwani

18 August 2026

DECLARATION OF OWN WORK

I, Kholofelo Solomon Serota Mogotlane, declare that this dissertation represents my original scholarly work, completed through my own independent research and critical engagement in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Communication Science at the University of South Africa (UNISA).

Student number: 63877228

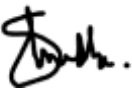
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—  —

SIGNATURE

DEDICATION

17 June 2026

DATE

DEDICATION

This research is devoted, first and foremost, to the memory of my father, Johannes Santalina Mogotlane, whose influence continues to guide me. *Ke Mothokwa wa Mmaseboko bare seboko gase bokwe baneng, ebile gase bokwe ntle sea šiša. Ke mmina Phukubje, mpša ya naga bare ya Ila Moletjie ga re eje, re šia go nkg a molomo. Ke Santalina maripa leselo, maja nkatane a bo Mašhila'a bodiphala sjutla sa boMokone Mmago Lesiba.* In your passing, I gained not a loss but a guardian. Your words of encouragement still echo beyond the waters, steady and unyielding. I carry with me your lesson that "Monna ga hlabelwe ke letšatši ka maragong", a reminder that discipline and purpose must greet every dawn. Those words became a compass, and this work is one of their destinations. And, to my mother, Anna Nkabaneng Mogotlane, our vigilant guardian and spiritual warlord. Your prayers have stood where strength alone could not. Your unconditional love has carried us through storms we never announced to the world. You are not only my mother. You are a living ancestor, breathing courage into our lineage every single day. This work is also dedicated to my beautiful late sister, Sylvia Manonyane Bonolo Mogotlane, who left us in 2010. Your voice still rises when doubt tries to settle. To my late brother, Thabiso Mogotlane, I dedicate this with tender ache. Though you departed before my arrival, your place in this family and in this journey remains sacred and undiminished. I further dedicate this study to my paternal and maternal ancestors. *Rakgolo Serota, kera yena Maina, Mpšhe nkadime dinao tsepitsepi ke tšhabe le tšona mohla wa lesolo. Ba re ke diatla makgwakgwa ga ke sware ngwana, ka swara ngwana wa Ila. Waka mosadi ke Pheladi motefa diatla, motopo monkga lefehla. Rakgolo Molalanyane le Koko Malehu, Ageee Dinoko! Ageee Lephalaborwa! Ke Malatji'a bogoši'a motho selema Mahlakeng. Ke Malatji Phepela ka Ngwete, Phepela o etše Leba, wa etša Molema o wawa. Bo Rakgolokhukhu le bo KokoKhukhu Mmapokoto, Amporofede, Mamanginana, Mashila, MyGod, Kgwahlana, Ramokone, and Sengadi.* Your protection surrounds me and your blessings are felt in doors that open quietly and in strength that arrives just in time. This study is not only an academic contribution. It is a conversation with those who came before me, a promise kept, and a path cleared for those who will come after.

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ABSTRACT

The July 2021 unrest in South Africa represented a pivotal episode of instability in the country's democratic dispensation, precipitating a digital contestation as significant as the physical violence it accompanied. Following the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma for contempt of court, X (formerly Twitter) became a central site on which users constructed, circulated, and sought to legitimise alternative narratives about the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA). This study positions these narratives as purposive, structurally organised discursive interventions that fundamentally reshaped how institutional legitimacy, prosecutorial authority, and justice were publicly evaluated in South Africa's digitally mediated democratic environment.

Guided by counter-narrative theory (CNT), digital public sphere theory (DPST), and participatory theory (PT), the study employs qualitative content analysis within an interpretivist paradigm, drawing on a purposively selected sample of 20 tweets collected between July 2021 and July 2025 to capture both the acute phase of the unrest and its sustained digital aftermath. The sample was retrieved through five hashtags, namely #July2021Unrest, #July2021Riots, #FreeJacobZuma, #PhoenixMassacre, and #ZumaUnrest, with each tweet treated as a multimodal discursive artefact and read closely rather than coded for frequency.

The analysis identifies five recurring narrative genres, namely populism, propaganda framing, misinformation and disinformation, ideological framing, and historical memory and emotive symbolism through which counter-narratives about the NPA were constructed. These genres did not function in isolation but converged and reinforced one another within a shared counter-narrative ecosystem that collectively repositioned the NPA from an institution upholding the rule of law to one seen as politically compromised, racially partial, and delegitimised adversary of the people, sustained through six discursive strategies, namely emotive framing, scapegoating, symbolic amplification, participatory engagement, moral dichotomies, and repetition and virality at a level of communicative technique. Thematic analysis further identified

four formations within the dataset. Political persecution and victimhood framed Zuma's prosecution as an attack on the liberation struggle. Institutional betrayal and elite corruption portrayed the NPA as serving factional interests rather than constitutional accountability. Racialised violence and communal defence centred on the NPA's perceived failure to prosecute Phoenix-related violence with equal urgency, echoing South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) findings on the absence of NPA instructions and communication breakdowns between police, witnesses, and victims. Hashtag mobilisation and symbolic references formed the connective infrastructure that organised, amplified, and sustained these formations across the digital public sphere.

The study proposes a five-genre analytical framework that may be useful for comparable studies of institutional legitimacy contestation in African and postcolonial settings, offering an evidence-based account, within the scope of a small purposive sample, of how digital counter-narrative production draws on historical memory, liberation iconography, and racial grievance in postcolonial democracies. The findings suggest that legal legitimacy in digitally networked societies is shaped not only by constitutional authority and procedural conduct, but also by the emotional, symbolic, and participatory registers through which publics interpret and evaluate institutional justice.

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KEY TERMS

Affective Publics: Political communities that form in digital spaces through shared emotional responses such as outrage, grief, and solidarity rather than through reasoned debate or formal organisational ties.

Counter-Narratives: Alternative accounts that challenge dominant or official interpretations of events, redistributing moral responsibility and contesting the authority of established institutions through purposive storytelling.

Digital Public Sphere: The networked communicative environment of digital platforms where citizens produce, contest, and negotiate political meaning through emotional expression, participatory interaction, and algorithmic mediation.

Hashtag Mobilisation: The process through which hashtag use organises and amplifies dispersed user voices into coherent, visible, and searchable collective formations within digital public spaces.

Historical Memory: The shared body of past experiences and cultural narratives through which communities construct collective identity and evaluate the moral standing of present-day institutions and events.

Institutional Legitimacy: The publicly perceived standing of an institution as fair, trustworthy, and morally justified in exercising authority, sustained through consistency, transparency, and moral alignment with public expectations.

Narrative Genres: Recognisable communicative forms that organise storytelling into familiar and persuasive structures, shaping how meaning, blame, and moral judgement are produced and received by audiences.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANC - African National Congress

BC – Black Consciousness

BLF – Black First Land First

CNT - Counter-narrative theory

DA - Democratic Alliance

DPST - Digital public sphere theory

EFF - Economic Freedom Fighters

FRELIMO - Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique)

MK - uMkhonto we Sizwe

MKMVA - Umkhonto weSizwe Military Veterans Association

NPA - National Prosecuting Authority

NADEL - National Association of Democratic Lawyers

PT - Participatory theory

RET - Radical Economic Transformation

SAHRC - South African Human Rights Commission

SWAPO - South West Africa People's Organisation

ZANU-PF - Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The convergence of social media platforms, political discourse, and the credibility of public institutions have become critical yet under-theorised dynamics in contemporary democratic governance. Digital platforms have fundamentally altered the architecture of public discourse, enabling citizens to produce, circulate, and contest narratives about state institutions without reliance on conventional media gatekeepers. Castells (2009) argues that networked communication has shifted political power from institutions to citizens, while Metzler and Garcia (2024) and Papacharissi (2015) demonstrate that this transformation has produced a fragmented, affective, and algorithmically mediated digital public sphere in which institutional authority is continuously negotiated rather than settled. In this environment, counter-narratives have become powerful instruments through which political credibility is challenged, public trust is contested, and alternative interpretations of institutional conduct are advanced. Counter-narratives, as Hyvärinen (2021) theorises, are not merely oppositional statements but structured discursive interventions that reinterpret events, redistribute responsibility, and reframe legitimacy through storytelling.

This research explores online counter-narratives relating to South Africa's National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) during and in the aftermath of the July 2021 unrest. These events, which followed the incarceration of former President Jacob Zuma on charges of contempt of court (SAHRC, 2024b), resulted in extensive violence, significant economic harm, and heightened contestation within digital spaces across social media platforms (SAHRC, 2024a). On X, previously referred to as Twitter, social media users generated and shared a dense network of alternative narratives that framed the NPA's prosecutorial conduct as selective, politically motivated, and institutionally compromised. These narratives did not merely reflect public dissatisfaction with specific legal outcomes. They actively reshaped public perceptions of prosecutorial

legitimacy within the digital public sphere, drawing on identifiable narrative genres, discursive strategies, and ideological frameworks rooted in South Africa's historical political development.

This research is underpinned by three interrelated theoretical frameworks which collectively offer a consistent and robust analytical basis for exploring how counter-narratives emerged, circulated, and gained discursive force during this period of profound institutional crisis. Counter-narrative theory (CNT) provides the analytical tools for examining how alternative narratives challenged dominant institutional accounts of justice and prosecutorial authority (Hyvärinen, 2021; Lueg & Lundholt, 2020). Digital public sphere theory (DPST) situates those narrative struggles within the networked, algorithmically mediated communicative spaces in which they were produced and circulated (Papacharissi, 2015; Fraser, Castells, 2009; 1990; Habermas, 1989). Participatory theory (PT) foregrounds the role of ordinary social media users as active producers and amplifiers of meaning through digital interaction (Freire, 1970).

The study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate a purposively chosen sample of 20 tweets, with each tweet interpreted as a discursive unit through which ideological positions, political meanings, and identities are produced and contested. This interpretivist methodological orientation is well suited to exploring how meaning was constructed, negotiated, and circulated within digital environments during a defined period of significant socio-political events. This chapter introduces the study by situating it within its broader context, outlining the research problem, and presenting the aim, research questions, and objectives. It also discusses the study's significance, clarifies its scope and limitations, and offers an overview of the structure of the subsequent chapters.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT TO THE STUDY

1.2.1 Contextual Profile of Jacob Zuma

Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma was born on 12 April 1942 in Nkandla, located in KwaZulu-Natal province (Gordin, 2010). His political identity developed within the liberation struggle and remains closely tied to the historical trajectory of the African National Congress (ANC). Zuma became a member of the ANC in 1958 and was incarcerated on Robben Island between 1963 and 1973 (The Presidency, no date). This liberation lineage, as Augustine (2025), Suttner (2017), and Buntman (2003) argue, granted him a form of symbolic authority that translated into post-apartheid political legitimacy, a pattern Masunda (2025) traces across the ANC, South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) more broadly. Following the democratic transition, Zuma served as Deputy President from 1999 until his dismissal under former President Thabo Mbeki in 2005 (Vasagar, 2005), following a High Court judgement that found evidence of a corrupt relationship between Zuma and his financial adviser, Schabir Shaik (Samaai & Van Vuuren, 2020). In May 2006, Zuma was acquitted in the highly publicised 2006 *Khwezi* rape trial (Tlhabi, 2017; Hassim, 2009), after which he was elected ANC President in 2007 and served as President of South Africa from 2009 till 2018 (Thamm, 2021; African National Congress, 2009).

Zuma's time in office and its aftermath were marked by a series of judicial proceedings that shaped South African public discourse and constitutional jurisprudence, including the prolonged arms deal corruption prosecution and related allegations of fraud, racketeering, and money laundering (Chipkin & Vidojević, 2026; Open Secrets, 2022; Schönteich, 2014), the Constitutional Court's Nkandla judgment on his failure to uphold constitutional obligations regarding state funds (Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2016), and the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, prompted by claims involving the Gupta family (Chipkin & Vidojević, 2025; Africa, Gumbi & Sokupa, 2021). Gumedé (2012) characterises Zuma's leadership style as

grounded in personalised authority, while Booysen (2015) situates this within escalating factional conflict inside the ANC following the 2007 Polokwane conference. A critical turning point was reached on 29 June 2021 when the Constitutional Court of South Africa imposed a 15-month prison sentence on Zuma for contempt of court, following his refusal to testify before the State Capture commission, commonly referred to as the Zondo Commission, which was chaired by then Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, now retired Chief Justice (Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2021; Ferreira, 2021). His imprisonment at Estcourt Correctional Centre on 8 July 2021 became the immediate catalyst for widespread unrest this study examines (Africa, Gumbi & Sokupa, 2021; Vhumbunu, 2021; The Witness, 2021).

1.2.2 Overview of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA)

Section 179 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, provides the constitutional basis for the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), subsequently established through the National Prosecuting Authority Act 32 of 1998 (National Prosecuting Authority Act No. 32 of 1998). The institution is responsible for initiating criminal prosecutions on behalf of the state and for carrying out prosecutorial duties aimed at maintaining and enforcing the rule of law (National Prosecuting Authority, no date), and is constitutionally required to act independently and without fear, favour, or prejudice in executing these responsibilities. Despite this formal mandate, the institution's legitimacy has been repeatedly contested. Schönreich (2024) and Kotzé (2018) detail how the termination of criminal proceedings against former President Zuma in 2009, widely perceived as politically influenced, and their later reinstatement under new leadership, entrenched long-term scepticism about prosecutorial independence. The National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADEL, 2019) states directly that the Zuma case "painted the NPA as a toothless institution subject to political manoeuvring by high powered government officials", leaving "a stain on the office of the NPA". Nortje and Davids (2025), echoing observations made by Corruption Watch and the Institute for Security Studies (2019), contend that the NPA's handling of state capture prosecutions attracted ongoing criticism and competing

interpretations from politically aligned stakeholders both during and following the Zuma presidency.

These challenges intensified around the period of the July 2021 unrest. Online discourse reflected simultaneous and often contradictory demands, including calls for decisive prosecution of those involved in the violence, questioning of the legal basis for Zuma's imprisonment, and criticism of the NPA's perceived inconsistency. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2024a) confirmed that the NPA received sixty-five dockets relating to deaths during the unrest, yet only a limited number of cases linked to Phoenix resulted in convictions. Rikhotso (2021) argues that such prosecutorial outcomes provided concrete material upon which claims of selective justice were constructed, making these claims resistant to institutional rebuttal. Sunshine and Tyler (2003) contend that this illustrates how institutional authority is sustained not only through legal mandate, but through public perceptions of fairness, moral coherence, and communicative engagement.

1.2.3 The July 2021 Unrest in South Africa

The events of July 2021 constitute one of the most significant episodes of social instability since the end of apartheid. Between 9 and 18 July 2021, large scale violence, looting, and destruction of property unfolded across KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, affecting urban centres such as Durban and Pietermaritzburg as well as parts of Johannesburg (Vhumbunu, 2021). More than 350 people lost their lives during this period, while the economic consequences for infrastructure, logistics networks, and commercial activity were severe (Africa, Gumbi & Sokupa, 2021; Vhumbunu (2021) and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2024b), identifies Zuma's arrest and imprisonment as the immediate precipitating event. The SAHRC (2024a) further indicate that the subsequent unrest that followed reflected the interaction between political mobilisation, entrenched socio-economic hardship, and digitally enabled coordination. This followed the Constitutional Court ruling that imposed a custodial sentence after Zuma repeatedly refused to cooperate with the State Capture Inquiry (also known as the Zondo Commission) (Constitutional Court of

South Africa, 2021). However, scholars caution against interpreting the unrest through a single causal lens. Visagie, Turok, and Swartz (2021) warn that such an approach obscures the diversity of actors, motivations, and local conditions involved, stressing South Africa with a long history of violent protests. Mongale (2022) similarly argues that the unrest reflected a convergence of political protest and opportunistic criminal activity rather than a uniform collective movement.

The Expert Panel appointed by the Presidency to investigate the July 2021 unrest concluded that Zuma's incarceration acted as a trigger rather than a root cause (Africa, Gumbi & Sokupa, 2021). The report highlighted a convergence of structural pressures, including chronic unemployment, poverty, housing insecurity, corruption, weakened state capacity, and public frustration linked to COVID 19 restrictions. Visagie, Turok and Swartz (2021) reach comparable conclusions, emphasising that while Zuma aligned mobilisation initiated the unrest, its deeper origins lay in long standing socio-economic inequality. De Haas (2023) situates this vulnerability within South Africa's history of racialised spatial exclusion, while Enaifoghe, Mtshali, and Durokifa (2023), as well as Mongale (2022) points to factional contestation within the ANC that actively channelled popular frustration for political leverage.

In the period immediately preceding Zuma's imprisonment, mobilisation was both visible and coordinated. Supporters gathered at his Nkandla residence and publicly articulated claims of political victimisation (Phungula, 2023b). This mobilisation rapidly extended into online environments. Petla (2023) demonstrates that digital networks facilitated the rapid circulation of messages portraying Zuma's imprisonment as unjust, alongside competing narratives condemning violence. Kekere, Marivate, and Hattingh (2025) confirm that mobilisation occurred across interconnected physical and digital spaces, accelerating the geographic diffusion of unrest. Africa, Gumbi and Sokupa (2021) further document how communication networks associated with Zuma aligned actors shaped the political atmosphere in the weeks before the violence. Simultaneously, intense contestation unfolded on X, where users constructed divergent interpretations of events, attributed responsibility to state institutions, and

assessed the legitimacy of legal authority. The NPA emerged as a central object of scrutiny. Digital narratives frequently characterised the institution as politically compromised, reflecting broader patterns of institutional mistrust identified by Desai (2023). At the same time, demands for accountability intensified around violence in Phoenix, KwaZulu-Natal, where racialised attacks became a prominent feature of the unrest (Mongale, 2022). Desai (2023) and Joseph (2023) demonstrate that these narratives were shaped by ideological positioning, historical memory, and populist framing rather than formal legal reasoning. Petla (2023) reinforces this finding, showing that public conceptions of justice during the unrest were guided primarily by symbolic and moral logics.

This study is located within that contested discursive terrain. It examines how counter narratives concerning the NPA were produced and circulated on X during and after the July 2021 unrest, and how these narratives illuminate broader questions of institutional legitimacy within South Africa's digital public sphere.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The increasing prominence of digital platforms in shaping public discourse has introduced complex challenges for the legitimacy of legal institutions within contemporary democracies. While platforms such as X expand opportunities for participation in political communication, they also enable the rapid circulation of counter narratives that contest institutional authority through emotive, symbolic and ideological framing. In periods of political crisis such as the July 2021 unrest in South Africa, these dynamics become particularly significant as institutions such as the NPA are subjected to intensified public scrutiny and narrative contestation. Such contestation has the potential to influence public perceptions of justice and accountability irrespective of formal legal processes, yet the mechanisms through which these narratives emerge, and gain traction remain insufficiently examined in scholarly work.

A key limitation within existing literature is its strong orientation towards Western contexts and its primary focus on protest movements rather than on legal and prosecutorial institutions. Aiseng (2024a) observes that African digital counter-publics remain comparatively under theorised, while Mukhudwana (2020) notes that South African scholarship has largely prioritised student activism and protest communication. This focus has resulted in limited engagement with the ways in which institutions responsible for upholding legality become focal points of digital contestation. As Fredriksson (2014) argue, institutional communication and legitimacy during periods of crisis remain under-explored areas, particularly in relation to prosecutorial bodies that occupy a central role in democratic governance.

A further gap concerns the discursive structures underpinning counter-narratives. Existing studies, including Walsh's (2021) framework for information disorder and the work of Ndlovu and Van Coller (2025) and Maqutu (2015) on the delegitimisation of the NPA, have not sufficiently examined how meaning is constructed through language, symbolism and participatory engagement in digital environments. Nor has the role of narrative genres such as populism, propaganda, historical memory, emotive symbolism and misinformation been systematically analysed in relation to the legitimacy of prosecutorial institutions specifically. A further methodological blind spot runs through this body of work. Studies that draw on social media data in politically charged South African settings, such as Khan, Thakur, Obiyemi and Adetiba (2022), Martinerie (2021) and Mukhudwana (2020), in their examination of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall discourse, have largely treated individual posts as aggregate evidence for thematic or frequency coding rather than subjecting them to sustained close reading. This tendency reduces tweets to data points rather than treating them as layered communicative constructions, leaving a gap between what is claimed about digital counter-narratives and what can be demonstrated at the level of the individual communicative act. This study addresses that gap directly.

These limitations point to a broader research problem concerning the absence of focused and contextually grounded analysis of how counter narratives about the NPA were constructed and circulated during and after the July 2021 unrest. Without such

analysis, it is difficult to determine how digitally mediated discourse contributed to shaping public interpretations of justice and institutional credibility during this period. By examining the ways in which narratives were formed, positioned and disseminated on X, this study seeks to address this gap and to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital participation, ideological framing and discursive practices interact in the reconfiguration of institutional legitimacy within South Africa's democratic context.

1.4 RESEARCH AIM

The main aim of this study was to analyse the discursive practices employed by social media users in constructing counter-narratives about the NPA within the digital public sphere of X during the July 2021 unrest in South Africa.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was guided by the following research questions:

Main research question:

- What were the underlying counter-narratives concerning the NPA within the digital public sphere of X during the July 2021 unrest?

Sub-questions:

- What discourses characterised counter-narratives about the NPA on X during the unrest?
- What discursive practices and strategies were deployed in the construction of counter-narratives concerning the NPA on X regarding the unrest?
- What ideological positions underpin these counter-narratives, and how were narrative genres such as propaganda, populism, historical memory, emotive

symbolism, misinformation, and disinformation mobilised in representations of the NPA during the unrest?

1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To address the research questions, the study was guided by the following objectives:

- To explore the underlying counter-narratives concerning the NPA within the digital public sphere of X during the July 2021 unrest, identifying what narratives circulated rather than how or why they were constructed.
- To describe the dominant discourses through which these counter-narratives were articulated and circulated on X, focusing on the surface content and framing of the narratives identified above.
- To deconstruct the discursive practices and strategies deployed in constructing these counter-narratives, moving beyond description to examine the specific rhetorical and communicative techniques used.
- To interrogate the ideological foundations of these counter-narratives, including the use of propaganda, populism, historical memory, emotive symbolism, as well as misinformation and disinformation as digital counter-narrative genres, situating the findings within their broader political and historical significance.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study makes a threefold contribution to scholarship on digital political communication. Theoretically, it extends counter-narrative analysis beyond the protest movements and activist campaigns that have dominated the field in African and South African contexts, positioning a prosecutorial institution as the central site of discursive contestation rather than as a peripheral backdrop. By treating populism, propaganda framing, misinformation and disinformation, ideological framing, and historical

memory and emotive symbolism as converging narrative genres rather than isolated communicative phenomena, the study proposes an analytical framework for examining institutional delegitimisation in postcolonial democracies, where liberation history, racial grievance, and political factionalism supply the symbolic resources upon which counter-narrative production draws. This responds directly to the gap identified by Aiseng (2024a) and Mukhudwana (2020), who observe that African digital counter-publics remain under-theorised relative to their political significance, and it does so through a framework grounded in African communicative experience rather than adapted wholesale from Western scholarly precedent. Empirically, the study's contribution lies in subjecting each of the 20 selected tweets to layered analytical attention that attends simultaneously to language, visual composition, hashtag function, and symbolic reference, making visible the mechanisms through which rhetorical force is generated and institutional legitimacy is contested within individual communicative acts. The four-year dataset further offers insight into how counter-narrative formations were not merely produced during the acute phase of the unrest but appeared to be sustained and recirculated across subsequent political and legal developments, illustrating claims about narrative persistence that existing scholarship has largely advanced on conceptual rather than data based terms.

The practical significance of the study is equally relevant for governance and legal communication. The analysis suggests that the NPA's institutional legitimacy was not undermined primarily by specific legal decisions, but by the communicative conditions surrounding those decisions, conditions characterised by perceived silence, delayed responsiveness, and limited engagement with the emotional and symbolic registers through which public evaluations of justice are formed. For governance practitioners, legal communicators, and policy actors, the findings offer insight into how counter-narrative formations were amplified and sustained within specific digital counter-publics, and why institutional responses that operate solely in procedural and legalistic registers may fail to address the affective and ideological dimensions of legitimacy contestation. The study therefore carries relevance for institutional communication strategy in South Africa and in comparable postcolonial democratic settings where

legal bodies face sustained public scrutiny through social media, contributing to broader debates on the rule of law by indicating that legal authority benefits from active, culturally responsive, and communicatively intelligent engagement with the publics it is constitutionally obligated to serve.

1.8 SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS

The study is delimited to an analysis of counter-narratives concerning the NPA as constructed on X during the July 2021 unrest and its sustained digital aftermath, focusing on publicly accessible posts associated with five selected hashtags, namely #July2021Unrest, #July2021Riots, #FreeJacobZuma, #PhoenixMassacre, and #ZumaUnrest. It does not analyse private communication, other social media platforms, or assess the legal merits of prosecutorial decisions. The dataset comprises 20 purposively selected tweets collected between July 2021 and July 2025, a four-year period justified not as an administrative convenience but as an analytically necessary frame shaped by a succession of political and legal developments that continuously regenerated digital counter-narrative production about the NPA well beyond the acute phase of the unrest. Because the dataset comprises 20 purposively selected tweets from a single platform, claims made elsewhere in this dissertation about digital publics, narrative ecosystems, or South African public opinion more broadly should be read as insights generated from this specific sample, rather than as demonstrated facts about the wider population of X users or South African society. This delimitation is maintained consistently across the Findings, Discussion, and Conclusion chapters.

1.9 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 1 introduces the study and outlines the background, problem statement, research aim, questions, and objectives.

Chapter 2 presents a critical literature review on digital public discourse, counter-narratives, and institutional legitimacy.

Chapter 3 develops the theoretical framework: counter-narrative theory, digital public sphere theory, and participatory theory.

Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology; it details the research paradigm, qualitative content analysis approach, purposive sampling strategy, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 presents, interprets, and analyses the empirical findings by means of a close reading of the 20 selected tweets.

Chapter 6 synthesises the findings and draws conclusions about the implications of digital counter-narratives for institutional legitimacy and democratic accountability in South Africa.

1.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter introduced the study, established its background, and outlined the problem statement, research aim, questions, objectives, and scope. It has demonstrated that digital counter-narratives about the NPA during the July 2021 unrest represent a significant and under-examined phenomenon in South African digital political communication. The chapter identified that the study is grounded in counter-narrative theory (CNT), digital public sphere theory (DPST), and participatory theory (PT), and employs qualitative content analysis to examine 20 purposively selected tweets. Chapter 2 reviews the scholarly literature that situates the study within broader debates on digital public discourse, counter-narratives, and institutional legitimacy.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter critically reviews and synthesises scholarship relevant to digital public discourse, counter-narratives, and institutional legitimacy in digitally mediated political contexts. The purpose of the chapter is to situate the study within established academic debates on how meaning, authority, and legitimacy are produced, negotiated, and contested in networked public environments (Castells, 2009), drawing on the analytical orientation established by (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) for situating qualitative research within existing scholarly debates. A literature review is not a descriptive catalogue of prior research but a structured and analytical process through which existing scholarship is integrated to inform the conceptual and analytical direction of a study (Lane, Common, Royer, & Oakes, 2022). Positioning the study within debates on digital discourse and counter-narratives, this chapter foregrounds how alternative narratives emerge in response to dominant and institutional accounts, particularly during periods of political instability and social unrest (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). Existing scholarship demonstrates that digital environments enable the rapid circulation of counter-narratives that challenge official interpretations, reframe institutional actions, and mobilise collective identities. These processes are especially significant in contexts where public trust in institutions is fragile and legitimacy is publicly contested.

The chapter further engages literature on institutional legitimacy to contextualise the focus on prosecutorial bodies. Institutions such as the NPA occupy a distinctive position within democratic societies as custodians of legality, accountability, and the rule of law. Their authority extends beyond formal legal mandates and is increasingly shaped by public perception, moral evaluation, and visibility in digital discourse (Mukhudwana, 2020). During political crises, prosecutorial decisions often become symbolic focal points through which broader struggles over power, justice, and

governance are articulated. The July 2021 unrest in South Africa provides a critical context for examining these dynamics. Triggered by the imprisonment of former President Zuma (SAHRC, 2024b), the unrest unfolded alongside intense digital contestation in which competing narratives framed the legitimacy of legal institutions. Within this environment, the NPA became a central object of online scrutiny, with counter-narratives questioning its impartiality, political independence, and role in enforcing justice (Majola, 2023). Analysing these discursive processes requires engagement with scholarship on counter-narratives, digital public discourse, and the narrative genres through which institutional legitimacy is contested, and these includes propaganda framing, populist rhetoric, ideological framing, historical memory and emotive symbolism, as well as misinformation and disinformation in counter-narrative production.

The scope of this review reflects these priorities. It begins by examining digital public discourse in the contemporary media environment, establishing the communicative terrain in which counter-narratives circulate. It then conceptualises counter-narratives and explores their relationship to power, resistance, and institutional authority, drawing on a range of global and African cases. Subsequent sections focus on how counter-narratives target legal and prosecutorial institutions, followed by an analysis of dominant narrative genres in political meaning-making process. The chapter also examines digital participation and narrative amplification before identifying gaps in existing literature and positioning the contribution of the present study. Despite extensive research on digital activism and counter-publics, much of the scholarship is concentrated on Western contexts and protest movements, offering limited insight into how counter-narratives evolve in response to legal institutions during political unrest, particularly within African democracies (Aiseng, 2024a; Mukhudwana, 2020). This study addresses these gaps by critically examining how counter-narratives surrounding the NPA were produced, circulated, and contested in the digital public sphere during and post-July 2021 unrest. The structure of this chapter provides a foundation for the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3.

2.2 DIGITAL PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

This section establishes the communicative terrain within which digital counter-narratives concerning the NPA were constructed and circulated during the July 2021 unrest. It situates the study within broader debates on how public discourse has been transformed by digital media, with particular emphasis on shifts in authority, participation, and meaning making. Understanding these transformations is essential because counter-narratives do not emerge in isolation but are shaped by the structural affordances, cultural logics, and power relations embedded within contemporary digital communication environments.

2.2.1 Transformation of Public Discourse in the Digital Age

Public discourse refers to the communicative exchange of ideas, values, and perspectives within a social context, serving as a mechanism through which societies make sense of public issues and collectively engage in meaning-making (Burelli & Destri, 2025). It is deeply intertwined with democratic processes, where dialogue among citizens plays a crucial role in shaping opinions, legitimising decisions, and reinforcing governance (Baekkeskov, Rubin & Öberg, 2021). Traditionally, the foundation of public discourse is closely linked to Habermas's (1989) conceptualisation of the public sphere as a domain in which private individuals come together to critically debate matters of common interest, ideally free from state or market interference.

Public discourse has undergone a fundamental transformation with the shift from traditional mass media systems to networked and participatory forms of communication. Historically, as Habermas (1989) demonstrates in his structural analysis of the bourgeois public sphere, public debate was largely organised through institutional gatekeepers, including mainstream media organisations and political elites, who exercised significant control over the production, circulation, and framing of information within formal deliberative spaces. The architecture of that system

privileged institutional actors and constrained the communicative reach of those without access to formal media channels.

Digital networked environments have fundamentally disrupted this architecture. Benkler (2006) establishes that the networked information economy enables individuals and non-institutional actors to participate in the production and circulation of public knowledge without depending on the industrial media system's editorial and distributional gatekeepers, redistributing the means of communicative participation to previously excluded actors. Castells (2012) extends this analysis empirically through his examination of contemporary social movements, demonstrating that autonomous communication networks supported by the internet and wireless communication have enabled citizens to organise, articulate grievances, and contest official narratives in real time, bypassing the institutional mediation that previously controlled access to the public sphere. This shift has led to the decline of conventional gatekeeping and the rise of user-generated discourse. Social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and others allow users to produce, share, and comment on content in real time, expanding the range of voices present in public debate (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). As a result, public discourse is increasingly shaped by interaction, visibility, and engagement rather than editorial selection or professional authority. While this transformation has broadened opportunities for participation, it has also complicated processes of verification, accountability, and credibility in public communication.

The implications of these changes for authority and meaning-making are significant. In digital environments, narratives gain prominence through circulation and emotional resonance, often privileging simplified or polarised interpretations of political events (Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021; Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel, 2017). Authority is therefore less securely anchored in institutional expertise and more contingent on public recognition and affective alignment. For institutions whose legitimacy depends on procedural rationality and trust, including legal and prosecutorial bodies, this transformation exposes them to

heightened scrutiny and contestation in the public sphere (Castells, 2009; Tyler, 2006; Habermas, 1996). The digital public sphere fosters a participatory communicative environment characterised by interactivity, networked connectivity, and multimodal expression (Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010). Here, discourse is no longer linear or hierarchical but polycentric and dialogic, reflecting a multiplicity of voices that contest and negotiate meaning in real time. These affordances expand opportunities for counter-narratives to emerge, as marginalised perspectives circumvent institutional constraints and reach wide audiences without mediation (Aiseng, 2024a; Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020).

The nature of public discourse in digital spaces is further complicated by algorithmic amplification. Platforms prioritise content that elicits strong emotional responses, often privileging sensational or polarising material over deliberative dialogue (Brady, McLoughlin, Doan, & Crockett, 2021; Brady et al., 2017). This dynamic can entrench echo chambers, where users engage primarily with like-minded individuals, reinforcing ideological homogeneity and diminishing exposure to alternative perspectives (Esau, Choucair, Vilkins, Svegaard, Bruns, O'Connor-Farfan & Lubicz-Zaorski, 2024; Cinelli et al., 2021).

2.2.2 The Digital Public Sphere and Online Contestation

The transformation of public discourse in digital environments has prompted renewed engagement with the concept of the public sphere. Habermas's (1989) original formulation conceptualised the public sphere as a space of rational critical debate among private individuals, oriented towards consensus and democratic deliberation. Contemporary scholarship, however, suggests that digital publics are neither unified nor primarily deliberative. Instead, they are fragmented, plural, and characterised by ongoing contestation (Eisenegger & Schäfer, 2023; Chambers, 2023). Digital platforms facilitate the formation of multiple and overlapping publics, including counter-publics and affective publics organised around shared identities, emotions, and grievances (Papacharissi, 2015). Within these spaces, discourse is frequently shaped by symbolic expression, moral judgement, and narrative struggle rather than

by procedural rationality. Competing interpretations of political events circulate simultaneously, each seeking visibility and legitimacy within networked publics. These dynamics become particularly pronounced during periods of political crisis. Moments of instability intensify online contestation as institutions, political actors, and citizens advance competing narratives to frame accountability, justice, and authority (Castells, 2012; Boin, 't Hart & McConnell, 2009).

The evolution of social media has profoundly reshaped the contours of public discourse, shifting it from traditional top-down models of communication to more decentralised, interactive engagements (Castells, 2009). Unlike traditional media, which operates through hierarchical gatekeeping, social media platforms enable participatory communication where users function simultaneously as content producers and consumers (Fischer, & Jarren, 2024; Eisenegger, & Schäfer, 2023). This transformation reflects both technological advancements and broader socio-political shifts, positioning social media as a critical arena for the construction, contestation, and dissemination of public narratives (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). The South African experience demonstrates how digital counter-publics mobilise during unrest to contest state narratives of governance and legality, highlighting the relevance of digital public sphere theory for understanding legitimacy struggles in crisis settings (Martinerie, 2021; Mukhudwana, 2020).

2.2.3 Digital Platforms as Sites of Political Meaning-Making

Digital platforms do not function as neutral channels for the transmission of public discourse. Rather, they actively shape how political meaning is produced, circulated, and stabilised through their technical design, cultural norms, and algorithmic logics (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018). In digitally mediated environments, meaning is not determined solely by the substance of arguments but by visibility, circulation patterns, and affective resonance within networked publics (Lim, 2025; Geboers & Van De Wiele, 2020). Content gains prominence not because of its evidentiary strength or legal accuracy, but because it generates interaction, affirmation, and symbolic alignment among users, a dynamic that builds directly on the affective publics

discussed above and helps explain why the emotionally resonant content described there tends to outcompete procedurally accurate content for visibility. As a result, political meaning is frequently condensed into simplified narratives that rely on moral evaluation rather than procedural reasoning. Legal and institutional processes, which are often complex and slow-moving, are therefore translated into emotionally legible stories of blame, betrayal, or victimhood.

The algorithmic organisation of digital platforms intensifies this translation by sustaining particular interpretations through repetition and networked reinforcement (Lorenz-Spreen, Lewandowsky, Sunstein & Hertwig, 2023; Brady et al., 2023a), compounding the symbolic and historically grounded framing strategies already discussed in relation to South African digital counter-publics. For legal institutions such as the NPA, these dynamics are especially consequential. Institutional silence, technical explanation, or procedural caution can be reinterpreted as evidence of bias, capture, or incompetence when contrasted with emotionally compelling counter-narratives circulating online.

2.3 COUNTER-NARRATIVES IN DIGITAL SPACES

This section introduces counter-narratives as the central analytical object of the study. It examines how counter-narratives are conceptualised in scholarship, how they function in relation to power and institutional authority, and how digital affordances enable their circulation and consolidation. Situating counter-narratives within the digital public sphere is essential for understanding how alternative interpretations of justice, accountability, and legitimacy emerged on X during and after the July 2021 unrest, particularly in relation to the NPA.

2.3.1 Conceptualising Counter-Narratives

Counter-narratives are commonly understood as discursive constructions that challenge dominant narratives by offering alternative interpretations of events, identities, and institutional practices (Hyvärinen, 2021; Bamberg & Andrews, 2004).

Within critical narrative scholarship, counter-narratives are positioned as relational forms of storytelling whose meaning is derived from their opposition to prevailing or official accounts (Bamberg & Wipff, 2021). Rather than existing in isolation, they emerge in direct response to narratives that are perceived as exclusionary, misleading, or unjust. In political and institutional contexts, counter-narratives function as tools for questioning authority and legitimacy. They contest the coherence, neutrality, or moral standing of institutional narratives, particularly where those narratives are associated with state power or elite interests (Hyvärinen, 2021; Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). Narrative power is therefore central to the operation of counter-narratives, as the capacity to define reality through storytelling is closely linked to legitimacy and influence (Corner, 2024; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019).

Broadening the theoretical grounding of counter-narrative scholarship beyond a single intellectual tradition reveals additional dimensions that are directly productive for the present study. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012) approach narrative not as a fixed textual product but as a socially situated interactive practice through which speakers and writers actively construct versions of self, community, and institutional relation in response to the evaluative demands of their immediate communicative context. Their framework is particularly generative for analysing social media counter-narratives because it foregrounds how narrators position themselves and their audiences within moral hierarchies of credibility and belonging, a dynamic that is especially consequential when ordinary citizens publicly contest the authority of constitutional institutions through digital storytelling. Rather than treating counter-narratives as simply oppositional, De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012) demonstrate that they are fundamentally identity-producing practices through which narrators stake claims about who they are, whose side they occupy, and what kind of justice they recognise as legitimate. Andrews (2014) extends this understanding by situating counter-narratives within the broader dynamics of social change, arguing that stories which challenge dominant accounts do not merely register dissatisfaction but function as generative imaginative acts through which alternative social arrangements are rendered conceivable and collectively desirable. Andrews (2014) further contends that the

transformative potential of counter-narratives lies precisely in their capacity to make visible the assumptions embedded within dominant accounts, exposing institutional narratives not as natural or inevitable but as constructed, contestable, and replaceable. Together these perspectives supplement the counter-narrative scholarship already reviewed by demonstrating that the digital counter-narratives examined in this study were simultaneously acts of identity assertion, moral positioning, and social imagination rather than simply reactive expressions of political dissatisfaction.

The scholarly exploration of digital counter-narratives within political contexts has gained considerable attention, particularly in relation to how social media enables marginalised voices to challenge official state narratives. This includes work on South Africa's Black Twitter and digital counter-publics (Aiseng, 2024a), #MustFall movements, and traditions of national liberation (Martinerie, 2021), Chuma, Bosch, and Wasserman's (2017) study of the #BringBacktheSignal hashtag, as well as the #ZumaMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns Khan, Thakur, Obiyemi, & Adetiba, 2022; Mukhudwana, 2020). Globally, studies of digital activism in Myanmar (Oh, 2019), the Black Lives Matter movement in Chang, Richardson and Ferrara's (2022) analysis of #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd, Poole, Giraud, and de Quincey's (2019) contestation of the #StopIslam campaign, as well as Pepe-Oliva and Casero-Ripollés's (2023) analysis of Twitter discourse of ten Ibero-American political women of change, demonstrate how digital counter-publics challenge official narratives in online environments (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2020). The rise of social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok has intensified the role of counter-narratives in public discourse (Tufekci, 2017). These platforms enable participatory communication, allowing users to bypass traditional media gatekeeping and co-create narratives in real time (Castells, 2009; Benkler, 2006). Hashtags, memes, and viral posts serve as tools for framing alternative viewpoints, fostering discursive spaces where institutional narratives are contested and reinterpreted (Martinerie, 2021).

Pepe-Oliva and Casero-Ripollés (2023) demonstrate how Ibero-American political women of change, actors seeking transformation of the prevailing political reality, used X to construct counter-hegemonic narratives through criticism, denunciation, and the promotion of alternative perspectives that challenge dominant elite discourses. Similarly, Oh's (2019) study of digital activism in Myanmar illustrates how counter-narratives address hate speech and ethnic conflict, as activists deployed the Panzagar 'flower speech' campaign to circulate positive, anti-hate messages alongside fact-checked information. Poole, Giraud and Quincey (2019) examine how hashtags such as #StopIslam circulated after the Brussels terrorist attacks to spread divisive messages while simultaneously prompting the creation of counter-narratives in response. In African contexts, Aiseng's (2024a) study of South Africa's Black Twitter demonstrates how culturally grounded counter-publics challenge narratives of marginalisation by deploying humour, symbolism, and historical references to critique systemic inequalities. Behm-Morawitz and Valerius (2024) show that oppositional discourses are often embedded within dominant media systems rather than existing outside them, while Kan's (2020) notion of the 'digital carnivalesque' illustrates how humour and satire function as forms of subversion, particularly in politically restrictive contexts. Campaigns such as #FeesMustFall and #ZumaMustFall illustrate how online publics mobilise around shared grievances to contest state narratives on governance, inequality, and accountability (Khan, Thakur, Obiyemi, & Adetiba, 2022; Martinerie, 2021; Mukhudwana, 2020). The 'Bring Back the Signal' chant during the 2015 State of the Nation Address (SONA) is a further prominent example of a digital counter-public challenging media control and state censorship in South Africa (Musgrave, 2015). Chuma, Bosch and Wasserman (2017) demonstrate how the jamming of Parliament's cellphone signal prompted immediate social media mobilisation under the #BringBacktheSignal hashtag, through which citizens, journalists, and opposition actors collectively took to X and contested what they framed as an unconstitutional suppression of communication and democratic accountability. In the case of the July 2021 unrest, social media users deployed counter-narratives framing the NPA as politically biased, selective in its prosecutions, and complicit in factional power struggles (Petla, 2023), illustrating that counter-narratives do more than oppose state

messaging, they articulate alternative visions of justice that influence institutional credibility (Giraud & Poole, 2021).

2.3.2 Counter-Narratives and Power Relations

Narratives are deeply embedded in power relations because they shape whose perspectives are recognised as legitimate and whose experiences are marginalised in public discourse (Van Dijk, 2008). Counter-narratives often emerge from groups or individuals who perceive institutional narratives as misrepresentative or unjust, positioning them as forms of discursive resistance within contested political contexts (Delgado, 1989). By challenging official accounts, counter-narratives destabilise dominant interpretations and expose the contingent nature of institutional authority. This process allows marginalised voices to articulate alternative understandings of responsibility, accountability, and justice, thereby contesting the moral and political foundations of institutional legitimacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Counter-narratives function as powerful instruments for destabilising dominant narratives, particularly within the digital public sphere. Their potency lies in their ability to reframe events, reinterpret institutional actions, and amplify voices that contest state-sanctioned or official narratives (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). These narratives are not merely oppositional, they are reconstructive, forging alternative meanings and collective identities through participatory engagement (Kinloch, Penn & Burkhard, 2020).

Social media provides the infrastructural and symbolic resources that enable such processes, allowing dispersed actors to collaborate in challenging institutional authority and shaping public opinion in real time (Tufekci, 2017). Multimodal storytelling, combining text, imagery, and video enhances emotional resonance, making counter-narratives more persuasive and shareable (Chang, Richardson & Ferrara, 2022). Hyvärinen (2021) argue that the dialogic function of counter-narratives forces dominant institutions to re-articulate their public stance in response to dissenting digital publics. There is also limited understanding of how institutional actors respond whether through silence, co-option, or direct rebuttal and, how such

responses influence the credibility and persistence of counter-narratives (Giraud & Poole, 2021). Visual symbols, including photographs and videos showing the burning of infrastructure, protest placards, and ANC regalia, were deployed during the July 2021 unrest to dramatise grievances and legitimise resistance, transforming digital platforms into sites of ideological struggle (Thatelo & Motsaabethe, 2024).

However, the relationship between counter-narratives and power is not inherently emancipatory. While digital platforms can amplify marginalised perspectives, they can also intensify polarisation and enable the strategic mobilisation of grievance-based narratives that reinforce antagonism rather than deliberation (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023). In periods of political crisis, counter-narratives may therefore operate both as critiques of institutional power and as instruments for advancing alternative political agendas, complicating simple distinctions between resistance and domination (Boin & 't Hart, 2022).

2.3.3 Digital Affordances and the Circulation of Counter-Narratives

The circulation of counter-narratives in digital spaces is shaped by platform affordances that facilitate participatory storytelling and rapid diffusion, with hashtags playing a central role in organising dispersed expressions into recognisable narrative formations that enable users to align around shared frames of meaning (Li, Suk, Zhang, Pevehouse, Sun, Kwon, Lian, Wang, Dong & Shah, 2024; Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020; Yang, 2016). Through aggregation and repetition, hashtags consolidate counter-narratives over time, while the combination of text, imagery, and video evokes emotional responses and moral judgement, increasing persuasive appeal and shareability (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020; Yang, 2016).

Digital affordances also enable counter-narratives to bypass traditional media and institutional communication channels. This reduces institutional control over narrative framing and allows alternative interpretations to circulate even in the absence of official responses (Fischer & Jarren, 2024). As counter-narratives gain visibility through repetition and engagement, they can achieve narrative dominance within

specific networked publics, shaping perceptions of legitimacy and authority in ways that are difficult for institutions to reverse.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on digital counter-narratives, critical gaps remain. Existing research rarely explores how these narratives intersect with legal authority in African democracies or how they employ discursive practices to contest prosecutorial legitimacy during crises (Mukhudwana, 2020).

2.3.4 Thematic Patterns in Digital Counter-Narratives and Analytical Relevance to the Study

The preceding subsections have established that counter-narratives are discursively constructed phenomena shaped by platform affordances, power relations, and the strategic deployment of narrative genres. Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024), examined online political posters circulated on X by ANC radical economic transformation (RET) faction members during the July 2021 unrest, confirming that visual political communication on the platform was characterised by deliberate Afrocentric visual rhetorical strategies deployed to construct factional political meaning and oppose institutional adversaries. Their findings demonstrate that digital counter-narratives during this period were strategically purposeful rather than merely spontaneous expressions of popular grievance.

Within this broader landscape, a growing body of work has identified recurring thematic formations through which digital publics organise their contestation of institutional authority, with these formations reflecting not random expressions of dissatisfaction but structured and recognisable narrative logics that shape how blame, justice, and legitimacy are publicly evaluated (Dawson, 2025; Yang, 2016; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). Four such patterns are directly relevant to understanding the social media discourse that emerged around the NPA during the July 2021 unrest, namely: political persecution and victimhood, institutional betrayal and elite corruption, racialised violence and communal defence, and hashtag mobilisation and symbolic references. Each of these thematic formations has been

extensively theorised in existing literature, and their discussion here establishes the conceptual foundation for the thematic analysis conducted in Chapter 5.

Theme 1: Political Persecution and Victimhood

One of the most persistent thematic patterns in digital counter-narratives directed at state institutions involves the construction of political victimhood. Scholarship on populist discourse identifies victimhood as a central narrative resource through which political actors are reframed as targets of unjust institutional power rather than subjects of legitimate legal accountability (Cianciara, 2025; Homolar & Ruiz Casado, 2025; Meijen & Vermeersch, 2024). In this framing, the prosecuted individual is repositioned as a representative of collective suffering, with legal proceedings interpreted not as the application of law but as the persecution of a symbolic figure whose fate is intertwined with that of a broader social constituency. Hyvärinen (2021) argues that narrative theory provides an important lens through which such reframings can be understood, since victimhood narratives do not merely reflect political positions but actively constitute new social realities by assigning moral meaning to institutional events.

Digital environments intensify victimhood narratives by enabling emotive personalisation and rapid affective alignment. When a prominent political figure is subjected to legal sanction, social media users can collectively reinterpret that sanction as evidence of institutional malice, constructing an oppositional identity between the victimised figure and a corrupt or captured state apparatus (Higgins, 2025; Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). Papacharissi's (2015) foundational work on affective publics demonstrates how this emotional reinterpretation gains traction through digital participation, as expressions of outrage, solidarity, and indignation collectively transform legal events into moral crises. These affective processes are reinforced by the architecture of platforms such as X, which incentivise emotionally charged communication through algorithmic amplification of high-engagement content (Milli, Carroll, Wang, Pandey, Zhao & Dragan, 2025; Goldenberg & Willer, 2023).

Hronešová and Kreiss (2024) alongside Al-Ghazzi (2021) further demonstrate that counter-narrative theory, when applied to democratic contexts, reveals how victimhood framings function as tools for delegitimising state institutions by inverting the moral relationship between the prosecuted and the prosecuting authority. This inversion is particularly powerful in contexts where public trust in institutions is already fragile, as it resonates with pre-existing scepticism and requires little additional persuasion to gain credibility (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023a; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

In post-apartheid South African political discourse specifically, victimhood narratives carry exceptional force because they draw on the deeply embedded symbolism of liberation struggle, colonial injustice, and racial oppression (Baron, 2022; Bowsher, 2020). The invocation of liberation-era memory allows contemporary prosecutorial decisions to be reframed as continuations of historical persecution, connecting present legal proceedings to a broader narrative of collective suffering and resistance. As Masunda (2025) and Alberts and Bossau (2026) argue, in African postcolonial contexts victimhood framing is frequently mobilised to question whether post-liberation institutions genuinely serve the people they claim to represent, or whether they have been recaptured by historically antagonistic forces. During the July 2021 unrest, such framings found expression in social media narratives that portrayed the NPA's prosecutorial conduct as politically orchestrated rather than constitutionally grounded, positioning former President Zuma as a symbolic casualty of factional and elite-driven legal persecution (Desai, 2023).

Theme 2: Institutional Betrayal and Elite Corruption

A second prominent thematic pattern in digital counter-narratives concerns the construction of institutional betrayal, in which formal state institutions are portrayed not as guardians of constitutional values but as instruments of elite interest that have abandoned their founding mandates (Chipkin & Vidojević, 2026). Literature on institutional trust and legitimacy demonstrates that betrayal narratives emerge most forcefully when there is a perceived gap between institutional promise and institutional

conduct (Long & Sitkin, 2024; Christl, Pham, Rosenthal, & DePrince, 2024). In democratic contexts, where institutions derive legitimacy from expectations of impartiality and public service, the perception that institutional power is being used to advance factional or class interests constitutes a profound moral rupture. Flew (2022), along similar lines to Bennett and Livingston (2018) identify legitimacy crises as defining features of contemporary institutional communication in digitally mediated environments, observing that social media platforms accelerate the collapse of institutional credibility by enabling rapid, decentralised contestation of official narratives. When institutions fail to communicate clearly or respond promptly, counter-narratives fill the interpretive void, often framing institutional silence as evidence of concealment or complicity (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019).

Prosecutorial decisions, judicial rulings, and legislative outcomes are re-narrated as evidence of systemic dishonesty, with legal authority repositioned as a tool for protecting elite interests rather than enforcing accountability. Scholarship on political communication identifies this reframing as a form of conspiracy logic, in which the formal appearance of legality is constructed as a cover for illegitimate power (Butter & Knight, 2023). Gerbaudo (2022) and Walsh (2020) adds that in conditions of entrenched institutional distrust, digital civic engagement tends to amplify betrayal narratives rather than deliberative critique, as users are more readily mobilised by moral indignation than by procedural argument. Cinelli et al. (2021) further observe that the fragmentation of the digital public sphere produces epistemically closed communities in which betrayal framings circulate without meaningful challenge. In the South African context, institutional betrayal narratives are further complicated by the documented legacy of state capture and institutional failure during the Zuma era (Chipkin & Vidojević, 2025; Lodge, 2023). This dynamic is consistent with Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) observation that propaganda achieves its greatest persuasive force not through outright falsehood but through the strategic exploitation of legitimate grievance, a dynamic that is particularly visible in counter-narratives about the NPA. Chipkin and Vidojević (2025) confirms this pattern in the South African setting, demonstrating that narratives of factionalism and institutional capture resonate

strongly with publics whose trust in state institutions has been eroded by evidence of politically motivated governance failures.

Theme 3: Racialised Violence and Communal Defence

A third thematic pattern, extensively theorised in scholarship on postcolonial digital discourse, concerns the racialisation of institutional conduct and the mobilisation of communal defence narratives. In societies marked by histories of racial inequality, institutional actions are frequently evaluated through a racial justice lens, particularly when prosecutorial decisions appear to apply unequally across racial lines (Adams & Luiz, 2022; Dugard, 2022). Fraser's (1990) foundational theorisation of counter-publics is essential to understanding this dynamic. Fraser argues that marginalised social groups form parallel discursive arenas in which alternative norms and interpretations are developed and rehearsed, challenging the universalist pretensions of dominant public discourse. In racially stratified societies, such counter-publics are organised around shared experiences of institutional exclusion and marginalisation, providing a discursive infrastructure through which racialised interpretations of legal events gain collective coherence and moral authority. Bosch (2017), examining the #RhodesMustFall movement on X in South Africa, demonstrates empirically how racialised counter-publics use social media to contest institutional narratives, transforming individual grievances into coordinated challenges to institutional legitimacy.

Racialised counter-narratives in digital spaces typically operate by juxtaposing differential institutional responses to comparable acts of violence or transgression, constructing a moral argument about selective justice that questions whether law is applied impartially or according to racialised hierarchies of harm (Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). In this framing, communal defence is presented not as lawlessness but as a rational and morally justified response to perceived state abandonment or racially motivated institutional neglect. Safaian and Teune (2022), analogue to Neumayer and Rossi (2018) demonstrate how digital protest imagery

reinforces these arguments. Digital platforms amplify racialised counter-narratives by enabling the aggregation of testimony, visual evidence, and historical reference into sustained arguments about systemic racial bias (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). The national investigative hearing report into the July 2021 unrest in Gauteng and Kwazulu-Natal documents the extent to which racialised grievances shaped public interpretation of events, noting that social media accelerated the circulation of narratives linking prosecutorial conduct to perceived racial inequality (SAHRC, 2024a). In such contexts, the NPA was evaluated not as a neutral legal function but as a contested political institution whose racial implications were actively debated within digital counter-publics (Mathe, 2022; Schönteich, 2014).

Theme 4: Hashtag Mobilisation and Symbolic References

The fourth thematic pattern concerns the role of hashtag mobilisation and symbolic references in organising, amplifying, and sustaining digital counter-narratives, especially during times of political uncertainty. Scholarship on digital activism and networked communication has established that hashtags function not merely as technical aggregation tools but as discursive and symbolic resources that condense complex political meanings into recognisable and shareable forms (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020; Papacharissi (2015). A hashtag encodes a political position, a moral claim, or a historical reference, allowing users to align their individual contributions with broader counter-narrative formations without requiring extended argumentative engagement (He, 2023; La Rocca & Boccia Artieri, 2023). Tufekci (2017) characterise this process as a form of platformed activism, in which the communicative infrastructure of social media platforms is strategically appropriated to sustain political contestation over time.

In politically charged contexts, such as the July 2021 unrest, hashtags serve as anchors for collective memory and shared grievance. By repeatedly invoking particular symbols, historical events, or political figures, hashtag-driven narratives sustain interpretive continuity, connecting present events to established narrative frameworks

(Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). La Rocca and Boccia Artieri (2023) observe that this function of hashtags has fundamentally altered the dynamics of democratic contestation, enabling loosely organised counter-publics to exert sustained narrative pressure on institutions without the formal organisational structures that characterised earlier forms of political mobilisation. This temporal and symbolic anchoring is particularly significant in postcolonial political settings, where the symbolic resources of liberation history, racial identity, and national belonging are routinely mobilised to give contemporary legal and governance processes deeper political meaning (Aiseng, 2024a; Martinerie, 2021). Bosch (2017) demonstrates in the South African context how hashtag activism draws on these symbolic resources to construct a sense of collective political continuity, linking present contestations to historical struggles in ways that give counter-narratives moral depth and broad affective resonance.

Literature on participatory digital culture further demonstrates that hashtag mobilisation facilitates networked amplification, in which individual expressions accumulate into collective narrative formations that achieve visibility and apparent consensus within specific digital publics (Berg, König & Koster, 2020; Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). Fischer and Jarren (2024) highlight that platform governance structures further mediate this process, as trending mechanisms and algorithmic prioritisation shape which hashtag-driven narratives achieve sustained visibility and which remain marginal (Duffy & Meisner, 2023).

For legal institutions such as the NPA, these dynamics mean that counter-narratives organised around powerful symbolic markers can rapidly achieve discursive dominance within online communities, shaping public perceptions of institutional credibility in ways that are difficult to contest through conventional institutional communication channels (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). These four thematic patterns, (1) political persecution and victimhood, (2) institutional betrayal and elite corruption, (3) racialised violence and communal defence, and (4) hashtag mobilisation and symbolic references, collectively constitute the interpretive terrain

within which digital counter-narratives about the NPA were constructed and sustained during the July 2021 unrest. Their discussion here demonstrates that the thematic findings presented in Chapter 5 reflect broader discursive formations extensively theorised within scholarship on digital public discourse, counter-narrative production, and institutional legitimacy.

Across all the four thematic formations reviewed here, what emerges consistently is that digital counter-narratives about the NPA were not produced as isolated expressions of individual grievance but as structurally organised discursive practices drawing on shared symbolic vocabularies, historical referents, and participatory mechanisms that gave them collective force and institutional reach well beyond the immediate events of the July 2021 unrest. The empirical significance of these four formations for the present study lies in their capacity to organise the analytical work undertaken in Chapter 5, where each theme is examined in relation to the specific tweets that constitute the dataset, demonstrating how theoretical patterns identified in the scholarly literature manifested concretely within the digital counter-narrative ecosystem surrounding the NPA.

2.4 COUNTER-NARRATIVES, INSTITUTIONS, AND LEGAL AUTHORITY

This section examines how counter-narratives intersect with institutional authority in digital spaces, with particular emphasis on legal and prosecutorial institutions. It situates the NPA within broader debates on legitimacy, trust, and accountability, and demonstrates why prosecutorial bodies become focal points of narrative contestation during periods of political crisis. By foregrounding legal authority rather than protest movements alone, this section establishes the conceptual bridge between digital discourse and justice institutions that underpins the empirical analysis in Chapter 5.

2.4.1 Institutional Legitimacy in Digital Discourse

Institutional legitimacy refers to the extent to which institutions are perceived as fair, trustworthy, and morally justified in exercising authority, with legitimacy increasingly

constructed through public discourse rather than legal mandate alone (Vaara, Aranda & Etchanchu, 2024; Tyler, 2023). In legal contexts, legitimacy is traditionally grounded in constitutional mandate, procedural fairness, and adherence to the rule of law (Lazar, 2024). However, scholarship increasingly recognises that legitimacy is also socially constructed through public discourse, where perceptions of fairness, consistency, and moral alignment play a decisive role (Tyler, 2023).

In digital environments, legitimacy is negotiated through visibility, responsiveness, and narrative coherence rather than formal legal reasoning alone. Social media platforms enable citizens to publicly evaluate institutional conduct, often framing legitimacy through moral judgement rather than procedural criteria (Van Bavel, Robertson, del Rosario, Rasmussen & Rathje, 2024; Brady, McLoughlin, Doan & Crockett, 2021). Legal authority therefore extends beyond statutory mandate into the realm of symbolic performance, where institutions are judged on how their actions resonate with public expectations of justice and accountability. Digital discourse intensifies this dynamic by privileging affective communication and simplified narratives. Institutions that fail to communicate clearly or promptly risk losing narrative control, allowing alternative interpretations to dominate public understanding (Hersel, 2022). Consequently, legitimacy in digital publics becomes contingent not only on legal correctness but on narrative credibility and moral plausibility.

The empirical dimensions of this dynamic have been examined directly by scholars working at the intersection of institutional communication and public legitimacy. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) and Hersel (2022) draw on cases of governance failure across democratic settings to demonstrate that institutions whose public communication strategies prioritise procedural explanation over moral responsiveness consistently lose narrative credibility within digitally networked publics, not because their legal conduct is necessarily deficient, but because their communicative conduct fails to meet the evaluative expectations through which ordinary citizens assess whether an institution is genuinely serving the communities it claims to represent. What Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) empirical

account reveals is that legitimacy erosion in practice follows a recognisable pattern, beginning with perceived communicative distance, accelerating through digital counter-narrative formation, and consolidating into structural public scepticism that subsequent institutional action struggles to reverse.

Lorenz-Spreen, Oswald, Lewandowsky and Hertwig (2023b) complements this account by examining how counter-narratives targeting public institutions have functioned across a range of political and organisational contexts, finding that the most consequential delegitimising narratives are those that succeed in reframing an institution's defining purpose, repositioning it from a guardian of shared values into an instrument of particular interests. Lorenz-Spreen and colleagues' (2023b) empirical observations are especially relevant to the present study because they demonstrate that this reframing process does not require the counter-narrative to be factually accurate in order to be persuasive, since its authority derives from its alignment with pre-existing frameworks of institutional scepticism rather than from evidentiary strength. Together these empirical accounts establish that the conditions under which the NPA's legitimacy was contested during and after the July 2021 unrest were not exceptional but reflected a recognisable and theoretically coherent pattern of institutional delegitimation in digitally mediated democratic environments.

2.4.2 Counter-Narratives Targeting Legal and Judicial Institutions

Legal and judicial institutions frequently become targets of counter-narratives during periods of political instability. Courts, prosecutors, and policing bodies are often framed as selective, politicised, or ineffective, particularly when legal decisions intersect with contentious political interests (Juzgenbayev, 2025; Kureshi, 2025). Such narratives challenge institutional neutrality and question whether legal authority is exercised fairly and consistently. Counter-narratives targeting legal institutions often mobilise themes of selective justice and institutional failure. By highlighting perceived inconsistencies in prosecution or enforcement, these narratives reframe legal outcomes as evidence of bias rather than impartiality (Van Elsas, Meijers & Sipma, 2026). In digital spaces, such framings are reinforced through repetition, emotional

appeal, and symbolic association, enabling them to gain credibility within networked publics (Brady & Crockett, 2024). By portraying institutions as instruments of factional or elite interests, counter-narratives undermine public confidence in the rule of law and contribute to scepticism towards formal accountability mechanisms (Kyriacou & Trivin, 2026; Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024).

2.4.3 Prosecutorial Institutions in Times of Political Crisis

Prosecutorial institutions become narrative focal points during political crises because they occupy a central position in translating legality into action. Decisions regarding prosecution, timing, and evidentiary thresholds are closely scrutinised and often interpreted through political frames rather than legal reasoning (Vilaça, 2024; Boldt & Boyd, 2018). In such contexts, prosecutorial discretion is reimagined as political intent, making institutions vulnerable to narrative attack. The July 2021 unrest in South Africa illustrates how prosecutorial authority can be discursively reframed during moments of instability. Following the incarceration of former President Zuma, digital counter-narratives portrayed the NPA as politically compromised and selectively punitive, framing legal accountability as factional persecution (Nortje & Davids, 2025; Petla, 2023). These narratives drew on historical grievances and liberation-era symbolism to situate prosecutorial action within broader struggles over power and legitimacy. Comparative scholarship highlights similar patterns in other crisis contexts, where legal institutions are subjected to intense narrative contestation and symbolic reinterpretation. These studies demonstrate that during political crises, prosecutorial bodies are not assessed solely on legal performance but on their perceived alignment with public expectations of justice, fairness, and accountability (Cox & Gripp, 2022; Nelson & Samarth, 2022). This underscores the importance of examining how counter-narratives shape public perceptions of prosecutorial legitimacy in digitally mediated environments.

2.5 NARRATIVE GENRES IN DIGITAL COUNTER-NARRATIVE PRODUCTION

This section reviews scholarly work on the discursive genres through which digital counter-narratives are produced and sustained. Rather than viewing counter-narratives as spontaneous or ideologically neutral expressions of dissent, existing literature shows that they are shaped by identifiable narrative forms that organise how authority, legality, and justice are interpreted within online publics. Of particular relevance to this study are populism, propaganda, historical memory, emotive symbolism, misinformation, and disinformation which function less as isolated communicative tactics and more as narrative logics that structure meaning, emotion, and political alignment in digitally mediated discourse. These genres provide the conceptual foundation for the empirical analysis undertaken in Chapter 5.

2.5.1 Populism as a Narrative Genre in Digital Discourse

The concept of populism carries a contested intellectual history that predates its contemporary application to digital communication. Ionescu and Gellner (1969), including Canovan (1981) were among the early scholars to identify populism as a politically malleable phenomenon that resists fixed ideological classification, appearing across vastly different historical and social contexts. Moffitt (2016) extended this observation by describing populism as a rhetorical style rather than a coherent programme, which explains its adaptability across opposing political camps. The most generative theoretical contribution for this study comes from Laclau (2005), who reconceptualised populism as a political logic that constructs a frontier between an oppressed people and a corrupt power bloc through what the author terms an empty signifier, a floating symbolic term that unifies disparate social grievances into a single antagonistic opposition.

In the South African context of the July 2021 unrest, Zuma functioned precisely as such a signifier, with his incarceration becoming the focal point through which accusations of institutional betrayal, racialised persecution, and post-apartheid elite

capture were simultaneously expressed within digital counter-narratives about the NPA. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) in alignment with Mudde (2004) developed the ideational approach further, defining populism as a thin-centred ideology that considers society as ultimately divided between a pure people and a corrupt elite and argues that politics should express the general will of the people. This framework accounts directly for how the NPA was discursively repositioned from a constitutional institution into a partisan instrument of elite power within counter-narratives circulating on X (Nortje & Davids, 2025; Petla, 2023), a central to the delegitimisation of prosecutorial authority during and following the unrest.

The transition of populism into digital communication has been extensively theorised and empirically demonstrated. Engesser, Ernst, Esser and Büchel (2017), similarly to Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig and Esser (2019) argue that social media platforms encourage a fragmented populism in which individual messages each carry a distinct populist element, such as glorification of the people, attacks on elites, or ostracising of outgroups, without requiring sustained argumentative coherence. Hopster (2021) citing Engesser et al. (2017) further identify four structural affordances of platforms such as X that systematically favour populist communication, namely direct access to the public without journalistic mediation, the establishment of close connection to the people, the creation of community among geographically dispersed participants, and the fostering of personalisation. Yilmaz, Bliuc, Norrie, Smith, Smith, Evans, Courtney and Barnett (2026), corroborating Gerbaudo (2018) develops the concept of algorithmic populism to demonstrate that platforms structurally advantage emotionally provocative and symbolically charged content over deliberative communication, which explains why populist counter-narratives consistently outperform institutional explanations in digital reach and engagement. Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) provide empirical corroboration through their finding that social media use and filter bubble exposure significantly increased support for populist candidates during the 2016 United States election, while Ernst et al. (2019) confirmed that extreme and challenger parties deploy measurably higher volumes of populist key messages on social media than on other communicative platforms across the six countries in their

study. Barton Hronešová and Kreiss (2024) states that populist communication is structurally adaptable across divergent political and cultural settings precisely because its organising logic rests not on fixed ideological content, but on a moral grammar of victimhood and opposition that can be attached to whichever institutional adversary a given political context makes available. This enables populist counter-narratives to mobilise supporters against state institutions by positioning them as agents of collective harm rather than guardians of shared democratic values.

Empirical studies demonstrate the synergy between populism and propaganda in digital mobilisation, with movements such as #MakeAmericaGreatAgain in the United States and populist campaigns in Brazil and India illustrating how digital discourse constructs binary oppositions between the people and the establishment to frame institutional actors as corrupt or illegitimate (Yilmaz et al., 2026; Ozawa, Woolley, Straubhaar, Riedl, Joseff & Gursky, 2023), deploying propaganda techniques such as selective framing, repetition, and scapegoating to sustain ideological narratives (Brady et al., 2021). Digital platforms are particularly conducive to populist narration because they prioritise immediacy, emotional expression, and symbolic condensation (Papacharissi, 2021), with social media amplifying the reach and impact of populism through multimodal communication and the rapid dissemination of emotionally charged content (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023b; Brady et al., 2021). In the South African digital context, populist counter-narratives have frequently drawn on liberation history, racialised memory, and anti-elite sentiment to contest institutional authority (Thatelo & Motsaabeth, 2024; Melber, 2018). During the July 2021 unrest such narratives specifically framed prosecutorial action not as constitutional enforcement but as an assault on collective struggle and political belonging (Phungula, 2023b; Petla, 2023).

2.5.2 Propaganda and Ideological Framing in Digital Spaces

The scholarly study of propaganda has a long and contested intellectual history that runs from early twentieth-century political communication to contemporary digital environments. One of the earliest scientific definitions was by Lasswell (1927), who described propaganda as the deliberate shaping of public attitudes through the

strategic use of meaningful symbols. Bernays (1928), widely regarded as a founding figure in the study of persuasive communication, argued that modern propaganda constituted a consistent effort to shape events in order to influence public relations to a particular enterprise, idea, or group. Ellul (1965) extended this conceptualisation considerably, describing propaganda as the dissemination of an ideology by embedding it within its broader social environment, arguing that its function was not merely to spread false information but to give citizens a simplified framework of understanding that made complex political processes emotionally and cognitively legible. These foundational contributions collectively establish that propaganda operates not primarily through outright falsehood but through the strategic organisation of meaning, a dimension that Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) develop in their influential formulation of propaganda as a form of ideological framing that relies on strategic persuasion, emotional mobilisation, and repetition to reinforce particular interpretations of political events.

The analytical relationship between propaganda and framing was further theorised by Entman (1993) who explains framing as the practice of emphasising particular aspects of reality in communication to shape how people define an issue, understand its causes, evaluate it morally, and consider appropriate solutions.. Entman and Usher (2018) extended this framework to digital environments, arguing that social media platforms have fragmented the framing process by distributing the power to construct meaning across a vast network of non-institutional actors, making propagandistic framing simultaneously more decentralised and more difficult to counter through conventional institutional communication. This theoretical pairing of propaganda and framing is directly relevant to the present study because counter-narratives about the NPA on X during the July 2021 unrest were not simply expressions of opinion but were structured framing acts that selectively emphasised particular facts, symbols, and historical references while marginalising the procedural basis of prosecutorial authority.

In digital spaces, propaganda does not depend solely on falsehood. Instead, it functions by selectively emphasising certain facts, symbols, and historical references while marginalising alternative perspectives (Nerino, 2023; Entman & Usher, 2018). Digital platforms enhance the effectiveness of propagandistic narratives by enabling rapid circulation and repetition across networked publics (Van Bavel, Robertson, del Rosario, Rasmussen, & Rathje, 2024; Brady et al., 2021). Through hashtags, memes, and visual symbolism, propaganda reinforces moral absolutism and ideological alignment, presenting institutional actors as either enemies or champions of the people (Thatelo & Motsaabeth, 2024; Jackson et al., 2020). Entman and Usher (2018) confirm that this participatory framing environment significantly weakens the institutional capacity to maintain narrative authority, since users rather than journalists or officials determine which frames achieve visibility, enabling propagandistic interpretations of legal events to dominate public discourse before institutional correction can gain traction.

In the context of the July 2021 unrest, propagandistic framing was evident in narratives that depicted the NPA and the judiciary as tools of elite power (Petla, 2023). Emotive storytelling, selective historical references, and the demonisation of legal institutions were deployed to delegitimise prosecutorial authority and justify resistance to legal outcomes (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026), on the same note with Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) contends that repeated exposure to distorted narratives can erode foundational democratic norms by generating sustained confusion about what legitimate accountability should look like, an observation that speaks directly to the cumulative effect of anti-NPA digital propaganda during and after the July 2021 unrest in South Africa. By framing judicial actions as partisan rather than constitutional, propaganda destabilises trust in prosecutorial institutions and diminishes their ability to function as credible arbiters of justice (Green & Roiphe, 2025; Juzgenbayev, 2025).

2.5.3 Historical Memory in Political Counter-Narratives

Historical memory constitutes a powerful narrative genre through which digital counter-narratives acquire moral authority and political legitimacy by anchoring contemporary grievances within a recognised continuum of injustice and resistance (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle, 2013). In the South African context, this genre draws specifically on the symbolic reservoir of the liberation struggle, apartheid-era persecution, and post-apartheid political identity, enabling users to reframe present institutional actions as extensions of historically documented oppression rather than as legitimate exercises of constitutional authority (Martinerie, 2021). Wale (2022) develops the concept of knotted memories to describe how past and present experiences of suffering become entangled in post-apartheid South Africa, producing a shared narrative of betrayed sacrifice (Kenyon & Madlingozi, 2022) in which the failures of contemporary governance are interpreted through the accumulated pain of apartheid-era struggle. This concept is directly relevant to the present study because digital counter-narratives about the NPA during the July 2021 unrest drew precisely on this knotting of historical memory and present institutional grievance to render prosecutorial action morally illegitimate. Martinerie (2021) demonstrates that South African digital movements such as #FeesMustFall and #ZumaMustFall derived significant discursive force from their deliberate invocation of liberation narratives, positioning present-day struggles as continuous with the anti-apartheid tradition and thereby lending them a moral urgency that transcended their immediate political circumstances.

This dynamic is not unique to South Africa. Udenze, Roig and Pires (2025), corroborates Roberts and Bosch (2023) by showing that across the African continent, the rise of digital platforms has transformed memory activism, with movements such as #EndSARS in Nigeria and #FeesMustFall in South Africa using social media to disseminate historical narratives, challenge state accounts, and create transnational solidarity. Aiseng (2024a) similarly argues that Black Twitter in South Africa functions as a culturally grounded counter-public in which historical memory, humour, and

political critique are woven together to contest contemporary institutional authority, demonstrating that collective memory is not merely rhetorical decoration but an organising logic through which political meaning is produced and sustained.

The deployment of historical memory in digital counter-narratives is particularly effective in postcolonial African democratic contexts because it activates deeply embedded affective identities that are resistant to institutional correction. Alberts and Bossau (2026) alongside Martinerie (2021) observe that in South Africa, the invocation of liberation credentials and apartheid-era suffering operates as a form of moral capital that can be mobilised to delegitimise legal institutions when their actions are framed as continuous with historical patterns of racialised exclusion and political persecution. Kenyon and Madlingozi (2022), including Wale (2022) reinforces this observation, demonstrating that political actors in contemporary South Africa weaponise nostalgia for the anti-apartheid struggle to exploit the widespread perception that post-apartheid institutions have betrayed the liberation project, with this collective memory being transmitted across generations as a basis for present political demands.

This pattern speaks directly to how counter-narratives about the NPA were framed during the July 2021 unrest, situating the NPA's prosecution of Zuma not as constitutional enforcement but as a betrayal of revolutionary ideals by an institution captured by post-liberation elite interests. Martinerie (2021) and Mukhudwana (2020) further demonstrate that the #ZumaMustFall campaign and its counter-mobilisations drew extensively on competing historical narratives, with supporters and opponents of Zuma each appealing to liberation history to legitimise their respective positions, illustrating that historical memory in digital counter-narratives is a contested rather than uniform resource. Petla (2023) confirms this dynamic in the specific context of the July 2021 unrest, showing that hashtags such as #PhoenizMassacre, explicitly framed Zuma's prosecution within a historical narrative of political persecution, drawing on Robben Island imagery, liberation rhetoric, and anti-colonial symbolism to construct prosecutorial action as a betrayal of the revolutionary project rather than an exercise of democratic accountability (Thatelo & Motsaabethe, 2024).

Robben Island functions within this symbolic economy as what Soudien (2015) and Buntman (2003) identify as the most powerful single symbol of the South African liberation struggle, encoding resistance, endurance, and moral authority in a single site of memory whose invocation in digital discourse immediately activates a political identity resistant to institutional reframing. What makes Buntman's (2003) account analytically indispensable for understanding historical memory as a counter-narrative genre is her demonstration that Robben Island accumulated its symbolic authority not merely through the suffering it witnessed but through the deliberate political education, solidarity networks, and collective identity formation that prisoners sustained within its walls, meaning that its invocation in contemporary digital discourse carries the weight of organised political consciousness rather than passive victimhood alone. This distinction matters considerably for the present study because when social media users deployed Robben Island imagery and references in counter-narratives about the NPA during the July 2021 unrest, they were not simply invoking a generalised symbol of Black suffering but drawing on a specific tradition of principled political resistance whose moral credibility had been institutionally constructed over decades, lending their counter-narrative claims a depth of historical legitimacy that no institutional rebuttal operating in procedural registers could readily displace. This pattern is corroborated by Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024), whose Afrocentric visual analysis of online political posters circulated during the same unrest demonstrates that historical memory, particularly liberation struggle iconography and the symbolic vocabulary of the anti-apartheid movement, was systematically embedded within digital visual communication as a means of constructing moral authority and legitimising political contestation against institutional authority.

2.5.4 Emotive symbolism in digital counter-narrative production

Scholars working in the fields of political communication and cultural studies have increasingly recognised emotive symbolism as a distinct communicative genre through which politically charged meanings are conveyed not through reasoned argument but through the affective power of images, cultural symbols, and expressive

language that speak directly to shared emotional experience (Van Bavel et al., 2024; Brady et al., 2021). The scholarly foundation of this concept can be traced to Victor Turner's (1967) work in *The Forest of Symbols*, where he established that all dominant cultural symbols possess what he described as a sensory (orectic) pole, a dimension of meaning distinct from the normative or ideological pole in that it arouses desires, feelings, and bodily responses in ways that render abstract social commitments so that they are personally felt and collectively mobilising. Turner (1967) demonstrated that symbols derive their political potency precisely from this bipolarity, since the emotive pole ensures that symbolic communication retains persuasive force even when its factual claims are contested, because it addresses affective identification rather than cognitive assessment only. Edelman (1985) builds on Turner's symbolic anthropology by applying it to political communication, showing that political symbols gain their influence through their ability to evoke desires, sentiments, and affective reactions that transform abstract political ideals into experiences that are emotionally meaningful and capable of prompting collective action.

This foundational insight was extended into the study of social movements by Jasper (2018), adding to his earlier study of the affective and reactive emotions in and around protest movements, theorised what he termed moral emotions as the specific affective responses that political symbols activate, including moral shock, righteous indignation, communal solidarity, and grief, arguing that these emotions organise political participation far more reliably than logical persuasion. Papacharissi (2021) argues that these emotions function as organising logics of political meaning, shaping participation and collective identity independently of empirical accuracy or deliberate reasoning. In the African rhetorical tradition, the equivalent and culturally distinct concept of Nommo was theorised by Asante (1998) as the generative and life-giving communicative power of the word and image in African discourse, through which language and visual expression do not merely transmit information but produce communal meaning, mobilise collective will, and generate transformative political feeling rooted in shared African cultural identity. Karenga (2003) explicitly demonstrates that Nommo refers not only to spoken language but also to the complete sensory and affective spectrum

of African communicative practice, including rhythmic expression, call-and-response interaction, visual modes of signification, and the creation of collective emotional resonance. He thereby shows that, within African rhetorical traditions, these affective and sensory dimensions are not ancillary additions to meaning but form its essential foundation. Subsequently, Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024), in their Afrocentric visual analysis of online political posters circulated on X during the July 2021 unrest in KwaZulu-Natal, provide direct empirical evidence of how this concept of Nommo was deployed in practice by the (RET) faction members, who used visual rhythm, call-and-response imagery, and liberation iconography to evoke resistance, solidarity, and political belonging in ways that far exceeded the literal content of the images, producing affective conviction among digital publics whose counter-institutional orientations towards the NPA were already structurally embedded in the historical experience of racialised inequality and post-apartheid political contestation.

The migration of emotive symbolism into digital spaces has been accelerated by platform affordances that systematically reward emotional resonance over deliberative content (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023b; Brady et al., 2021). Papacharissi (2015) theorised this process through the concept of affective publics, showing that digital political expression is structured around shared emotional orientations such as outrage, grief, and indignation, which organise collective interpretation with greater force than deliberative reasoning ever could. Drawing on empirical analysis, Van Bavel et al. (2024) validate and deepen Papacharissi's concept of affective publics by demonstrating that social media posts infused with moral emotion consistently outperform deliberative messages in producing user engagement, strengthening political commitment, and stimulating collective mobilisation. Their findings underscore that digital political communities cohere around emotional resonance rather than reasoned debate, with affect functioning as the primary organising force of participation. Unlike argumentation, which demands sustained engagement with evidence, emotive symbolism achieves political conviction through the immediacy of affective impact, bypassing cognitive evaluation entirely in many instances (Brady et al., 2021; Jasper, 1997).

Martinerie (2021) confirmed this pattern in the South African context, demonstrating that emotionally charged visual content during the #RhodesMustFall and #ZumaMustFall movements produced communal political conviction that institutional counter-arguments struggled to address, because the symbols spoke to structurally embedded experiences of racial injustice that predated any specific institutional failure. Mukhudwana (2020) adds an important nuance by showing that emotive symbolism in South African digital politics is a contested resource rather than a uniformly directed one, with opposing political factions drawing on the same liberation-era symbolic vocabulary to generate competing affective alignments, which explains why digital counter-narratives about the NPA during the July 2021 unrest did not originate from a single political position but circulated across multiple ideological formations.

Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) further demonstrate that digital protest imagery functions as symbolic evidence within counter-narrative formations, constructing moral certainty about institutional conduct through visual testimony rather than through procedural demonstration. The research shows that visual material circulating in digital spaces, including images, hashtags, memes, and visual storytelling, operates as symbolic proof through which counter publics establish moral conviction regarding institutional behaviour. By sharing visual representations of racial injustice, gender-based violence, and institutional breakdown, digital activists assemble a record of evidence whose authority rests on the immediacy of visual perception rather than on formal procedural verification (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). In the specific context of the July 2021 unrest, emotive symbolism was most powerfully operative in the circulation of images depicting Zuma in custody, burning infrastructure set alongside liberation regalia, and MK (uMkhonto we Sizwe) branded political commentary, all of which transformed specific legal and institutional events into collective statements about justice, identity, and power, mobilising grief, solidarity, and moral indignation simultaneously (Thatelo & Motsaabethe, 2024; Aiseng, 2024a). These dynamics were further amplified through multimodal digital communication in

which the layered combination of image, text, and hashtag generated meanings that were at once politically charged and emotionally accessible to broad counter-publics (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles (2020). Papacharissi (2015) establish that symbolic storytelling in digital environments also functions as a participatory practice through which alternative communities of meaning are actively constructed, reinforcing the argument that emotive symbolism in counter-narrative production is not incidental rhetorical decoration but a structurally generative mode of political communication through which the NPA's legitimacy was systematically contested during and after the July 2021 unrest.

2.5.5 Misinformation and Disinformation in Political Narratives

The conceptual distinction between misinformation and disinformation has occupied scholars of communication and political discourse since the proliferation of digital media fundamentally altered the conditions under which political meaning is produced and contested. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), whose framework on information disorder is the most widely adopted definitional reference in the field, distinguish three interrelated but analytically separable categories of false content, namely misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information, each differentiated by intent and the degree of harm caused. Misinformation, in their framework, refers to content that is false or misleading but shared without deliberate intent to deceive, whereas disinformation denotes content that is knowingly false and purposefully disseminated to manipulate audiences for political, ideological, or financial gain. Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) expanded and refined their version of the 2017 framework, directly applying the typology to digital platforms and extending the definitional work by mapping the diverse formats of information disorder, distinguishing seven specific types of false or misleading content, which involves satire/parody, misleading content, impostor content, fabricated content, false connection, false context, manipulated content and explain how these types map onto the three-part typology of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Consequently, Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2021) further extended this definitional work by mapping the diverse typologies of false news stressing news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation,

advertising, and propaganda content across digital platforms, confirming that neither concept operates in isolation but each reinforces the other within broader information ecosystems characterised by speed, algorithmic amplification, and affective engagement (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023b).

Scholarship confirms empirical source for the foundational case that false news content circulating on social media achieves reach and persuasive impact disproportionate to its evidentiary basis during a major political event. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) directly demonstrate that in the three months before the 2016 US presidential election, false news stories favouring Trump were shared 30 million times on Facebook while those favouring Clinton were shared 8 million times, establishing the foundational empirical case that digital misinformation and disinformation are not merely communicative nuisances but constitutive forces in political outcomes. Within political narratives, both forms distort interpretive processes by simplifying complex legal and institutional procedures into conspiratorial or morally absolute explanatory frameworks, framing institutions as captured, biased, or corrupt and thereby mobilising public sentiment against perceived injustice before factual scrutiny can take effect (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023; Petla, 2023a).

Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) argue that public trust in institutions is particularly vulnerable in this environment because false or misleading narratives do not need to be believed to be damaging; their circulation alone is sufficient to introduce doubt, which in institutional contexts such as prosecutorial authority represents a structural liability that compounds over time. Brady et al. (2021), notably Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) provide supporting evidence that delays in official institutional responses consistently leave a vacuum into which falsehoods and rumours expand, generating public scepticism about the competence and integrity of the relevant authorities long before any formal rebuttal reaches the affected publics. Juzgenbayev, (2025), alongside Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) further demonstrate that these phenomena shift public discourse progressively away from evidence-based

assessment and towards polarised, emotionally driven narratives that systematically undermine confidence in judicial impartiality.

Important to note, Brady et al. (2021) confirmed that the problem of false information in digital environments is structural rather than incidental, arguing that cognitive, social, and technological factors intersect to create conditions in which falsehoods spread further, faster, and more deeply through social networks than accurate information. This structural insight is directly reinforced by Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018), whose analysis of 12 years of Twitter data demonstrated empirically that false news stories travel six times faster and reach broader audiences than their truthful counterparts, with emotionally novel content driving the advantage. The findings of Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) offer empirical support for the argument advanced by Vosoughi and colleagues regarding the disproportionate dissemination of false information. Their analysis demonstrates that the widespread circulation of misinformation during the 2016 election had tangible effects on electoral outcomes. By documenting the extent to which false political stories were shared, they show that such content attained a level of visibility and influence far exceeding what could be justified by available evidence. These results reinforce Vosoughi and colleagues' conclusion that the inherent advantages enjoyed by false news in terms of rapid diffusion and extensive reach can produce significant political effects in real-world contexts. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) explain how the design of digital platforms accelerates this circulation by enabling sharing before verification, making the correction of false narratives a structurally disadvantaged enterprise from its outset.

Disinformation campaigns in particular exploit the structural gap between the speed of false claims and the slowness of institutional response by framing institutional actors as agents of factional agendas rather than neutral arbiters of law, a pattern documented extensively in the political communication literature (Juzgenbayev, 2025; Green & Roiphe, 2025). Similar dynamics have been observed across African democratic contexts, where disinformation during electoral and governance crises has repeatedly delegitimised state institutions and intensified political polarisation well

before official correction mechanisms could be deployed (Roberts & Bosch, 2023). In South Africa, this pattern found concrete expression in a forged document attributed to the NPA that falsely claimed prosecutors had been instructed to halt drug-related cases; despite the NPA's denial, the document had already circulated sufficiently to establish doubt about prosecutorial integrity in ways that subsequent rebuttals could not fully reverse (SAnews, 2023).

The July 2021 unrest demonstrates how both misinformation and disinformation were systematically embedded within counter-narratives about the NPA, with claims that consistently framed the prosecution of Jacob Zuma as factional political retaliation rather than lawful judicial enforcement (Thatelo & Motsaabethe, 2024; Petla, 2023). Addressing these phenomena requires approaches that extend well beyond technical interventions such as content moderation or automated detection (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023a). Fact-checking, while valuable in principle, is consistently constrained by the speed and emotional appeal of false narratives, which achieve affective resonance long before corrections reach the same audiences (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Roberts and Bosch (2023) therefore advocate for media literacy approaches embedded within culturally specific frameworks rather than universal corrective mechanisms, while scholarship consistently finds that counter-narratives grounded in emotional resonance and delivered through credible community actors remain far more effective in challenging entrenched falsehoods and rebuilding institutional trust than institutionally authored rebuttals alone (Van Bavel et al., 2024; Brady et al., 2021).

Read together, these five genres reveal both convergence and friction rather than five independent phenomena. Populism and historical memory share a reliance on collective identity and moral binary, casting institutional actors as either aligned with or opposed to the people, but they draw on different temporal resources to do so, populism through immediate grievance and historical memory through inherited injustice. Propaganda and ideological framing operate at the level of deliberate rhetorical construction, while misinformation and disinformation operate at the level of factual claim, a distinction with real consequences for how each is best countered,

rheterical framing calls for engagement with underlying values, whereas false factual claims call for verifiable correction, though as Roberts and Bosch (2023) note, correction alone is rarely sufficient once affective resonance has taken hold. Emotive symbolism functions less as a standalone genre than as an amplifying layer that intensifies the other four, lending propaganda its persuasive charge, historical memory its emotional weight, and misinformation its capacity to spread before correction arrives. This suggests that digital counter-narratives about institutions such as the NPA rarely draw on a single genre in isolation, but instead layer genres to compound their persuasive and delegitimising effect, a proposition this study examines directly through the analysis of narrative genre convergence in Chapter 5.

2.6 DIGITAL PARTICIPATION AND NARRATIVE AMPLIFICATION

This section examines how digital participation shapes the production, circulation, and amplification of counter-narratives in online environments. It focuses on participatory engagement as a discursive process through which citizens collectively construct meaning and sustain narratives over time, particularly during periods of political crisis.

2.6.1 Participation, Engagement, and Narrative Production

The concept of participation in political communication has a foundational scholarly history that predates the digital era by several decades. Arnstein (1969), in her influential typology of citizen participation, distinguished between tokenistic forms of engagement and genuine expressions of civic power, arguing that meaningful participation requires citizens to be active contributors to political processes rather than passive recipients of institutional decisions. Habermas (1989) similarly situated participation at the heart of democratic legitimacy, theorising the public sphere as a communicative space in which private individuals deliberate matters of common concern free from state and market interference, with democratic validity deriving from the quality of participatory dialogue rather than from formal institutional mandate. Freire (1970) extended this framework by arguing that authentic participation is a transformative practice through which marginalised groups develop critical awareness of their social conditions and act collectively to change them, establishing the

conceptual link between participation and counter-institutional political consciousness that is directly relevant to the present study. Castells (2009) directly updates and extends Arnstein's (1969) foundational distinction between tokenistic and genuine participation by demonstrating how communication power in the network society determines whether citizens function as passive recipients of institutional and media narratives or active participants in the production of political meaning. The study directly argues that the most fundamental form of power lies in the ability to shape the human mind, and that mass self-communication through digital networks has created a new terrain on which citizens can contest institutional power by producing and circulating counter-narratives that challenge the interpretive frameworks through which institutional actors seek to define political reality (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020).

These foundational contributions collectively established participation not as a technical communicative act but as a politically charged practice through which power relations are negotiated, contested, and sometimes fundamentally disrupted. Engagement, as a distinct but related concept, refers to the affective and cognitive investment that individuals bring to participatory communication, determining whether their contributions are sustained, amplified, or abandoned within public discourse (Papacharissi, 2015). Together, participation and engagement constitute the relational infrastructure through which political narratives are collectively produced, circulated, and legitimised beyond the confines of formal institutional channels (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). The transition of these concepts into digital environments has fundamentally altered their dynamics, scale, and consequences. Castells (2009) argues that networked communication has redistributed participatory power from institutional actors to citizens by enabling horizontal, decentralised forms of political expression that bypass conventional gatekeepers and editorial hierarchies. Citizens contribute to the collective construction of narratives that interpret political events and evaluate institutional conduct in a variety of ways, extending political engagement beyond formal democratic processes and into everyday digital interactions (Papacharissi, 2015), with hashtag use as one particularly consequential mechanism

examined in detail later in this chapter. Aiseng (2024a) demonstrates that this affordance disrupts conventional power asymmetries in discourse production, enabling diverse and previously marginalised voices to challenge institutional narratives and introduce alternative frames of meaning into public debate. Narratives produced in these environments are rarely authored by a single actor but emerge through collective authorship, in which individual contributions accumulate progressively into shared interpretive frames through repetition, endorsement, and networked amplification (Papacharissi, 2015; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013). In politically charged contexts such as the July 2021 unrest in South Africa, participatory engagement strengthened counter-narratives about the NPA by lending them visibility, perceived communal authenticity, and the moral force of numbers that no single author could command alone (Petla, 2023).

Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) and Brady et al. (2021) however, caution that digital participation is not inherently deliberative or politically constructive, since engagement driven primarily by emotional resonance and group identification tends to privilege simplified or polarised interpretations of complex institutional processes over substantive procedural engagement. Carpentier (2011) develops a conceptual distinction between minimalist participation, which grants citizens communicative access without genuine decision-making power, and maximalist participation, which enables substantive agency over the production and circulation of meaning, a distinction whose theoretical implications for evaluating the democratic significance of digital counter-narrative production are elaborated in the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3. This observation is empirically supported by Van Bavel et al. (2024), who document how algorithmically curated digital environments amplify emotionally charged narratives that question institutional legitimacy without engaging its procedural foundations, and by Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a), who confirm that participatory narrative production about legal institutions consistently favours affective credibility over evidentiary reasoning, creating conditions in which counter-narratives about bodies such as the NPA achieve sustained public traction regardless of their factual accuracy.

2.6.2 Hashtag Mobilisation and Networked Amplification

The hashtag, as a communicative mechanism, represents one of the most consequential technical developments in contemporary digital political communication, transforming what was originally a simple metadata sorting tool into a structurally generative instrument of collective narrative production and political mobilisation. Zappavigna (2011), among the first scholars to theorise hashtags as discourse devices, established that their function extends well beyond technical aggregation into the realm of ambient affiliation, through which users signal shared values, identities, and political orientations to networked publics who may never interact directly but who collectively constitute a discursive formation through convergent symbolic use (Bruns & Burgess, 2011).

Bonilla and Rosa (2015) extended this analysis by demonstrating that hashtag-based narratives gain their political potency not merely from their reach but from their capacity to condense complex political meanings into emotionally resonant and symbolically loaded markers that invite participation with minimal argumentative investment, thereby lowering the threshold for collective counter-narrative formation (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). Aiseng (2024a) alongside Martinerie (2021) confirmed this pattern in the South African context through their analysis of the #MustFall Twitter activism during movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, establishing that hashtag-driven aggregation is the primary mechanism through which South African digital counter-publics organise narrative contestation against institutional authority, with each iteration of the hashtag simultaneously building and reinforcing the collective memory of the movement it represents. By aggregating dispersed expressions under a shared symbolic marker, hashtags transform individual contributions into collective narrative formations that are easily searchable and persistently visible within networked publics (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020).

Through sustained repetition and recirculation, hashtag-based narratives consolidate shared interpretations over time, operating less as search indices than as normative claims about political reality that carry accumulating evidential weight through frequency of exposure alone (Zappavigna, 2011). During political crises, hashtags enable rapid mobilisation by anchoring present events to historical grievances and moral claims in ways that reinforce narrative continuity and affective alignment among participants who may be geographically, politically, and demographically diverse (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020).

Empirical scholarship from the Arab Spring uprisings to the Black Lives Matter movement has consistently documented the transformative role of hashtag mobilisation in sustaining digital activism, shaping public discourse, and exerting sustained pressure on institutional actors during political crises (Papacharissi, 2015; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). In the specific context of the July 2021 unrest in South Africa, hashtag mobilisation functioned as the primary amplificatory mechanism through which counter-narratives about the NPA were organised and sustained. Hashtags such as #FreeZuma, #HandsOffZuma, and #PhoenixMassacre facilitated the circulation of narratives that consistently portrayed prosecutorial action as selective and politically motivated (Petla, 2023), reinforcing perceptions of institutional bias through repeated symbolic association across a networked public that extended well beyond those who had direct stakes in the legal proceedings (Thatelo & Motsaabethe, 2024). The networked amplification these hashtags achieved ensured that delegitimising counter-narratives about the NPA maintained sustained visibility and affective resonance in digital public discourse throughout the unrest and its extended aftermath, operating in the absence of any consistent or strategically coherent institutional communicative response.

2.7 RESEARCH GAPS IN EXISTING LITERATURE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The body of scholarship reviewed across this chapter reflects a rich and growing intellectual tradition in the study of digital counter-narratives, institutional legitimacy,

and political communication in networked environments. Notwithstanding this breadth, a careful and critical reading of the literature reveals several significant omissions that weaken its explanatory capacity in relation to the specific dynamics under examination in this study. These gaps are not merely technical absences but reflect deeper structural biases in how counter-narrative scholarship has been produced, positioned, and applied, particularly with regard to African postcolonial democratic contexts, prosecutorial institutions, and the integrated operation of narrative genres during sustained political crises.

The most fundamental limitation of existing literature is its entrenched geographical concentration on Western political contexts. A disproportionate share of counter-narrative scholarship has drawn its theoretical frameworks, case studies, and empirical evidence from North American and European settings, producing frameworks that treat Western democratic norms, institutional architectures, and communicative cultures as tacit universal benchmarks. Roberts and Bosch (2023) alongside Moyo (2020) identify this as a structural gap that leaves African digital counter-publics comparatively under-theorised, while Aiseng (2024a) and Petla (2023) demonstrate that even within the South African scholarly tradition, digital communication research has been overwhelmingly oriented towards student-led protest movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall rather than towards the discursive contestation of formal legal and prosecutorial authority. This is not a minor absence. Postcolonial African democracies produce conditions for counter-narrative formation that are qualitatively different from those theorised in Western scholarship, including the mobilisation of liberation struggle memory as a source of moral legitimacy, the racialisation of institutional conduct as a primary evaluative lens, the presence of powerful factional networks capable of coordinating counter-narrative production, and the operation of digital counter-publics whose cultural and rhetorical logics draw on Afrocentric communicative traditions rather than on Western deliberative models. Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) represent an important advance by applying Afrocentric visual rhetorical analysis to online political communication during the July 2021 unrest, yet their study addresses the broader landscape of visual

political communication rather than the counter-narrative targeting of a specific constitutional institution such as the NPA. The gap between what the South African case demands analytically and what existing literature provides theoretically therefore is a substantive one that this study is positioned to address.

A second critical gap concerns the consistent marginalisation of prosecutorial institutions in counter-narrative scholarship. Legal bodies appear across the reviewed literature primarily as contextual features of larger political crises rather than as objects of sustained discursive contestation in their own right. Green and Roiphe (2025) similarly to Petla (2023)) both identify this as a specific weakness in South African communication and governance scholarship, noting that bodies such as the NPA, despite occupying constitutionally critical roles in democratic accountability, have been largely neglected as subjects of narrative analysis. This neglect is analytically costly because prosecutorial institutions are uniquely positioned at the intersection of legality and political contestation. Their decisions are simultaneously technical in their legal basis, political in their implications, and symbolic in their public reception, a combination that makes them structurally susceptible to delegitimising counter-narrative production in precisely the ways documented in this study. By treating the NPA as a peripheral institutional actor rather than a central site of discursive struggle, existing scholarship has failed to develop the analytical tools necessary for understanding how prosecutorial legitimacy is socially constructed, contested, and eroded through digital communication during periods of political crisis.

A third gap lies in the treatment of narrative genres as discrete and separable analytical categories. The reviewed scholarship on populism, propaganda, historical memory, emotive symbolism, misinformation, and disinformation tends to examine each as an autonomous communicative phenomenon with its own theoretical lineage and empirical applications. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) provide an authoritative framework for information disorder, while Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) offer a foundational account of propaganda as ideological framing, and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) theorise populism as a discursive logic of moral opposition. Each

of these contributions is analytically valuable within its own domain. What the literature has not sufficiently produced, however, is an account of how these genres function simultaneously and in convergence to construct a mutually reinforcing counter-narrative ecosystem that targets a specific institution. During the July 2021 unrest, populist framing, liberation-era historical memory, propagandistic demonisation, emotive visual symbolism, and deliberate disinformation did not operate as parallel and independent streams of discourse about the NPA but as interacting logics that amplified one another's delegitimising effects. Petla (2023) alongside Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) documents some of this convergence in the South African context, but a systematic analytical framework for examining how these genres combine to produce cumulative institutional damage is absent from the literature, and this study contributes to filling that conceptual space.

A fourth gap runs through the existing literature at the intersection of participatory communication, temporal durability, and prosecutorial delegitimation. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) in alignment with Castells (2009) have substantially advanced understanding of how networked communication redistributes political power toward citizens, yet their account operates at a level of structural generality that does not engage with the specific conditions under which participatory digital practices sustain targeted delegitimation of a single constitutional institution across multiple years rather than during a single crisis episode. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) and Papacharissi (2021) offers a searching account of how affective expression and platform fragmentation have reshaped democratic communication, but their framework was not developed to address the particular communicative vulnerabilities of prosecutorial bodies whose public standing depends on perceived neutrality rather than on popular identification or electoral legitimacy. Carpentier (2011) brings participatory communication theory into productive dialogue with digital environments, though his analytical attention is directed at broad civic engagement dynamics rather than at the historically specific conditions of postcolonial African political settings where liberation symbolism and racial memory shape the terms on which institutions are publicly evaluated. The limitation in Carpentier (2011) is more precise and more

consequential for the present study. His conceptual distinction between minimalist and maximalist participation provides the sharpest available analytical tool for evaluating whether digital counter-narrative production constitutes genuine communicative agency or a structurally bounded performance of civic voice, yet he developed and applied this distinction within Western media and organisational contexts that do not account for the distinctive power dynamics of postcolonial African crisis communication. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) bring the question of durability into focus through their account of cascading legitimacy effects in digital environments, but their empirical and conceptual attention does not extend to prosecutorial institutions, whose relationship with public legitimacy is governed by procedural rather than democratic authority and whose communicative responses to counter-narrative pressure are constrained by legal and constitutional obligations that general participation frameworks were never designed to accommodate. Taken together, these scholars leave unaddressed the specific question of how South African digital counter-publics sustained and intensified narrative pressure on the NPA across the four years following the July 2021 unrest, and what communicative, historical, and structural conditions made that sustained pressure possible in a setting that the reviewed literature is not equipped to theorise.

This study addresses these interconnected gaps through a qualitatively grounded analysis of 20 purposively selected tweets that constituted counter-narratives about the NPA during and following the July 2021 unrest in South Africa. By treating the NPA as the primary rather than incidental object of counter-narrative production, the study generates empirically grounded analytical insight into how digital discourse constructs and erodes prosecutorial legitimacy in a postcolonial democratic context where the legacy of apartheid, the politics of liberation memory, and the dynamics of ANC factionalism create conditions that no existing Western-derived framework has been designed to account for. By examining populism, propaganda, historical memory, emotive symbolism, misinformation, and disinformation as converging rather than isolated narrative genres, the study advances a more integrated account of how interacting discursive logics produce cumulative delegitimising effects. By drawing

theoretically on CNT, DPST, and PT, and by situating its analysis within Afrocentric scholarly perspectives represented by Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) and Aiseng (2024a), the study contributes conceptual and empirical resources to a field whose African dimensions remain under-developed relative to the democratic significance of the phenomena they concern.

2.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter reviewed and synthesised literature on digital public discourse, counter-narratives, and institutional legitimacy in contemporary media environments. It has demonstrated how the transformation of public discourse in the digital age has altered the conditions under which authority, credibility, and meaning are negotiated, particularly during periods of political crisis. By examining the digital public sphere, the emergence of counter-publics, and the role of platforms in shaping political meaning, the chapter has established the communicative terrain in which counter-narratives circulate and gain influence. The review has positioned counter-narratives as central mechanisms through which dominant and institutional narratives are challenged in digital spaces. It has shown how counter-narratives operate within power relations, mobilise marginalised voices, and destabilise official accounts through participatory and affective discursive practices. The chapter has further highlighted how digital affordances such as hashtags, multimodality, and networked amplification facilitate the rapid circulation and consolidation of counter-narratives, shaping public perceptions of legitimacy and authority. Particular attention has been given to the relationship between counter-narratives and legal institutions, with a focus on prosecutorial bodies during times of political instability. The literature demonstrates that institutions such as the NPA are especially vulnerable to narrative contestation in digital environments, where prosecutorial decisions are interpreted through moral, political, and ideological frames rather than procedural reasoning. The discussion of narrative genres including populism, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda has illustrated how legal accountability can be reframed as political persecution, contributing to the erosion of institutional trust.

By identifying gaps in existing scholarship, the chapter has justified the focus of the present study and clarified its contribution. The limited attention given to prosecutorial institutions in African digital contexts, the underexplored role of narrative genres in debates on legal legitimacy, and the insufficient examination of participatory amplification highlight the need for further research. This study addresses these gaps by examining digital counter-narratives about the NPA amid the July 2021 unrest, providing a foundation for understanding how legitimacy is contested in the digital public sphere. The chapter thus provides the conceptual grounding for the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3.

The gaps established across this chapter justify a tripartite theoretical response in which CNT addresses the genre and power dimensions of institutional delegitimisation, DPST accounts for the structural and contextual conditions within which counter-narratives circulated, and PT explains how sustained narrative pressure on the NPA was collectively produced and maintained across an extended period in a postcolonial democratic setting that existing participation scholarship was not designed to address.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter develops the theoretical framework that underpins the study by drawing on counter-narrative theory (CNT), digital public sphere theory (DPST), and participatory theory (PT) as three analytically complementary frameworks whose combined reach addresses dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation that no single theory could account for independently. CNT, while providing the conceptual vocabulary for examining how alternative narratives challenge institutional authority, cannot on its own explain the structural communicative conditions under which those narratives gained visibility, circulation, and collective endorsement within networked digital environments. DPST supplies that structural and contextual account but does not possess the analytical tools necessary to examine the specific discursive genres, rhetorical strategies, and narrative forms through which institutional delegitimation was achieved at the level of individual communicative acts. PT addresses what neither of the preceding frameworks resolves, namely how ordinary and largely anonymous social media users became the collective authors and sustained amplifiers of counter-narrative pressure on a constitutional institution across an extended four-year period in a postcolonial democratic setting shaped by liberation history and racial memory. The three frameworks do not operate at equivalent analytical levels but are arranged in a relationship of sequential complementarity, with CNT functioning as the primary analytical lens through which the content and structure of the counter-narratives are examined, while DPST and PT provide the structural and agential contexts within which that content was produced, circulated, and sustained.

Together, these frameworks enable a coherent and layered understanding of how legal authority was publicly contested during and after the July 2021 unrest, how prosecutorial legitimacy was discursively dismantled through narrative, and how justice was reframed as a moral and political question rather than a procedural and

constitutional one. The counter-narratives examined in this study did not emerge spontaneously but were produced within digitally mediated environments shaped by participatory engagement, affective expression, symbolic communication, and ideological struggle whose dynamics required a framework capable of capturing simultaneously what those narratives said, where and how they circulated, and who produced and sustained them over time. This chapter unpacks each theoretical lens in turn, engaging with the primary and secondary scholars associated with each framework, their foundational conceptual contributions, their empirical applications in comparable contexts, and the critiques that inform the study's analytical sensitivity to their limitations. In doing so, it provides the conceptual foundation for the empirical analysis conducted in Chapter 5 while remaining in deliberate and sustained dialogue with the gaps in existing scholarship identified in Chapter 2.

3.2 COUNTER-NARRATIVE THEORY

3.2.1 Origins and Conceptual Foundations

CNT provides a critical framework for understanding how alternative stories are produced to challenge dominant institutional narratives, particularly in contexts marked by political tension and unequal power relations. Counter-narratives are not merely oppositional statements but structured discursive interventions that reinterpret events, redistribute responsibility, and reframe legitimacy through storytelling (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). They function by questioning the credibility of official accounts and offering competing explanations grounded in moral judgement, lived experience, and collective memory (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020).

The theoretical origins of counter-narrative scholarship lie in narrative theory and critical pedagogy (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Freire, 1970). Freire's (1970) contribution to critical pedagogy offers a key theoretical basis for understanding the emergence of counter-narratives as instruments of social and political transformation. Central to his framework is the notion of 'conscientização', which refers to the development of critical awareness through dialogue and reflective engagement.

Within this process, marginalised communities become active interpreters of their lived experiences, generating their own accounts of social reality rather than relying on representations imposed by dominant institutions. These alternative interpretations function as counter-narratives by contesting prevailing power structures, exposing the limitations of hegemonic discourses, and fostering the collective consciousness required for organised political mobilisation and resistance. Subsequently, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) conceptualised counter-narratives as discursive responses to what they termed master narratives, those overarching stories that reinforce hegemonic norms and institutional authority while marginalising complex and contradictory lived experiences. Central to their framework is the insight that storytelling is inherently political. In essence, it reflects social reality, shapes power relations, and constructs identities and legitimacy (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). Hyvärinen (2021) extend this argument by theorising counter-narratives as relational phenomena whose meaning is always derived from the dominant discourse they contest. Consequently, counter-narratives also operate across multiple registers simultaneously, individual, collective, and institutional, making them particularly useful for analysing the layered discursive landscape of social media during political crisis (Hyvärinen, 2021; Bamberg & Andrews, 2004) Bamberg and Wipff (2021) further develop this framework by examining counter-narratives within organisational and institutional contexts, showing how they destabilise authority not only from below but also laterally, as competing actors within and beyond institutions contest the terms of legitimacy.

The work of Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) is particularly significant as among primary theorists of this framework. Both Hagström and Gustafsson argues that counter-narratives in institutional and political contexts function as mechanisms of narrative power that is, the capacity to define social reality through storytelling. In institutional settings, counter-narratives challenge the coherence, neutrality, or moral standing of official accounts. This is directly relevant to this study, as counter-narratives on X during the July 2021 unrest did not merely dispute specific legal

decisions but contested the fundamental legitimacy and impartiality of the NPA as a constitutional institution.

Hyvärinen (2021), a leading narrative theorist, introduced the concept of tellability to counter-narrative scholarship. Tellability refers to the cultural, social, and technological conditions that determine which stories are considered meaningful, legitimate, and shareable. Brady et al. (2021) and Papacharissi (2015) demonstrate that in digital contexts the criteria for narrative visibility are shaped by cultural norms and network dynamics that determine which stories are considered meaningful, shareable, and worthy of collective attention within specific communicative communities, while Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023), similarly to Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) establish that platform algorithms and editorial logics constitute a separate and structurally distinct layer of visibility governance through which the technical architecture of social media platforms actively determines which narratives achieve reach and which remain marginal regardless of their cultural resonance or argumentative strength. This concept is central to understanding why certain counter-narratives about the NPA, those drawing on emotive language, historical grievance, and liberation symbolism gained traction and achieved wide circulation during the unrest, while others remained marginal.

3.2.2 Empirical Applications and African Scholarship

Empirical research has demonstrated how counter-narratives operate as tools of resistance and identity construction in digital protest contexts. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) show how activists deploy counter-narratives to reframe media coverage and contest institutional messaging, while Aiseng (2024a) demonstrates how identity-based counter-narratives in digital spaces challenge dominant portrayals of social actors. Lee and Lee (2023b), in their study of Asian American women's use of TikTok, illustrate how counter-narratives resist stereotyping and build solidarity through shared digital storytelling.

In the South African and African contexts, the theory is especially analytically generative. Mukhudwana (2020) applies counter-narrative analysis to the #ZumaMustFall campaign, demonstrating how populist and ideologically charged networks mobilised around calls for political accountability, producing digital counter-narratives that contested both state authority and institutional legitimacy. Martinerie (2021) similarly analyses the #MustFall movements in South Africa, showing how counter-narratives drawn from traditions of national liberation served as discursive tools for contesting post-apartheid structural inequality. Kenyon and Madlingozi (2022) provide important comparative insight by examining counter-narratives in the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements, showing how multimodal digital content amplified counter-narratives that challenged dominant framings of higher education exclusion. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) examine how #BlackLivesMatter produced counter-narratives that contested racialised institutional power, a dynamic directly comparable to the South African experience of racialised counter-narratives about the NPA discussed in Chapter 5.

In digital contexts, the affordances of social media intensify the production and circulation of counter-narratives. Castells (2009) demonstrate how social media platforms reduce reliance on traditional gatekeepers and enable real-time contestation of official versions of events. Aiseng (2024a) theorises how counter-narratives in digital public spheres give voice to marginalised communities excluded from dominant media systems. Papacharissi (2015) further show how digital storytelling functions as a counter-narrative practice that expands participatory engagement and challenges institutional authority.

3.2.3 Critiques and Theoretical Limitations

CNT is not without critique, and the most analytically consequential of its limitations for the present study is the binary risk identified by Hyvärinen (2021) and Bamberg and Andrews (2004) who caution against organising discourse analysis around rigid oppositions between dominant and counter narratives on the grounds that political meaning in practice is internally fragmented, hybrid, and resistant to clean categorical

separation. This critique carries genuine and specific weight for the dataset examined in this study because the counter-narratives about the NPA that circulated during and after the July 2021 unrest did not originate from a single unified political position but from multiple and sometimes contradictory formations, including Zuma-aligned ANC factions, RET networks, Black Consciousness-oriented digital publics, and Phoenix-focused racial justice communities, each of which contested the NPA's legitimacy through different ideological frameworks and toward different political ends.

The binary model of a singular counter-narrative opposing a singular dominant narrative therefore does not straightforwardly describe what the dataset contains, and an examiner is entitled to ask whether CNT can accommodate this multiplicity without distorting the analytical findings. This study addresses the tension by treating the counter-narrative ecosystem surrounding the NPA not as a single unified oppositional formation but as a convergent field of distinct yet overlapping discursive practices whose shared delegitimising effect on the NPA emerged from the accumulation of their separate contributions rather than from their ideological coherence, an approach that draws on Bamberg and Wipff (2021) conceptualisation of counter-narratives as relational phenomena rather than fixed categorical opposites to dominant accounts. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) further warn against essentialising marginalised voices as homogeneous, noting that counter-narrative communities are internally diverse and often contradictory, a caution that this study observes by attending to the specific ideological and factional positioning of individual tweets rather than treating all anti-NPA digital discourse as analytically equivalent.

Frandsen, Kuhn and Lundholt (2018) identifies a further limitation in the literature's tendency to privilege grassroots counter-narratives while overlooking how institutions themselves strategically deploy counter-narratives to defend legitimacy or reassert authority, a dynamic that the study acknowledges by remaining attentive to the communicative responses, or notable silences, that the NPA produced in the face of sustained digital contestation throughout the collection period.

3.2.4 Application to This Study

CNT is applied in this study through a set of specific conceptual instruments that correspond directly to the analytical moves undertaken in Chapter 5, ensuring that the relationship between the theoretical framework and the empirical analysis is deliberate and traceable rather than assumed. The first and most foundational of these instruments is Hagström and Gustafsson's (2019) conceptualisation of narrative power, understood as the capacity to define social reality through storytelling in ways that redistribute moral authority and reframe institutional conduct. This concept provides the primary analytical lens through which Section 5.3 examines the five narrative genres operative in the dataset, specifically populism, propaganda framing, misinformation and disinformation, ideological framing, and historical memory and emotive symbolism, treating each genre not as a neutral communicative form but as a specific exercise of narrative power directed at the NPA's constitutional standing.

The second instrument is drawn from Hyvärinen, Hatavara and Rautajoki (2021) alongside Bamberg and Andrews (2004), whose conceptualisation of master narratives as overarching stories that reinforce institutional authority and marginalise competing accounts, provides the referential framework against which the counter-narratives in the dataset are positioned throughout Chapter 5. Every tweet examined in the empirical analysis is understood as a discursive response to the master narrative of prosecutorial constitutionalism that the NPA embodies, and its counter-narrative function is evaluated in terms of how specifically and effectively it contests, inverts, or displaces that master narrative within the digital counter-publics through which it circulated.

The third instrument is Hyvärinen's (2021) concept of tellability, which refers to the cultural, social, and algorithmic conditions that determine which narratives achieve visibility and collective endorsement within specific communicative contexts. This concept is operationalised in Section 5.4, where hashtag mobilisation and networked amplification are theorised not merely as technical platform functions but as social and

cultural processes through which certain counter-narratives about the NPA met the tellability conditions of their specific digital counter-public formations and thereby achieved sustained circulation, while others remained marginal.

Hyvärinen, Hatavara and Rautajoki (2021), as well as Bamberg and Andrews's (2004) theorisation of counter-narratives as relational phenomena whose meaning is constituted through their opposition to dominant accounts provides a fourth analytical instrument, deployed across the thematic analysis in Section 5.6 to interpret how the four dominant themes of political persecution and victimhood, institutional betrayal and elite corruption, racialised violence and communal defence, and hashtag mobilisation and symbolic references each derived their delegitimising force from their specific relational positioning against the NPA's institutional self-presentation. Together these conceptual instruments ensure that CNT performs specific and differentiated analytical work across the empirical chapter rather than functioning as a general orienting framework whose connection to the data is implicit and undemonstrated.

3.3 DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY

3.3.1 Origins and Conceptual Foundations

DPST encapsulates a paradigmatic shift in how public discourse, civic engagement, and political deliberation are conceptualised in the digital age (Castells, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002). This transformation is driven by the proliferation of digital technologies, the decline of traditional media gatekeeping, and the rise of user-generated content (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023b). The roots of the theory are firmly located in Habermas' (1989) seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, where he described the public sphere as a domain dedicated to rational-critical debate. This sphere was conceived as a space of discursive equality in which private individuals deliberated public matters independently from state and market influence (Habermas, 1989). Such public spaces were salons, restaurants, sports grounds, and etcetera where people converged, deliberated, and contributed to a meaning-making process of the daily pressing issues. While his conceptualisation was

grounded in the specifics of European modernity, Habermas' ideas formed the foundational framework upon which subsequent digital adaptations have been constructed.

A critical theoretical contribution comes from Fraser (1990), who problematised Habermas' singular and idealised public sphere and advanced the concept of subaltern counter-publics. Fraser (1990) argued that marginalised groups create alternative discursive arenas to resist exclusion from dominant public discourse. This concept is particularly relevant to this study, as digital counter-narratives about the NPA can be understood as products of precisely such counter-publics, formed in response to perceived institutional failure and injustice. Papacharissi (2002) developed the concept of the virtual sphere, arguing that digital environments extend the civic functions of traditional public discourse while introducing new asymmetries of participation and power. She later advanced the notion of affective publics, arguing that political expression online is shaped as much by emotion as by rationality, acknowledging the performative and emotive character of digital engagement (Papacharissi, 2015). These scholars collectively repositioned the digital public sphere as a plural, contested, and emotionally charged domain rather than the deliberative ideal Habermas envisioned.

Contemporary theorists have extended the framework further. Aiseng (2024a), corroborating Fraser (1990) argues for pluralistic and inclusive frameworks within digital infrastructures that promote civic dialogue and counter-hegemonic narratives. De Blasio, Kneuer, Schünemann and Sorice (2020) characterise the digital public sphere as a moving target, constantly reshaped by technological innovation, political economy, and social practice. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020), including Castells (2009) argue that social media has fundamentally altered democratic communication by enabling new forms of mobilisation and political expression that bypass traditional institutional channels. The advent of platforms such as X, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok has radically reconfigured the architecture of the public sphere, displacing traditional media's editorial gatekeeping and enabling rapid,

decentralised exchanges and viral mobilisation (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023b; Brady et al., 2021). Castells (2009) and Papacharissi (2002) frames these shifts as transformations in the relationship between the internet and political communication, emphasising how dispersal and decentralisation simultaneously expand and fragment political discourse.

3.3.2 Empirical Applications and African Scholarship

Several empirical studies have deployed DPST as an analytical framework to examine public contestation in digital environments. In the global context, Papacharissi (2015) and Castells (2012) explored the Arab Spring uprisings and showed how social media enabled new forms of mobilisation, coordination, and transnational solidarity. Consequently, Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020), alongside Bonilla and Rosa (2015) applied the theory to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, illustrating how activists used hashtags to challenge racial injustice and create alternative public conversations outside mainstream media. De Blasio et al. (2020) further demonstrate how digital deliberation can enable new democratic norms while simultaneously generating fragmentation and polarisation.

DPST has been applied productively to movements of political resistance, particularly in the South African and African contexts. Kenyon and Madlingozi (2022) examined how young South Africans used X during the #FeesMustFall movement to contest state narratives on higher education, circulate personal testimonies of exclusion, and mobilise protest action. Martinerie (2021) extend this analysis by showing how student activists created counter-public spaces on digital platforms that challenged dominant institutional framings and legitimised alternative visions of justice rooted in decoloniality. These studies demonstrate the dual potential of the digital public sphere as simultaneously a space of empowerment and exclusion, a dynamic directly relevant to the present study's focus on the NPA and the July 2021 unrest. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) extend Fraser's (1990) framework empirically by demonstrating that exclusion from mainstream political debate in contemporary digital environments operates not through formal gatekeeping but through reputational delegitimation and

algorithmic marginalisation, a finding that speaks directly to this study's concern with why counter-narrative formations about the NPA persisted within their own counter-public spaces rather than achieving broader deliberative traction, given that Zuma-aligned digital voices were consistently framed by institutional actors and mainstream media as factionally motivated rather than as legitimate civic interlocutors of a constitutional institution.

3.3.3 Critiques and Theoretical Limitations

DPST has attracted significant critique. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) and De Blasio (2020) both argue that digital platforms foster multiple ideological silos and echo chambers that hinder cross-cutting debate and deepen social fragmentation rather than enabling a unified public sphere. The commercial and algorithmic logics of platforms, as Brady et al. (2021) demonstrate, prioritise virality, sensationalism, and emotional expression over rational-critical deliberation, undermining inclusivity by making visibility contingent on algorithmic design rather than democratic equality. Fuchs (2023) argues that the commodification of digital communication fundamentally compromises its democratic potential, while Davis (2020) describes digital spaces as anti-public spheres characterised by misinformation, disinformation, and toxic discourse. These constraints are critical for understanding how delegitimising narratives about the NPA were amplified and normalised during the July 2021 unrest, and why institutional attempts at narrative control were frequently ineffective in an environment where emotional resonance and symbolic association determined visibility rather than procedural accuracy or legal correctness.

The counter-public formations examined in this study were themselves shaped by the algorithmic amplification conditions that Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) and Brady et al. (2021) identify as structurally distorting, and this study accommodates that constraint by treating the counter-narratives in the dataset not as spontaneous civic expressions but as discursive formations whose visibility and apparent consensual authority were partly constituted by platform logics that rewarded emotional intensity and symbolic resonance over evidentiary accuracy, a recognition that informs the analytical caution

applied throughout Chapter 5 when attributing democratic significance to participatory counter-narrative production about the NPA.

3.3.4 Application to This Study

DPST is applied in this study through specific conceptual instruments that correspond to identifiable analytical moves in Chapter 5, performing explanatory work that CNT alone could not accomplish because it accounts for the structural and communicative conditions within which counter-narratives were produced and sustained rather than for the content and form of the narratives themselves. The first conceptual instrument is Fraser's (1990) theorisation of subaltern counter-publics as parallel discursive arenas in which marginalised groups develop and circulate alternative interpretations of social arrangements outside the dominant public sphere. This concept is operationalised in Section 5.4, where the five hashtag formations central to the dataset are interpreted not as informal communicative practices but as the organisational infrastructure of identifiable subaltern counter-publics whose participants constructed shared evaluative frameworks for assessing the NPA's conduct in deliberate separation from the institutional and mainstream media registers through which the NPA communicated its own account of its prosecutorial decisions.

The second conceptual instrument is Papacharissi's (2015) theorisation of affective publics as political formations organised around shared emotional orientations rather than around deliberative reasoning or formal ideological alignment. This concept is operationalised in Section 5.5.1, where the emotive framing strategy is theorised as the primary mechanism through which counter-public membership was constituted and sustained, with outrage, grief, solidarity, and moral indignation functioning as the connective tissue binding diverse and geographically dispersed users into coherent counter-public formations directed at the NPA.

A third instrument is drawn from Habermas (1989) as critically extended by Fraser (1990) and Papacharissi (2021), whose collective reformulation of the public sphere as fragmented, plural, and characterised by ongoing contestation rather than unified

deliberation provides the structural context within which Section 5.2 situates the counter-narrative ecosystem as a whole, demonstrating that the digital contestation of the NPA's legitimacy was not an aberration within an otherwise functional deliberative environment, but a constitutive feature of the fragmented communicative landscape within which South African democratic discourse operates. Together these instruments ensure that DPST contributes distinct and specific analytical purchase to the empirical analysis rather than functioning as a general contextual backdrop whose relationship to the data is assumed rather than demonstrated.

3.4 PARTICIPATORY THEORY

3.4.1 Origins and Conceptual Foundations

PT does not originate from a single intellectual tradition but rather emerges from the convergence of critical, democratic, and communicative scholarship developed across the mid-twentieth century, each tradition addressing from a distinct disciplinary vantage point the enduring question of how citizens might function as genuine actors in the political and governance processes that shape collective life. The philosophical groundwork for this intellectual tradition was first established by Dewey (1927) who maintained in *The Public and Its Problems* that democracy constitutes a mode of communal existence rather than a formal system of governmental arrangement, with its vitality depending on the active communicative involvement of citizens in shared public problem-solving. For Dewey (1927), the legitimacy of democratic institutions was inseparable from the quality of ongoing dialogue between citizens and those who governed them, a foundational premise whose influence on subsequent participatory scholarship cannot be overstated. Writing from the tradition of Latin American critical pedagogy several decades later, Freire (1970) radicalised this premise in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* through his concept of conscientisation, which he defined as the process through which marginalised communities develop critical understanding of the structural conditions that subordinate them and translate that understanding into organised transformative action. Freire (1970) rejected the view that participation could be reduced to the inclusion of excluded voices within pre-existing institutional

processes, arguing instead that authentic participation is a fundamentally disruptive practice through which oppressed groups refuse the position of passive recipients and claim agency over the conditions of their own existence.

This understanding of participation as politically generative rather than merely procedurally inclusive is directly relevant to this study because the counter-narrative production directed at the NPA during and following the July 2021 unrest reflected precisely this conscientised participatory dynamic, with ordinary social media users collectively contesting prosecutorial authority through shared discursive practices that challenged rather than deferred to institutional framing. Operating from an entirely different theoretical position, Habermas (1984) in his study of the *Theory of Communicative Action* argued that democratic participation derives its normative authority from the quality of communicative rationality that citizens bring to public deliberation, with legitimate governance requiring open and reasoned debate conducted free from domination by state or market power. Pateman (1970), however, exposed a critical limitation in Habermas's normative idealism by demonstrating in *Participation and Democratic Theory* that theoretical commitments to deliberative inclusion remain hollow without structural redistribution of power within the social and economic institutions through which public life is actually organised, including workplaces, media systems, and governance bodies. Pateman's (1970) structural critique introduced an enduring analytical tension into participatory scholarship between normative aspiration and institutional reality that subsequent theorists would engage in markedly different ways.

Building on these foundational contributions, later scholarship produced increasingly refined analytical instruments for evaluating whether participatory practices achieve genuine redistribution of communicative and political power or merely simulate inclusion while leaving existing hierarchies undisturbed. Arnstein (1969) provided perhaps the most durable and widely applied of these instruments through her *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, which mapped participation across eight ascending levels from manipulation and therapy through consultative and tokenistic forms to

partnership, delegated authority, and full citizen control. The analytical value of Arnstein's (1969) typology lies in its refusal of participation as an undifferentiated good, insisting instead that each form of engagement must be evaluated against the criterion of whether it substantively transfers decision-making power to citizens or reproduces existing asymmetries under the guise of inclusion.

Fiorino (1990) widened the framework by arguing that participatory governance processes generate epistemological as well as democratic benefits, improving the quality of regulatory decision-making through the integration of diverse experiential knowledge that institutional actors alone could not command. Dryzek (1990) shifted the analytical focus in *Discursive Democracy* towards the communicative conditions that either enable or foreclose genuine participation, arguing that equitable, reflexive, and inclusive dialogue constitutes both the procedural requirement and the substantive aim of any governance arrangement with credible democratic foundations. Cohen and Rogers (1992) extended this framework further by theorising how organised associational groups can mediate between dispersed citizen participation and effective democratic governance, providing the structural architecture through which individual participatory energies accumulate into sustained political action. Carpentier (2011) subsequently translated this intellectual tradition into the study of media and communication through his conceptual distinction between minimalist and maximalist participation, with the former granting citizens access to communicative systems without genuine decision-making power and the latter enabling substantive agency over the production and circulation of meaning. This distinction holds particular analytical relevance for the present study because it provides the conceptual basis for evaluating whether the digital counter-narrative production about the NPA during the July 2021 unrest represented genuine participatory agency or a structurally constrained performance of civic voice.

Yilmaz et al. (2026) anchors these theoretical developments within contemporary digital environments, cautioning that the rhetoric of participation is regularly appropriated by institutions and platforms seeking the legitimising appearance of

inclusion without the substantive redistribution of communicative power that genuine participatory practice requires, a risk that he describes as participatory theatre, and one that this study addresses analytically by maintaining a consistent distinction throughout the empirical analysis between participatory acts that generated substantive communicative agency over how the NPA's legitimacy was publicly constructed and those that reproduced the appearance of civic voice within algorithmically constrained counter-public formations whose reach and authority derived from platform logics rather than from the deliberative quality of the participation itself.

3.4.2 Contemporary Applications and African Scholarship

In contemporary contexts, participatory practices operate across both analogue and digital domains. Palacin, McDonald, Aragón and Nelimarkka (2024), alongside Gonçalves, Ioannou and Verma (2024) demonstrate how digital participatory budgeting and related civic technologies extend citizen involvement beyond traditional forums. Wampler, McNulty and Touchton (2021) highlight participatory budgeting as a model for redistributing power by enabling citizens to directly allocate public funds. Drawing on a comprehensive review of 139 English-language scholarly publications spanning approximately thirty years, Bartocci, Grossi, Mauro and Ebdon (2023) demonstrate that participatory budgeting constitutes a significant form of democratic innovation. Their analysis shows that the mechanism extends beyond consultation by enabling citizens to exercise direct influence over public expenditure decisions, allowing communities to deliberate on and determine the allocation of municipal resources and budgetary priorities. This transfer of decision-making authority provides residents with a tangible role in shaping how public funds are spent. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) stress that digital participation has become central to democratic functioning, with online platforms mediating civic engagement in ways previously impossible through analogue means alone (Gonçalves, Ioannou & Verma, 2024). Shybalkina and Bifulco (2021) demonstrate how digital participation expands civic accountability, though Shybalkina (2022) cautions that participation under

authoritarian or semi-democratic constraints is frequently limited by censorship, surveillance, and institutional resistance.

In African and South African contexts, participatory scholarship offers significant insights. Udenze, Roig and Pires (2025), alongside Roberts and Bosch (2023) demonstrate that protest movements in African contexts gain legitimacy and sustainability when rooted in grassroots participation, while top-down, externally imposed participatory models risk undermining social cohesion and democratic authenticity. This finding is directly applicable to the dynamics of digital counter-narratives about the NPA during the July 2021 unrest, which drew their legitimacy precisely from the participatory, decentralised nature of their production. Lokot (2023) provides a further comparative lens by examining how Ukrainian citizens used social media during conflict to document lived experiences through hashtags, images, and videos, asserting agency over narrative construction and countering state-controlled accounts. The parallels with South African digital activism during the unrest are instructive, as both contexts demonstrate how digital participation enables narrative agency in conditions of perceived institutional failure. Davis (2021) illustrates how citizens in Cuba engage with digital platforms to subtly critique the state through text-based debates and user-generated content, demonstrating the cross-contextual applicability of participatory digital activism in politically constrained environments.

Reed et al. (2018), through a theory of stakeholder participation, argue that in environmental governance, inclusive stakeholder participation builds trust and collective ownership of decisions. Cohen and Rogers' framework of associational participation mediating between citizens and institutional authority directly provides the theoretical basis for understanding how participatory practices in formal institutional settings, including adversarial legal systems, ensure that citizens' voices shape the production of meaning about their situations rather than being entirely subordinated to institutional logics. This directly underpins the claim about participatory approaches ensuring more humanised representation. Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008) provide a foundational African perspective on communication

theory that situates participatory communication within broader models of public engagement, reinforcing the grounding of this study in African scholarly traditions.

3.4.3 Critiques and Theoretical Limitations

Despite its democratic promise, PT has attracted sustained critique. Pateman (1970) and Arnstein (1969) identify democratic deficits arising from elite dominance and socio-economic disparities that undermine participation, rendering it symbolic rather than substantive. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) and Roberts and Bosch, (2023) similarly warns that digital inequalities, including uneven internet access, low digital literacy, and gendered divides, exclude vulnerable groups from participatory processes, thereby reproducing existing hierarchies. Davis (2021), alongside Brady et al. (2021) highlights the dangers of digital surveillance and algorithmic governance, which can curtail genuine participation on social media platforms by shaping visibility and policing dissent. These structural constraints are particularly relevant in the South African context, where digital participation during the July 2021 unrest was shaped by persistent socio-economic inequalities, differential access to platforms, and the algorithmic logics of X. Carpentier (2011) further warns that participation can be appropriated by powerful actors who invoke its language while withholding meaningful decision-making power, a risk of participatory theatre that demands analytical attentiveness to the limits of digital participation in reshaping institutional legitimacy.

A limitation bearing directly on the present study is that PT was developed predominantly in relation to formal governance arrangements and deliberative forums rather than the informal, anonymous, and algorithmically mediated practices through which social media users engage politically, and this study adapts the framework accordingly by treating retweeting, hashtag attachment, and affective commentary as networked micro-contributions whose collective accumulation produced sustained counter-narrative pressure on the NPA rather than as formal civic acts measurable against classical deliberative standards.

3.4.4 Application to This Study

In this study, PT is applied to analyse how social media users collectively produced and reinforced counter-narratives concerning the NPA during the July 2021 unrest. Specifically, it is used to examine how participatory practices, including hashtag use, retweeting, visual sharing, and affective commentary amplified particular interpretations of justice and contributed to the erosion or defence of institutional legitimacy. The theory is especially important for interpreting the empirical findings related to hashtag mobilisation, virality, and repetition identified in Chapter 5, where participatory dynamics transformed individual expressions of dissent into collective, sustained counter-narratives that shaped public perceptions of prosecutorial authority in South Africa. By applying PT within a South African digital context, this study situates itself within a growing body of African communication scholarship that takes seriously the democratic and narrative agency of digital publics in postcolonial political settings. This scholarly tradition is represented within the present study not only through the contributions of Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) and Aiseng (2024a) but also through Mabweazara and Mare (2021), whose examination of digital public spheres and marginalised voices in sub-Saharan African contexts demonstrates that participatory counter-narrative production in African settings operates through communicative logics shaped by colonial history and structural exclusion that Western participatory frameworks were not designed to accommodate. Srinivasan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivanane (2019) contend that the rapid expansion of digital technologies across Africa necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of how publics are conceptualised and studied. They maintain that contemporary digital developments on the continent require new analytical approaches capable of capturing emerging forms of public engagement and interaction. In doing so, they advocate for a departure from the conceptual frameworks, historical assumptions and dominant vocabularies that have traditionally shaped Western understandings of publics, arguing instead for perspectives that are more responsive to African social, cultural and technological realities. Udenze, Roig and Pires (2025) alongside Aiseng (2024), and Martinerie (2021), who examined hashtag-mediated political communication in African contexts,

confirms that networked solidarity-building sustains counter-narrative formations across the temporal distance between a precipitating crisis and its eventual institutional resolution.

Although counter-narrative theory (CNT), digital public sphere theory (DPST), and participatory theory (PT) are often applied together in studies of online contestation, each fulfils a distinct analytical purpose within this study. CNT supplies the conceptual vocabulary needed to identify how alternative narratives challenge dominant institutional accounts, functioning as the lens through which the content of the counter-narratives is read. DPST situates that contestation within its structural setting, attending to the networked and algorithmically mediated spaces in which visibility and circulation are unevenly distributed, and thereby serves as the lens through which the context of circulation is read. PT, in turn, foregrounds the agency of ordinary users as producers of meaning rather than passive recipients of it, acting as the lens through which questions of authorship are read. These three frameworks converge in treating institutional legitimacy as an outcome that is continually negotiated rather than permanently settled, yet they diverge in where their attention falls. CNT is chiefly concerned with the structure of the narratives themselves, DPST with the conditions under which those narratives circulate, and PT with the identity and agency of the participants constructing them. Read together, they enable this study to trace a coherent analytical path, moving from what was said, to where and how it spread, and finally to who was constructing it and for what purpose, without allowing these three distinct questions to collapse into one another.

3.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter established the theoretical framework for analysing digital counter-narratives concerning the NPA during the July 2021 unrest in South Africa. CNT provides the conceptual basis for understanding how alternative stories challenged dominant institutional accounts of justice, drawing on the foundational scholarship of Bamberg and Andrews (2004), whose conceptualisation of master narratives

establishes the referential framework against which the counter-narratives in the dataset are positioned, Hyvärinen (2021) whose theorisation of counter-narratives as relational phenomena informs the thematic analysis in Section 5.6, Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) whose concept of narrative power provides the primary analytical lens through which the five narrative genres examined in Section 5.3 are interpreted, and Hyvärinen (2021), whose concept of tellability provides the tool through which hashtag amplification in Section 5.4 is theorised, as well as empirical applications from South African and African contexts.

DPST, grounded in the work of Habermas (1989), Fraser (1990), and Papacharissi (2015), situates counter-narratives within fragmented, affective, and algorithmically mediated communicative spaces, with Fraser's (1990) concept of subaltern counter-publics providing the lens through which the hashtag formations in Section 5.4 are interpreted and Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics providing the framework through which the emotive framing strategy in Section 5.5.1 is theorised, demonstrating why digital platforms became the primary arenas of discursive struggle during the unrest.

PT, drawing on the normative foundations of Arnstein (1969), Freire (1970), and the empirical contributions of Carpentier (2011), Udenze, Roig and Pires (2025), Lokot (2023), and Roberts and Bosch (2023) (2024), explains how ordinary social media users became active agents in producing and amplifying meanings through digital interaction, with the framework adapted throughout the empirical analysis to account for the informal, anonymous, and algorithmically mediated participatory practices of social media counter-publics that classical participatory theory did not anticipate.

What distinguishes this tripartite framework from a simple accumulation of theoretical perspectives is the specific division of analytical labour through which each framework addresses what the remaining two cannot resolve independently, producing an integrated account of institutional delegitimisation that is simultaneously discursive, structural, and participatory. CNT established what the counter-narratives about the

NPA are and how they function, providing the conceptual vocabulary for identifying the narrative genres, discursive strategies, and thematic formations through which the institution's legitimacy was publicly contested and eroded across the dataset. DPST established where those counter-narratives circulated and under what structural conditions they achieved visibility, reach, and apparent consensual authority, accounting for the algorithmically mediated, affectively organised, and participatorily reinforced communicative environment within which the delegitimisation of the NPA unfolded rather than treating that environment as a neutral transmission channel. PT established how the counter-narratives were collectively produced and sustained over the four-year collection period, explaining why the delegitimising pressure on the NPA accumulated and intensified rather than dissipating after the acute phase of the unrest through the networked micro-contributions of ordinary social media users whose collective authorship gave the counter-narrative ecosystem its temporal durability and apparent popular authority.

Together these three frameworks positioned this study to interpret the empirical findings of Chapter 5 as evidence of sustained narrative struggle over legal legitimacy in a digitally mediated democratic society, demonstrating that justice in digitally networked societies is not evaluated solely through legal procedure but is continuously negotiated through public discourse, participatory engagement, and symbolic communication. The tripartite framework is directly responsive to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, building upon debates on counter-narratives, institutional legitimacy, narrative genres, and digital participation in ways that no prior study has brought into sustained and mutually reinforcing dialogue in relation to the digital delegitimisation of a prosecutorial institution within a postcolonial African democratic context shaped by liberation history, racial memory, and entrenched institutional mistrust. Chapter 4 proceeds to outline the research methodology through which this theoretical framework was operationalised in the collection, sampling, and analysis of social media data.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Research methodology provides the structured foundation through which a study's research questions are addressed in a systematic, transparent, and intellectually coherent manner. It defines how knowledge is produced, how meaning is interpreted, and how empirical material is analysed in relation to the study's theoretical and conceptual positioning (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A clearly articulated methodology is particularly important in qualitative research, where interpretive judgement plays a central role in shaping analytical outcomes and scholarly credibility (Denzin, Lincoln, Giardina & Cannella, 2023).

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted to examine digital counter-narratives concerning the NPA during and after the July 2021 unrest in South Africa. The study was concerned with how social media users constructed, circulated, and legitimised alternative narratives about justice, accountability, and prosecutorial authority within digitally mediated public spaces. As such, the methodology was designed to capture meaning-making processes rather than to measure frequency, prevalence, or causal relationships. Guided by a qualitative, interpretivist orientation, the study treated social media discourse as a site of narrative construction and ideological contestation. The primary data collection method employed was qualitative content analysis, applied to a purposively selected corpus of 20 publicly available tweets drawn from X during the period July 2021 to July 2025. This methodological choice is discussed in detail in subsequent sections, but it is foregrounded here to establish the analytical character of the study. The methodological approach prioritised depth, contextual sensitivity, and discursive analysis, enabling an examination of how language, symbolism, and participatory practices were mobilised to frame the actions and legitimacy of the NPA.

The chapter details the philosophical assumptions underpinning the study, the research approach and design, data collection procedures, sampling strategy, and analytical techniques employed. In addition, the chapter addresses issues of trustworthiness, ethical responsibility, and methodological limitation to ensure transparency and academic rigour. By clearly outlining these elements, the chapter establishes a coherent methodological foundation for the empirical analysis presented in Chapter 5 and ensures alignment with the study's theoretical framework and research objectives.

4.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm provides the philosophical orientation that shapes how a researcher understands reality, produces knowledge, and justifies methodological choices (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It establishes the assumptions that underpin the relationship between the researcher, the data, and the phenomenon under investigation (Denzin et al., 2023). In qualitative inquiry, articulating the research paradigm is particularly important because interpretation, context, and meaning are central to the research process. This study was situated within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which was appropriate given the study's focus on digital counter-narratives, treated not as objective representations of events but as socially produced meanings that reflect ideological positioning, historical memory, and political contestation. The paradigm enabled an exploration of how social media users interpret, frame, and evaluate the actions of the NPA within the digitally mediated public sphere during and after the July 2021 unrest.

Interpretivism is concerned with the subjective meanings that individuals assign to their communicative practices, treating social reality as accessible only through the particular perspectives and lived experiences that shape how people make sense of the world around them (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Social constructivism extends this orientation by attending to how those subjective meanings are not merely individual but are collectively produced, negotiated, and stabilised through social interaction and discourse, making shared interpretive frameworks the primary unit of analytical

interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Both orientations were necessary for the present study because this approach enabled the simultaneous examination of how individual social media users interpreted the NPA's prosecutorial conduct through their own ideological and historical positioning, and how those individual interpretations were collectively assembled into shared counter-narrative formations through the participatory dynamics of digital interaction, a dual analytical concern that neither interpretivism nor constructivism could address adequately in isolation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

4.2.1 Ontological Assumptions

Ontology concerns assumptions about the nature of reality and what can be said to exist within the social world (Crotty, 1998). Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) illustrate that the major research paradigms, namely positivism, interpretivism and critical theory, each rest on a distinct ontological commitment that determines whether reality is understood as objective and fixed, socially constructed and multiple, or shaped by power relations. Within these perspectives, reality may be viewed respectively as an external and observable phenomenon, a collection of socially negotiated meanings, or a condition shaped by underlying structures of power and inequality (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Therefore, ontology is not merely an abstract philosophical consideration but a core foundation that informs and guides all subsequent methodological and epistemological choices within the research process. This study adopted a relativist ontological position, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that multiple, coexisting realities are produced through human interaction and discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Within digital spaces, events such as the July 2021 unrest do not possess a single, fixed meaning. Instead, they are interpreted differently by various actors, each constructing narratives that reflect their values, beliefs, and political orientations. From this ontological standpoint, counter-narratives about the NPA were understood as legitimate social realities examined as meaningful constructions that reveal how users perceive justice, accountability, and institutional legitimacy rather than evaluated in terms of factual accuracy. This assumption allowed

the study to focus on how meaning is produced and contested rather than on establishing an objective account of whether that meaning is correct or true or not.

4.2.2 Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology addresses the nature of knowledge and how it can be known (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017; Crotty, 1998). The study aligned with an interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that knowledge is generated through interpretation and that understanding social phenomena requires engagement with meaning, context, and subjectivity (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Knowledge is therefore not discovered as an external truth but constructed through interaction between the researcher and the data. In this study, epistemological emphasis was placed on interpreting how social media users articulate counter-narratives about the NPA through language, symbolism, and discursive framing. Tweets were treated as texts embedded within broader socio-political contexts, and meaning was derived through close, contextual reading rather than measurement or quantification. This epistemological position recognises the researcher as an active interpreter whose analytical insights emerge through reflexive engagement with the data.

4.2.3 Interpretivist Assumptions

Interpretivism assumes that social reality is constituted through communicative practices and that meaning is negotiated rather than fixed (Crotty, 1998; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This approach is particularly suited to the study of digital discourse, where narratives are shaped through interaction, repetition, and symbolic expression (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). In online environments, users draw on emotion, historical reference, and ideological positioning to make sense of institutional actions and to communicate their interpretations to others (Papacharissi, 2015). The interpretivist stance adopted in this study foregrounded the subjective meanings embedded in tweets, and that counter-narratives operate through affective and rhetorical strategies rather than formal argumentation alone. By embracing interpretivism, the study was able to examine how counter-narratives about the NPA

were constructed, how they circulated within digital publics, and how they contributed to the reconfiguration of institutional legitimacy.

4.2.4 Paradigmatic Alignment with the Study

The interpretivist-constructivist paradigm was particularly appropriate for this study because it foregrounds meaning-making within socially and politically mediated digital spaces. Counter-narratives are inherently interpretive phenomena that represent alternative constructions of social reality challenging dominant discourses. By situating the analysis within this paradigm, the study explored how social media users produced, circulated, and contested narratives about justice, accountability, and institutional legitimacy associated with the July 2021 unrest. This paradigm aligned with the study's theoretical framework, which drew on the DPST and CNT, both of which emphasise participation, discourse, and interpretation. The focus was on understanding the content, discursive strategies, and ideological underpinnings of digital counter-narratives, rather than measuring their prevalence or making claims. Consequently, the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm provided a coherent philosophical foundation for exploring the complexity and richness of social media discourse surrounding the NPA during the July 2021 unrest.

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, informed by an interpretivist orientation, to examine how digital counter-narratives about the NPA were constructed and circulated on X during and after the July 2021 unrest. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study was concerned with meaning, interpretation, and discursive practice rather than measurement, frequency, or statistical generalisation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The objective was to understand how social media users articulate perceptions of justice, legitimacy, and accountability through language, symbolism, and narrative framing. Within this qualitative framework, the study employed qualitative content analysis as its primary research approach. Content analysis was suited to examining communicative artefacts such as social media posts

because it allows for systematic yet interpretive engagement with textual and visual material (Denzin et al., 2023; Schreier, 2012). Rather than treating tweets as isolated statements, the approach enabled analysis of how meaning was produced across patterns of discourse, rhetorical strategies, and narrative forms.

The research approach was exploratory and interpretive in nature. It did not seek to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships but to illuminate how counter-narratives emerge, evolve, and gain discursive force within digitally networked publics. Tweets were analysed as situated expressions shaped by political context, historical memory, and participatory interaction, allowing the study to move beyond surface description and engage with the ideological and symbolic dimensions of counter-narrative production. The study focused on a purposively selected corpus of 20 tweets, chosen for their relevance to the research questions and their richness in discursive content, with content analysis providing the flexibility required to examine both explicit claims and implicit meanings embedded in these posts, including emotive language, moral judgements, and symbolic references. Although qualitative content analysis and political discourse analysis were both deployed in this study, they operated at distinct analytical levels and served different methodological purposes rather than functioning as interchangeable or overlapping approaches. Qualitative content analysis provided the overarching systematic framework through which recurring patterns of meaning were identified, organised, and interpreted across the dataset as a whole, enabling the study to map the broader narrative and thematic formations that characterized the digital counter-narrative production about the NPA (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Schreier, 2012). Political discourse analysis, by contrast, provided the close-reading tools through which specific language choices, rhetorical positioning, framing strategies, and symbolic references operative within individual tweets could be examined in detail, attending to how political meaning is constructed at the level of the single communicative act rather than across the dataset as a pattern (Van Dijk, 2008). The two methods were applied sequentially and at complementary analytical levels, with qualitative content analysis establishing the thematic architecture of the findings and political discourse analysis providing the granular

interpretive evidence through which each theme was substantiated and illustrated in Chapter 5. This methodological choice ensured coherence between the study's theoretical framework, research objectives, and analytical strategy, and provided a robust foundation for the thematic and political discourse analysis developed later in Chapter 5.

4.4 DEDUCTIVE AND INDUCTIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

This study employed a combined deductive and inductive content analysis to examine digital counter-narratives concerning the NPA during and after the July 2021 unrest. The integration of these two analytical logics allowed the study to remain theoretically informed while remaining responsive to meanings emerging directly from the data (Schreier, 2012). This hybrid approach was particularly suited to the interpretivist orientation of the research, as it facilitated both conceptual guidance and analytical openness. The deductive component of the analysis was guided by the study's theoretical framework and research objectives. Concepts drawn from CNT, the DPST, and PT, informed the initial analytical sensitivity of the researcher, particularly in relation to ideas of legitimacy, justice, institutional authority, and narrative contestation. These concepts shaped the preliminary reading of the data by directing attention to recurring discursive patterns such as claims of political persecution, selective justice, institutional betrayal, and moral evaluation of prosecutorial action. Deductive analysis therefore provided a conceptual scaffold that aligned the empirical material with the broader theoretical concerns of the study. At the same time, the study adopted an inductive analytical process to ensure that themes were not imposed rigidly on the data. Through repeated and close reading of the 20 selected tweets, patterns of meaning, rhetorical strategies, and symbolic references were allowed to emerge organically from the dataset (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This inductive process enabled the identification of nuanced themes that were not pre-defined, including affective framings of justice, racialised interpretations of accountability, and participatory forms of narrative amplification. In this way, the analysis remained grounded in the lived expressions and interpretive practices of social media users.

The analytical process unfolded iteratively. Initial engagement with the dataset involved reading and re-reading tweets to capture contextual nuance, tone, and intent. This was followed by open coding, where phrases, images, hashtags, and discursive cues were labelled according to their narrative and rhetorical function. Codes were then refined and clustered into broader thematic categories through constant comparison across tweets. This iterative movement between data and theory ensured analytical rigour while preserving interpretive depth. The combination of deductive and inductive content analysis strengthens the credibility of the findings by balancing theoretical coherence with empirical sensitivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). By employing this combined approach, the study was able to systematically interrogate how digital counter-narratives about the NPA are constructed, circulated, and legitimised within the digital public sphere.

4.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Data for this study was collected through manual retrieval of publicly available tweets on X, focusing on content related to the NPA in the context of the July 2021 unrest and its aftermath. Manual data collection was deliberately selected to align with the study's qualitative and interpretivist orientation, allowing the researcher to prioritise contextual richness, narrative complexity, and discursive relevance rather than volume or automation (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Tweets were identified using a set of pre-determined hashtags associated with the unrest and subsequent digital discourse, namely #July2021Unrest, #July2021Riots, #ZumaUnrest, #PhoenixMassacre, and #FreeJacobZuma. These hashtags functioned as entry points into networked conversations where counter-narratives concerning justice, accountability, and prosecutorial legitimacy were actively articulated. The use of hashtags as a sampling gateway was consistent with qualitative social media research that treats them as discursive signposts rather than neutral metadata (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Zappavigna, 2011).

The data collection period was from July 2021 to July 2025. This temporal boundary was established to capture both the immediate reactions to the unrest and the

sustained development of counter-narratives over a four-year period, during which associated legal proceedings, commemorative events, and political developments continued to generate relevant digital discourse. By July 2025, the primary wave of NPA-related counter-narrative production had reached a period of relatively discursive consolidation, making this an appropriate and justifiable point of closure for data collection purposes. This time-bound approach enabled the study to examine how counter-narratives evolved, receded, or intensified across an analytically defined period rather than treating digital discourse as a static snapshot.

A total of 20 tweets were selected for analysis through purposive sampling. Selection criteria included the relevant hashtags, thematic relevance to the NPA, narrative richness, visibility of discursive strategies, and the presence of rhetorical or symbolic elements such as emotive language, moral judgement, historical references, and images. Tweets that merely relayed factual information without interpretive framing were excluded, as the focus of the study was on meaning-making rather than information dissemination. Each selected tweet was archived manually, including its textual content and any accompanying visual material such as images or videos. Visual elements were retained because they form an integral part of digital meaning-making and frequently contribute to the affective and symbolic dimensions of counter-narratives (Thatelo & Motsaabeth, 2024). Manual archiving ensured that tweets were preserved in their original form at the time of collection, reducing the risk of later deletion or alteration (Schreier, 2012). Manual data collection also enabled ethical sensitivity and reflexive judgement (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Tweets that had been deleted prior to analysis were excluded, and identifiable user information was anonymised in the presentation of findings. This approach balanced methodological transparency with ethical responsibility, recognising that although tweets are publicly accessible, they are embedded within sensitive political discourse (Williams, Burnap & Sloan, 2017).

Alternative or complementary methods were considered during the design of this study. Semi-structured interviews with social media users, journalists, or

communications specialists could have illuminated the motivations behind specific posts, but would have shifted the study's focus from the discursive construction of counter-narratives to the intentions of individual authors, which lay outside its stated objectives. Surveys of public perception could have indicated the prevalence of particular views of the NPA, but would not have revealed how those views were discursively constructed and circulated, which was the specific concern of this study. A larger, automatically sampled corpus of tweets was similarly considered, but would have required frequency-based coding at the expense of the close, multimodal reading this study prioritises. Given the study's exploratory and interpretive aims, purposive sampling of a smaller, richly analysable dataset was judged as the more appropriate design choice.

4.6 POPULATION

In research, a population refers to the complete set of units, individuals, or phenomena that share a characteristic relevant to the research problem and from which the researcher draws conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In qualitative research, the population is not primarily understood in statistical terms but as the broader domain of communicative, social, or cultural phenomena that the study seeks to illuminate (Denzin et al., 2023). The population of this study comprised all publicly available tweets on X that reference the NPA's decisions and actions in relation to the July 2021 unrest and its aftermath. This population included a wide range of user-generated content in which the NPA is discursively positioned within debates about justice, accountability, political interference, and institutional legitimacy. Given the expansive and continuously evolving nature of social media content, the population was conceptually broad. Tweets relating to the July 2021 unrest continued to circulate long after the immediate crisis, often resurfacing during related legal proceedings, political developments, or commemorative moments. As such, the overall population encompassed all posts produced from July 2021 to July 2025 that directly or indirectly engaged with the NPA's role during and after the unrest.

4.6.1 Accessible Population

The accessible population refers to the portion of the overall population that the researcher can realistically and practically reach within the constraints of the study (Patton, 2015). It represents the subset of the broader population that is available for inclusion based on temporal, geographic, linguistic, or technical boundaries (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). For the purposes of this study, the accessible population was delimited to publicly available tweets retrievable through X's search function using selected hashtags, namely #July2021Unrest, #July2021Riots, #ZumaUnrest, #PhoenixMassacre, and #FreeJacobZuma, within the defined collection period of July 2021 to July 2025. These hashtags functioned as discursive gateways through which users framed interpretations of legality, responsibility, and institutional conduct, making them particularly suitable for identifying counter-narratives relevant to the study's aims (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). The accessible population was further narrowed by focusing on tweets that displayed interpretive, evaluative, or rhetorical engagement with the NPA, including tweets that question prosecutorial motives, frame legal actions as politically driven, invoke historical or moral claims, or articulate distrust in the criminal justice system. Tweets that merely reproduced factual information without discursive commentary were excluded, as they do not contribute meaningfully to the construction of counter-narratives.

4.6.2 Target Population

The target population refers to the specific segment of the accessible population that most directly addresses the research questions and from which the study's purposive sample is drawn (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In qualitative interpretivist research, the target population is defined not by numerical bounds but by analytical and thematic relevance to the study's objectives (Denzin et al., 2023). For this study, the target population comprised tweets within the accessible population that contained identifiable counter-narrative elements, specifically those that articulated alternative framings of justice and prosecutorial authority, deployed emotive or symbolic language, invoked historical or political grievance in relation to the NPA, or mobilised

participatory engagement through hashtags, visual content, or rhetorical strategies. Within this defined population, the study did not seek statistical representativeness. Instead, it treated the target population as a discursive field from which analytically rich examples were drawn to illuminate how meaning is produced and contested in digital spaces. This orientation was consistent with qualitative interpretivist research, which prioritises depth of understanding and contextual insight over numerical generalisation (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). A corpus of 20 purposively selected tweets was therefore drawn from this target population to reflect a range of narrative positions, rhetorical strategies, and affective tones present within digital discourse about the NPA during and after the July 2021 unrest.

4.7 UNITS OF ANALYSIS

According to Creswell and Creswell (2023)), a unit of analysis is the primary entity or phenomenon that the researcher examines in order to answer the research questions. It defines what is being studied and provides the basis for data collection, coding, and interpretation (Schreier, 2012). In this study, the unit of analysis was each individual tweet, which was treated as a discrete yet contextually situated discursive artefact through which social media users constructed counter-narratives about the NPA during and after the July 2021 unrest.

Each tweet was analysed holistically across three interconnected dimensions. The first was the textual dimension, which encompassed the verbal content of the tweet including written language, claims, rhetorical questions, moral judgements, and evaluative statements that articulated counter-narrative positions in relation to the NPA and broader perceptions of justice.

The second was the visual dimension, which included images, photographs, videos, memes, and embedded media that accompanied the tweet. Visual elements are integral to digital meaning-making and frequently carry affective, symbolic, or ideological weight that extends beyond or intensifies the verbal content of a post (Thatelo & Motsaabethe, 2024; Papacharissi, 2015).

The third was the symbolic and reference dimension, which encompassed hashtags, historical allusions, liberation-era symbolism, intertextual references, and cultural markers that situated the individual tweets within the broader narratives of political identity, collective memory, and institutional contestation. These symbolic elements are particularly significant in the South African political context, where digital discourse about the NPA is frequently anchored in racialised history and postcolonial political grievance (Petla, 2023).

Together, these three dimensions ensured that the unit of analysis reflected the multimodal, contextually embedded nature of digital discourse (Papacharissi, 2015; Schreier, 2012). A total of 20 purposively selected tweets constituted the dataset, enabling in-depth qualitative analysis of how justice, legitimacy, and prosecutorial authority in relation to the July 2021 unrest were narrated and contested within the digital public sphere.

4.8 SAMPLING METHOD AND TIME DIMENSION OF THE STUDY

This study employed purposive sampling to select tweets that were information-rich and directly relevant to the construction of digital counter-narratives about the NPA during and after the July 2021 unrest. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgement sampling, is a deliberate non-probability strategy through which units are chosen on the basis of their specific characteristics and their capacity to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation rather than to represent a broader population statistically (Patton, 2015). Denzin et al. (2023) similarly confirms that purposive sampling is the preferred approach in qualitative interpretivist inquiry precisely because its selection logic is driven by analytical relevance rather than distributional representativeness. Patton (2015) further argues that the defining advantage of this strategy over convenience or snowball alternatives is that it enables the researcher to assemble a corpus whose every unit is demonstrably connected to the study's theoretical framework and research questions, thereby ensuring that no selected material is analytically redundant. Consistent with these principles, the dataset

comprised 20 publicly available tweets drawn across five hashtags associated with the unrest, namely #July2021Unrest, #July2021Riots, #ZumaUnrest, #PhoenixMassacre, and #FreeJacobZuma, with each tweet evaluated against criteria that included thematic relevance to the NPA, discursive richness, rhetorical complexity, and the presence of symbolic elements such as emotive language, moral judgement, visual content, historical reference, and hashtag deployment.

Tweets were initially identified through hashtag-based searches conducted using X's native search function, applied individually to each of the five hashtags associated with the unrest. This process returned an initial pool of 288 tweets, comprising 27 tweets under #July2021Unrest, 4 under #July2021Riots, 130 under #ZumaUnrest, 37 under #FreeJacobZuma, and 90 under #PhoenixMassacre. This pool was narrowed to the final sample of 20 through a systematic exclusion process. Tweets were removed where the originating account had since been deleted or suspended, where the tweet constituted a near duplicate repost of content already captured elsewhere in the pool, where the tweet referenced Zuma or the unrest generally without specific reference to the NPA, or where the tweet otherwise held no substantive relevance to the NPA's prosecutorial conduct, including tweets falling outside the study's four year time dimension. The remaining tweets were then evaluated against the criteria outlined above, with selection continuing until further candidate tweets appeared to add little beyond the narrative genres, discursive strategies, and thematic patterns already emerging within the sample. Twenty tweets were judged as a practical and analytically sufficient stopping point given this pattern and the study's exploratory scope, offering a dataset small enough to sustain close, multimodal reading of each tweet while still capturing the recurring genres and themes evident across the wider pool.

The time dimension of the study was from July 2021 to July 2025, a four-year longitudinal frame whose boundaries were determined by the sustained analytical productivity of the period rather than by administrative considerations. Creswell and Creswell (2023) state that a longitudinal orientation is methodologically warranted

when the researcher seeks to understand how a phenomenon develops, transforms, or intensifies over time rather than capturing a single fixed moment; the present study's extended collection window reflects precisely that logic. The rationale for maintaining the collection frame through to July 2025 was grounded in concrete evidence that the NPA remained an active object of counter-narrative production throughout the period, sustained by a sequence of political and legal developments that continuously renewed the discursive terrain under examination (Petla, 2023). Marriah-Maharaj (2024) documents that the January 2024 Pietermaritzburg High Court proceedings involving 65 accused instigators facing charges of terrorism, sedition, and public violence reactivated contestation across the hashtag formations central to the dataset. Gordon, Roberts, Mchunu, Struwig and Bohler-Muller (2025) establish empirically that the MK Party's 2024 electoral base was concentrated in the same geographic and demographic formations in KwaZulu-Natal that had produced Zuma-aligned political networks during the preceding years, while Chipkin and Vidojević (2026) demonstrate how the elite factional contestation within the ANC from 2006 onward produced durable alignment structures whose symbolic vocabularies and mobilisation networks did not dissolve after the July 2021 unrest but persisted into subsequent political formations. Laclau's (2005) theorisation of the empty signifier provides the conceptual basis for understanding how liberation iconography such as the MK name and imagery could be appropriated to unify these formations under a single antagonistic identity directed at the post-2021 ANC leadership. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) accounts for the broader trajectory of post-1994 institutional erosion that the MK Party's electoral performance brought into sharp political relief, situating its challenge to the democratic settlement within a longer pattern of declining public confidence in post-apartheid governance institutions that had been accumulating well before the July 2021 unrest and that the unrest itself accelerated. Seeletsa (2026) and Mabaso (2025) both document the prosecution of Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, whose trial proceedings were scheduled for April 2026 and whose incitement charges maintained sustained public scrutiny of the NPA's prosecutorial conduct throughout the latter portion of the collection period.

The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2024a) confirmed that the NPA had received 65 unrest-related dockets yet secured only a limited number of Phoenix-related convictions, a finding that continued to supply the factual grounding upon which selective justice counter-narratives were constructed and circulated in digital spaces well into the collection period. July 2025 therefore represents the methodologically defensible point at which the primary counter-narrative formations examined in this study had reached sufficient discursive consolidation to sustain the analytical conclusions presented in Chapter 5 and synthesised in Chapter 6.

4.9 DATA ANALYSIS

This study was not designed to measure the prevalence, frequency, or statistical representativeness of counter-narratives about the NPA on X. Rather, it was designed to explore, through close qualitative reading, how a purposively selected set of counter-narratives were constructed and communicated. Sample adequacy was accordingly judged by analytical richness and by the point at which recurring genres, strategies, and themes ceased to yield new interpretive categories, rather than by population coverage. Data analysis in this study combined thematic analysis and political discourse analysis to examine how digital counter-narratives about the NPA were constructed, circulated, and legitimised based on the dataset of 20 tweets. The analysis was interpretive and iterative, moving between close reading of the data and theoretical reflection to identify patterns of meaning, narrative framing, and ideological positioning (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes related to justice, legitimacy, political interference, and institutional betrayal, while political discourse analysis enabled a deeper interrogation of rhetorical strategies, symbolic references, and affective language through which these themes were articulated. Together, these approaches allowed the study to capture both what was being communicated and how meaning was constructed within digitally mediated counter-narratives, ensuring alignment with the study's interpretivist paradigm and its focus on discursive contestation in the digital public sphere. Thematic analysis was applied first across the full corpus of 20 tweets to surface the four dominant interpretive formations through which the NPA's institutional legitimacy was publicly contested,

with political discourse analysis subsequently applied within each formation to interrogate the particular rhetorical choices, linguistic constructions, framing orientations, and symbolic deployments through which individual tweets gave their counter-narrative claims communicative force, such that the two methods worked in a staged and mutually reinforcing relationship rather than in parallel or as substitutes for one another.

4.9.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical method used to identify, organise, and interpret recurring patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It provides a flexible yet systematic framework for examining what people say or write, how they construct meaning, and what shared interpretive tendencies emerge across a body of data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Unlike content analysis approaches that focus primarily on frequency, thematic analysis engages with the latent and manifest meanings embedded in communicative texts, making it particularly well-suited to the interpretive study of digital discourse (Schreier, 2012). In the context of social media research, thematic analysis allows the researcher to move beyond isolated statements and identify overarching narrative and ideological patterns through which counter-narratives about institutions are constructed and sustained (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). Thematic analysis was employed in this study to systematically identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning across the 20 tweets selected for analysis. Following the reflexive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), the thematic analysis was conducted through the following steps.

Step 1: Familiarisation with the data

The researcher engaged in repeated and active reading of all 20 tweets, including their textual, visual, and symbolic content. This phase involved taking initial notes and developing a broad sense of the data's themes and meanings before any formal coding began.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

Each tweet was coded to capture its narrative function, rhetorical strategy, evaluative stance, and symbolic references. Codes were applied to textual phrases, visual elements, hashtags, and ideological markers, generating a rich and granular set of descriptive labels across the dataset.

Step 3: Searching for themes

Related codes were grouped into potential thematic clusters that reflected shared patterns of meaning. At this stage, thematic coherence was prioritised over the frequency of occurrence, with analytical attention directed toward identifying the dominant narrative formations through which counter-narrative claims about the NPA were organised and sustained across the dataset rather than toward establishing the statistical prevalence of any particular discursive pattern.

Step 4: Reviewing themes

Candidate themes were reviewed against the dataset to ensure they were adequately supported by the evidence and that they meaningfully captured the discursive patterns present. Themes were refined, merged, or subdivided where necessary to ensure analytical precision.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

Each finalised theme was clearly defined in terms of its conceptual boundaries and analytical significance. Theme names were drawn from the data itself and from the theoretical framework, ensuring consistency with the study's conceptual orientation.

Step 6: Producing the analysis

The final thematic findings were written up by selecting illustrative examples from the dataset, interpreting each theme in relation to the study's theoretical framework, and situating the findings within the broader scholarly debates reviewed in Chapter 2. Themes were not treated as fixed categories but as interpretive constructs that captured shared narrative tendencies within the dataset, ensuring that thematic

findings reflected the discursive logics through which counter-narratives about the NPA were constructed and circulated in the digital public sphere.

4.9.2 Political Discourse Analysis

Political discourse analysis is an analytical approach that examines how language and communication are used to construct, contest, and legitimise political power, authority, and identity (Van Dijk, 2008). Unlike general discourse analysis, political discourse analysis is specifically concerned with how language functions as a vehicle for ideological positioning, the reproduction of power relations, and the articulation of political interests within and across communicative contexts (Chilton, 2004). It attends closely to the rhetorical, symbolic, and argumentative strategies through which political actors, including ordinary citizens, construct versions of social reality that serve particular political ends (Entman, 1993). In the context of digital media, political discourse analysis examines how tweets, hashtags, and visual content function not merely as expressions of opinion but as discursive acts that frame institutional actors, assign blame, construct moral hierarchies, and mobilise political identities (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Van Dijk, 2008).

In addition to thematic analysis, political discourse analysis was applied in this study to examine how language, symbolism, and framing were used to construct counter-narratives about the NPA. This analysis focused on how tweets positioned the NPA, attributed blame, and articulated claims of justice, persecution, or institutional failure through rhetorical choices rather than factual verification alone. Attention was given to emotive language, moral binaries, historical references, and symbolic cues that shaped meaning within the digital public sphere. Political discourse analysis enabled the study to interrogate how narratives were legitimised through repetition, affective appeal, and alignment with broader ideological positions, rather than through legal or procedural reasoning. By situating tweets within their socio-political and historical context, this approach illuminated how digital counter-narratives functioned as discursive practices that redefined prosecutorial authority and justice during and after the July 2021 unrest (Van Dijk, 2008; Chilton, 2004).

4.10 TRUSTWORTHINESS

The trustworthiness of this qualitative study was ensured through the established criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and applied in contemporary qualitative methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Credibility refers to the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings and whether they accurately represent the perspectives and meanings embedded in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged and repeated engagement with the full dataset, involving multiple close readings of each tweet across different analytical sessions to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than shaped by initial assumptions (Clark, Foster, Sloan & Bryman, 2021). Reflexive memoing was maintained throughout the analytical process, enabling the researcher to document interpretive decisions and revisit earlier readings in light of insights generated through subsequent engagement with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Given that the study draws on publicly available digital content whose original authors could not be consulted, member checking was not applicable as a credibility measure, and analytical rigour was instead secured through systematic documentation of coding decisions, sustained reflexive awareness of the researcher's positionality in relation to the South African political context under examination, and attentiveness to contradictions and competing interpretive possibilities within the dataset (Denzin et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Beyond reflexive memoing and the maintenance of an audit trail, a further step was taken to verify consistency in the coding of the final sample. The coding of narrative genres, discursive strategies, and themes across the 20 selected tweets was revisited after an interval, with each tweet reassessed independently of the original coding sheet to check whether the same categories would be applied on a fresh reading. In addition, the pool of tweets excluded from the final sample was reviewed to establish whether any excluded material had complicated or run counter to the emerging thematic patterns. This review found that

excluded tweets had been set aside for the reasons already outlined, namely duplication, limited relevance to the NPA specifically, or falling outside the study's four year time dimension, rather than because they contradicted the developing analysis, indicating that the exclusion process had not inadvertently filtered out disconfirming evidence.

Dependability concerns the stability and consistency of the research process over time and across analytical decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear and consistent analytic process, with documented decisions regarding coding, theme development, and interpretive focus. An audit trail of analytical decisions was maintained throughout the study to demonstrate methodological coherence and transparency.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are shaped by the data rather than by the researcher's biases or preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Confirmability was supported through reflexive memoing, allowing the researcher to account for positionality and minimise undue bias in the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher acknowledged their own interpretive position and its potential influence on the analytical process, ensuring that conclusions were traceable to the empirical data.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings can be applied to other contexts or similar phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Transferability was enhanced by providing contextually rich descriptions of the tweets and the socio-political conditions under which they were produced, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar digital and institutional contexts. While the study does not claim statistical generalisability, its thick descriptive approach provides a robust basis for analytical transferability to comparable cases of digital counter-narrative production in African and postcolonial democratic settings. It is worth noting directly, at this point, that the procedures described above strengthen the credibility and dependability of the analysis conducted, but they do not resolve the more

fundamental limitation of sample size. A rigorously analysed sample of 20 tweets remains a sample of 20 tweets. The trustworthiness measures adopted in this study should therefore be understood as safeguarding the quality of interpretation within the sample, rather than as extending the transferability of its findings beyond it.

4.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical responsibility is a foundational requirement of all research involving human subjects or human-generated data, as it ensures that the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of research participants and data sources are protected throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Clark et al., 2021). Researchers are obligated to consider the ethical implications of their choices regarding how data are collected, stored, used, and reported, particularly in contexts involving sensitive political discourse or identifiable individuals (Williams, Burnap & Sloan, 2017). Ethical vigilance is especially important in digital research, where the boundary between public and private expression is not always clearly defined and where the political or personal sensitivity of online content may expose individuals to unintended consequences (Clark et al., 2021).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout this study, despite the use of publicly accessible data from X. Although the tweets analysed in this study were publicly available, they were recognised as socially situated expressions produced within a sensitive political context. The study was classified as negligible risk because it relied exclusively on publicly accessible data and did not involve direct interaction with human participants. Accordingly, tweets were analysed and presented in their original publicly available form, including usernames and other publicly visible account information where relevant to the analysis. This approach was consistent with the study's ethical approval and preserved the authenticity and contextual integrity of the online discourse examined. Tweets that had been deleted before the commencement of the analysis were excluded from the dataset. All research data were securely stored on password-protected and encrypted devices accessible only to the researcher. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of South Africa's (UNISA)

Departmental Scientific Review Committee, confirming that the research complied with the institution's ethical requirements for research involving publicly available online data (UNISA DSRC, 2025).

4.12 LIMITATIONS

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis was confined to X and does not account for counter-narratives circulating on other platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, or WhatsApp, where political discourse around the July 2021 unrest may have taken different forms. Second, the qualitative focus on a purposively selected dataset of 20 tweets limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised beyond the specific cases analysed, although this approach enabled in-depth interpretive insight. Third, manual data collection and interpretation inevitably involved researcher subjectivity. This limitation was mitigated through reflexive memoing, consistent coding procedures, and close engagement with the data, but it cannot be eliminated entirely. Finally, the study analyses publicly available content and therefore does not capture private, deleted, or algorithmically suppressed discourse, which may also have contributed to the broader counter-narrative environment surrounding the NPA.

4.13 CONCLUSION

This chapter has constructed the methodological infrastructure through which the study's research questions are systematically and transparently addressed. By situating the research within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, the chapter established the philosophical foundations from which all subsequent analytical choices proceed, grounding the study's relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology in a coherent account of why social media discourse about the NPA is best understood as socially produced meaning rather than as verifiable fact. The qualitative content analysis framework, operating through a staged combination of deductive and inductive analytical logics, was shown to offer the contextual sensitivity and discursive flexibility that the study's theoretical commitments demand, while the complementary deployment of political discourse analysis at the level of individual

tweets provided the granular interpretive instruments through which rhetorical strategies, symbolic deployments, and ideological positioning within the dataset could be examined with sufficient precision. Together, these methodological choices ensured alignment between the study's philosophical orientation, its theoretical framework, and the specific analytical work required by each research question. The purposive selection of corpus of 20 tweets across five hashtag formations, drawn from a four-year longitudinal collection window, produced a dataset whose every element was demonstrably connected to the study's conceptual concerns, while the attention given to the textual, visual, and symbolic dimensions of each unit of analysis ensured that the full communicative complexity of digital counter-narrative production was brought within the scope of the analysis.

The chapter further demonstrated that methodological rigour in interpretivist qualitative research is not achieved through sample size or statistical controls but through the careful and consistent application of trustworthiness criteria that are appropriate to the epistemological character of the inquiry. Credibility was secured through sustained reflexive engagement with the dataset and systematic documentation of analytical decisions; dependability was demonstrated through an audit trail of coding and thematic development; confirmability was supported through reflexive memoing that kept the researcher's positionality in view throughout the analysis; and transferability was enhanced through the contextually rich descriptions of the dataset and its socio-political conditions that accompany the findings. Ethical responsibility was observed throughout, with the anonymisation of private individuals, the exclusion of deleted material, and the appropriate treatment of public figures' communicative conduct reflecting a principled engagement with the specific ethical challenges of politically sensitive digital research. Having established these methodological foundations, the study is now equipped to proceed to Chapter 5, which presents the data and empirical analysis of how digital counter-narratives about the NPA were constructed, circulated, and legitimised across the selected dataset during and after the July 2021 unrest.

CHAPTER 5: DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND ANALYSIS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents and analyses the empirical findings of the study, drawing on a purposively selected dataset of 20 posts on X, posted during and after the July 2021 unrest in South Africa. In keeping with the convention adopted across the academic literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and in accordance with the disclaimer established in the introductory chapter, these posts are referred to throughout as tweets. The chapter is grounded in the three theoretical frameworks developed in Chapter 3, namely counter-narrative theory (CNT), digital public sphere theory (DPST), and participatory theory (PT). CNT, as theorised by Bamberg and Andrews (2004) and extended by Hyvärinen (2021). These frameworks provided the analytical lens through which alternative stories contesting institutional legitimacy were examined. DPST, rooted in Habermas (1989) and rearticulated for digital environments by Fraser (1990) and Papacharissi (2015), situates the counter-narratives examined here within algorithmically mediated communicative spaces. PT, grounded in the foundational work of Freire (1970), extended by Arnstein (1969), and applied to digital contexts by Carpentier (2011), foregrounds the active role of ordinary social media users as producers and amplifiers of political meaning.

The qualitative content analysis approach outlined in Chapter 4 guided the interpretive method applied throughout this chapter. According to Schreier (2012), qualitative content analysis is concerned not with counting occurrences of topics but with interpreting the meanings produced within discourse, examining how language, visual imagery, and symbolic resources are deployed to construct particular versions of social reality. Each tweet in the dataset was treated as a discursive artefact through which meaning was produced, contested, and circulated, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm outlined in Chapter 4. This chapter examines how social media users employed narrative genres, discursive strategies, and participatory mechanisms

to contest the legitimacy of the NPA and reframe its prosecutorial conduct within broader political, historical, and racial narratives.

To contextualise the empirical analysis, Section 5.2 examines counter-narratives in digital spaces contesting NPA legitimacy. Section 5.3 analyses five narrative genres operative in the dataset. Section 5.4 examines digital participation and narrative amplification with specific attention to hashtag mobilisation. Section 5.5 analyses the primary discursive strategies through which counter-narratives about the NPA were constructed and sustained. Section 5.6 presents the thematic analysis of digital counter-narratives, identifying four dominant interpretive formations through which the NPA's legitimacy was publicly contested across the dataset. Section 5.7 concludes the chapter by connecting the empirical findings to the research questions established in Chapter 1.

5.2 COUNTER-NARRATIVES IN DIGITAL SPACES

Digital spaces constituted the primary arena through which competing meanings surrounding the July 2021 unrest were rapidly produced, contested, and stabilised. As Castells (2009) theorises, networked communication redistributes political power by enabling horizontal, citizen-driven discourse that bypasses conventional institutional gatekeepers. Within this environment, the NPA's prosecutorial conduct became a sustained focal point of counter-narrative activity. Users on X produced and circulated alternative interpretations of events that did not merely respond to institutional decisions but actively restructured the moral and evaluative frameworks through which those decisions were publicly understood. Bamberg and Andrews (2004) theorise that counter-narratives are not reactive commentary but structured discursive interventions that reinterpret events and redistribute moral responsibility, while Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) establish that narrative power, the capacity to define social reality through storytelling, constitutes the primary mechanism through which institutional authority is contested and reframed. This distinction is analytically critical because it situates the tweets examined in this study not as informal public reactions

but as purposive narrative productions through which institutional authority was systematically contested.

DPST, as developed by Habermas (1989) and critically extended by Fraser (1990) for marginalised and subaltern groups, provided the foundational framework for understanding why and how these counter-narratives gained traction. Fraser (1990) argues that subordinated groups consistently form what she terms subaltern counter-publics, parallel discursive arenas in which alternative norms and interpretations of social arrangements are invented and circulated. In the context of the July 2021 unrest, X functioned precisely as such a space for Zuma-aligned and ANC-RET (Radical Economic Transformation) faction networks, enabling the formation and amplification of counter-narratives that would not have achieved equivalent visibility within conventional media structures. Papacharissi (2015) further demonstrates that digital political expression is not organised around deliberative reason-giving in the Habermasian sense but around shared emotional orientations, outrage, solidarity, grief, and indignation, which structure collective interpretation more powerfully than procedural argument. This affective dimension explains why counter-narratives about the NPA during the July 2021 unrest achieved such rapid circulation and resonance, even where they rested on contested or misleading factual grounds.

The counter-narratives examined in this dataset did not function as isolated reactions to specific events but as interconnected discursive practices that collectively reshaped public understandings of legality, accountability, and institutional authority. A dominant strand centred on allegations of selective prosecution, in which perceived inconsistencies in arrests, prosecutions, and outcomes were reframed as evidence of institutional bias rather than procedural complexity. Sunshine and Tyler (2003) argue that institutional authority is sustained not only through legal mandate but through public perceptions of fairness, moral coherence, and communicative engagement, and that institutions which appear inconsistent lose public confidence regardless of their formal constitutional standing. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) extend this empirically by demonstrating that legitimacy erosion follows a recognisable

pattern, beginning with perceived communicative distance, accelerating through digital counter-narrative formation, and consolidating into structural public scepticism that subsequent institutional action struggles to reverse. This dynamic is on display in Figures 1 and 2 which represent the clearest instances in the dataset of the counter-narrative logic of selective justice.

kabelo @kpseabi · Jul 11, 2023



We are being LIED to by corrupt politicians who lack any honour!! Last year they claimed to know the instigators of the July 2021 unrest, but none of those persons have been convicted of serious crimes which hugely damaged economy [#July2021Unrest](#) [#IntelligenceGatheringFailure](#)



Figure 1: Prosecutorial delays reframed as institutional failure.

Figure 1 depicts the front page of the *Sowetan* newspaper with the masthead in bold red lettering, a primary image of burning trucks in KwaZulu-Natal, and a secondary image of then-Deputy President Paul Mashatile alongside the headline 'We know who's behind this'. This print editorial was widely circulated on X, where its digital recontextualisation within counter-public formations transformed it from a print news artefact into a counter-narrative instrument indicting the state for institutional inaction.

The *Sowetan* traces its institutional origins through a succession of Black South African newspapers systematically suppressed by the apartheid state, including *The World*, banned in 1977, and *Post Transvaal*, whose editorial staff migrated to form the new publication when it was formally established in 1981 (Cowling, 2014). During the apartheid era, the newspaper operated as what scholars characterise as a captive press institution, staffed by Black journalists and editors yet controlled by white corporate ownership, maintaining a grassroots editorial orientation rooted in Black Consciousness (BC) philosophy while serving the political and social interests of disenfranchised urban Black communities (Penn Libraries, 2021). Its founding editor Joe Latakgomo publicly committed the paper in its inaugural edition to the pursuit of justice for all South Africans without compromising the journalistic principles of honest and fair reporting (Siluma, 2026). Under Aggrey Klaaste, who edited the newspaper from 1988 to 2002, the *Sowetan* pursued a controversial nation-building campaign drawing on Black Consciousness values of communal self-reliance, arguing that Black communities should construct the social foundations of a future South Africa in parallel with the liberation struggle, a position that attracted fierce internal and external resistance from Black Consciousness-aligned journalists and liberation movement structures alike (Cowling, 2014). Despite this contestation, the newspaper grew through the 1990s to become the highest circulating daily in South Africa, carrying a readership of almost two million and a circulation of 124,000 by 2006 (Penn Libraries, 2021; Cowling, 2014). Following the political transition, the *Sowetan* was sold in 1993, adopting editorial positions broadly sympathetic to the ANC before passing through New African Investments Limited, Times Media Group, and Tiso Blackstar into its current home within Arena Holdings (Siluma, 2026). Its institutional significance for this study derives from its historical standing as the foremost daily newspaper serving Black South African urban communities, meaning that its front page circulated on X during the July 2021 unrest carried the accumulated symbolic authority of a publication whose identity is inseparable from the contested history of Black political recognition and journalistic resistance to state power in South Africa.

The tweet constructs legitimacy as strictly outcome-based, suggesting that justice only exists where visible convictions occur. By asserting prior knowledge of instigators without subsequent prosecution, it recasts prosecutorial delay as deliberate concealment rather than procedural complexity. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) theorise that counter-narratives derive their authority not from evidentiary strength but from their resonance with pre-existing frameworks of institutional scepticism. Within the digital publics that circulated this tweet, the burning truck imagery reinforced the moral urgency of the claim, investing a print editorial with the emotive weight of a moral indictment directed at the state. The follow-up #IntelligenceGatheringFailure in the tweet caption rules out such moral indictment of the NPA. The populist logic identified by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) is operative throughout, the headline's "we" positions digital users as members of a known public betrayed by a state that has information but withholds accountability.



CapricornFM News  @CapricornFMNews · Nov 3, 2023



Former Ukhozi FM Presenter Ngizwe Mchunu has been acquitted of all charges brought against him in relation to the violence that occurred during the [#July2021Unrest](#) NM





Figure 2: Selective prosecution amplified through reactions to acquittals.

Figure 2 presents two screenshots from a tweet by Capricorn FM reporting on the acquittal of former South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) Ukhozi FM Radio presenter, Ngizwe Mchunu, who had been charged with incitement to commit public violence related to the July 2021 unrest (Business Day, 2021). Mchunu, a vocal Zuma supporter, handed himself over to Durban police on 19 July 2021 after being accused of urging Zuma supporters to commit violence at Kwa-Mai Mai in Johannesburg (Pheto & Pijoos, 2023). Mchunu was also seen on guard outside the President's homestead in Nkandla, declaring that no one would dare touch Zuma before his arrest and imprisonment (Du Plessis, 2021). Interestingly to note, former President Zuma was observed attending separate court appearances in support of Mchunu and the famous #FeesMustFall activist, Bonginkosi Khanyile, both of whom were facing charges of incitement to commit public violence in connection with the July 2021 unrest (Xulu, 2025; Notho, 2023).

The political relationships surrounding Jacob Zuma reflect a highly fluid and personalised network shaped by intra-party factionalism, patronage relations, and shifting elite alliances within the ANC (Samaai & Van Vuuren, 2020; Booysen, 2015; Gumede, 2012). In the days leading to his arrest, Zuma's support base mobilised

physically at his Nkandla homestead in KwaZulu-Natal (Vhumbunu, 2021). Between 2 and 5 July 2021, large gatherings of supporters assembled outside his residence, framing his imprisonment as politically motivated and unjust (BBC News, 2021). This mobilisation included visible participation from ANC-aligned and former ANC-aligned figures. Carl Niehaus, acting in his capacity within the uMkhonto weSizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA) at the time, was physically present at Nkandla on 3 July 2021 and publicly communicated messages of solidarity with Zuma, framing the arrest as illegitimate and politically driven (The Witness, 2021). On 5 July 2021, Ace Magashule appeared at Nkandla alongside Zuma's supporters, publicly addressing the gathering and reinforcing narratives of political persecution (SABC News, 2021). At this time Magashule was already suspended as ANC Secretary General following his own legal challenges, and his presence symbolised the alignment of suspended and disgruntled ANC elites with Zuma's defence network (Grootes, 2021). Supra Mahumapelo, who served as Premier of the North-West province from May 2014 to May 2018, publicly positioned Zuma's imprisonment within the factional counter-narrative framing that characterised the July 2021 unrest. Speaking at the funeral of former MKMVA president Kebby Maphatsoe in Soweto on 5 September 2021, Mahumapelo stated that Maphatsoe had died deeply aggrieved about Zuma being jailed without trial, conveying Maphatsoe's dying conviction that such conduct had no place in a democracy and was historically associated with apartheid-era practices (Ndaba, 2021). His position reflects the role of provincial ANC elites in sustaining Zuma aligned networks beyond formal national leadership structures (Booyesen, 2015).

The primary tweet expresses frustration and disbelief at the outcome, while the secondary response affirms and amplifies the sentiment through participatory endorsement. These mobilisation dynamics extended into wider unrest following Zuma's imprisonment between 9 and 18 July 2021, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, where large scale looting and violent protests occurred in cities such as Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Soweto (Africa, Sokupa & Gumbi, 2021). Empirical studies link these events to a combination of political mobilisation, socio economic

grievances and coordination through both physical and digital networks (Africa, Sokupa & Gumbi, 2021; Vhumbunu, 2021). As for Africa, Gumbi and Sokupa (2021), the unrest was also subsequently linked in state investigations to social media driven mobilisation patterns, including content circulated by political actors connected to Zuma's broader support base.

Within digital discourse, this acquittal was not framed as a routine legal outcome but as evidence of prosecutorial incompetence or opportunism. The emphasis on the state's failure to prove its case fed into narratives that arrests were performative rather than purposeful, reinforcing perceptions of institutional bad faith. The thread format multiplied the emotional resonance of the initial claim, demonstrating participatory amplification as a discursive mechanism through which individual grievances are transformed into apparent collective conviction (Kinloch, Penn & Burkhard, 2020; Papacharissi, 2015). Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how digital publics contested NPA legitimacy by reframing both action and inaction as evidence of selectivity, constructing an interpretive framework in which no prosecutorial outcome could restore institutional credibility without visible, high-profile accountability (Rikhotso, 2021).



Zamxaka Nxarhuni @ZNxarhuni · Jul 9, 2024

A harrowing story of & by Ntethelelo Mkhize on @Newzroom405, a survivor of the #JULY2021UNREST racist attack by Indians from Phoenix. They also killed his friends. They were denied justice as the case was deliberately botched by both the @SAPoliceService & the @NPA_Prosecutes.

Figure 3: Testimonial amplification and institutional accusation framing the NPA as complicit in the denial of justice to Phoenix Massacre survivors

Figure 3 presents a text-based tweet that amplifies a testimonial narrative linked to the July 2021 unrest, specifically the violence in Phoenix commonly referred to as the Phoenix Massacre. The tweet foregrounds the account of Ntethelelo Mkhize, as a survivor of what is framed as a racially motivated attack in a Newzroom Afrika television feature on DStv Channel 405, while asserting that justice was denied due

to deliberate mishandling by both the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the NPA. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) (2024a) confirmed that the NPA received 65 dockets related to unrest-related deaths, yet very few Phoenix-related cases resulted in convictions, providing the factual grounding upon which testimonial counter-narratives of this kind were built and sustained within digital counter-public formations. Petla (2023) situates this prosecutorial shortcoming within a broader pattern of institutional under-performance that rendered the NPA particularly vulnerable to accusatory counter-narrative construction. The reference to a "harrowing story" establishes an affective entry point that privileges lived experience and emotional truth over formal legal discourse, consistent with what Papacharissi (2015) demonstrates as the organising role of shared emotional orientations including outrage, solidarity, and grief in structuring collective digital interpretation more powerfully than procedural argument. The claim that the case was "deliberately botched" shifts the narrative from possible procedural failure to intentional misconduct, constructing both the police and the NPA as active agents in the denial of justice rather than neutral or constrained institutions, which Van Dijk (2008) identifies as a characteristic strategy of elite manipulation framing through which institutional actors are repositioned as agents of illegitimate power operating beneath the appearance of lawful procedure. Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) further theorise this deployment of partial truth and implied credibility as being a defining feature of digital political misinformation, through which claims achieve the persuasive force of verified fact without submitting to evidentiary standards.

The use of the hashtag #PhoenixMassacre embeds the individual survivor account within the wider discursive network examined in Section 5.4.1, connecting a singular personal testimony to the collective counter-narrative formation through which the NPA's prosecutorial conduct was evaluated across the full four-year collection period. Zappavigna (2011) theorises this as ambient affiliation, through which hashtag attachment transforms an individual testimonial post into a node within a larger and self-reinforcing counter-public formation, while Phungula (2023b) confirms that survivor accounts function as particularly persuasive anchors for counter-narrative

claims because their affective authority is difficult for institutional communication operating in procedural registers to contest directly. Sunshine and Tyler (2003) argues that institutions which appear to apply the law inconsistently across racial and political lines lose public confidence regardless of the formal constitutional authority they exercise, and Figure 3 positions the NPA precisely within this evaluative framework of selective accountability and systemic racial bias. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) theorises that counter-narratives achieve their delegitimising force through cumulative repetition, as individually circulated claims accumulate into an apparently consensual public verdict about institutional conduct, while report of the national hearing into the July 2021 unrest (SAHRC, 2024a) demonstrates that the NPA's perceived failure to prosecute Phoenix-related violence with equivalent urgency to its pursuit of Zuma-aligned actors became the most powerful factual anchor for counter-narrative claims of selective racial justice during and after the July 2021 unrest, with Figure 3 illustrating how individual testimonial tweets contributed to the construction and maintenance of that anchor within the broader counter-narrative ecosystem.

5.3 NARRATIVE GENRES IN DIGITAL COUNTER-NARRATIVE PRODUCTION

Digital counter-narratives surrounding the July 2021 unrest were embedded within recognisable communicative genres that shaped how meaning was produced, stabilised, and contested. These genres functioned not merely as stylistic features but as organising logic through which institutional legitimacy was challenged and reconfigured. Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) define propaganda as the deliberate use of communication to influence public perception primarily through emotional appeal, while Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) establish populism as a discursive strategy that constructs moral opposition between the virtuous people and a corrupt elite. Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) distinguish misinformation from disinformation by intent, establishing the conceptual foundation for analysing both as distinct yet interrelated narrative genres. Within the digital public sphere, these genres operated simultaneously and intersected, reinforcing one another through repetition, emotional

appeal, and participatory amplification. The following sub-sections examine each genre in sequence, consistent with the analytical sequence established in Chapter 2.

5.3.1 Populism

Populism operates as a narrative genre in digital counter-narrative production by constructing political reality through a moral distinction between an authentic people and a corrupt or illegitimate elite. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) argue that in digital environments, populism does not require formal ideological coherence but functions as a narrative style that simplifies complex institutional processes into emotionally resonant moral oppositions. Legal authority is evaluated through perceived alignment with popular will and historical struggle rather than procedural reasoning, making populist counter-narratives structurally suited to the affordances of platforms such as X where immediate emotional resonance determines visibility (Papacharissi, 2021). In the South African digital context, Martinerie (2021) demonstrates that South African digital movements derive their populist force from framing present institutional action as continuous with the exclusions of the colonial and apartheid eras, while Aiseng (2024a) argues that Black Twitter functions as a culturally grounded counter-public in which populist critique is organised through shared historical referents. During the July 2021 unrest, populist counter-narratives framed prosecutorial action not as constitutional enforcement but as an assault on collective struggle. Chipkin and Vidojević (2026), corroborating Booysen (2015) confirm that this framing resonated powerfully with constituencies whose trust in post-apartheid institutions had been eroded by documented patterns of politically motivated governance failure.

Dima Msuthu @DimaMsuthu · Jul 14, 2023



Replying to @AdvDali_Mpofu

Trash doesn't deserve an audience or attention. We need to listen to those who seek #JusticeForZuma, not paid content. Zuma must be freed from perpetual Apartheid persecution

#FreeJacobZuma



Figure 4: Populist construction of the authentic people against institutional elites, deployed through multimodal composition

Figure 4 presents a tweet comprising three photographs and a written caption that together constitute a coherent populist counter-narrative directed at the legitimacy of Zuma's prosecution and the NPA's institutional authority. The caption reads: "Trash doesn't deserve an audience or attention. We need to listen to those who seek #JusticeForZuma, not paid content. Zuma must be freed from perpetual Apartheid persecution." The first photograph depicts a group of liberation struggle stalwarts including former Presidents Nelson Mandela, Jacob Zuma, and Cyril Ramaphosa, deployed as a visual invocation of collective liberation solidarity that positions Zuma within the founding moral generation of the democratic project. The second photograph juxtaposes Zuma with Koos Bekker, chairperson of Naspers, with an accompanying claim that Zuma was imprisoned for refusing to appear before a biased commission while Bekker refused the same commission without consequence. The

third photograph depicts white protesters carrying anti-Zuma placards alongside a drawing that represents Zuma with horns, visually positioning his opponents as those who demonise a liberation figure. The hashtag #JusticeForZuma anchors all three photographs within a single counter-narrative formation directed at the NPA as the instrument of Zuma's prosecution.

The populist logic of this tweet is particularly evident in its construction of communicative authenticity. By labelling dissenting or institutional voices as "paid content" the post deploys what Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) describe as the populist inversion of credibility, in which manufactured consensus is attributed to elite actors while genuine truth is reserved for authentic popular representatives. This pre-emptively delegitimises any institutional response as evidence of further corruption rather than legitimate rejoinder, foreclosing the possibility of deliberative engagement. The phrase "perpetual Apartheid persecution" performs the tweet's most analytically significant discursive act, linking the Constitutional Court's ruling directly to the historical experience of racialised state repression. Wale (2022) describes this as the knotting of past and present suffering, through which the accumulated moral authority of the anti-apartheid tradition is conferred on present-day political grievances. The Bekker comparison introduces apparent evidential weight for the racial selective justice claim. However, Africa Check (2021) identified this comparison as misleading because the Zondo Commission never formally summoned Bekker, making the two situations procedurally distinct. Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) classify this type of embedded claim as misinformation operating within a populist frame, illustrating how narrative genres intersect within single posts and mutually reinforce one another's delegitimising force.

5.3.2 Propaganda Framing as Counter-Narrative Arguments

Propaganda framing is a narrative genre functions through the strategic mobilisation of emotional appeals, selective historical references, and symbolic associations to advance particular political interpretations of institutional conduct without requiring adherence to strict factual verification. Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) define

propaganda as the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. In digital counter-narrative production, propaganda achieves its persuasive force not primarily through falsehood but through what Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) describe as the card stacking technique, in which selective presentation of evidence constructs an ideologically predetermined conclusion that appears empirically grounded. Digital platforms enhance the effectiveness of propagandistic narratives by enabling rapid circulation and repetition before institutional correction can gain traction, and by embedding them within algorithmic environments that favour emotionally resonant content regardless of factual accuracy. Phungula (2023b) confirms that propagandistic framing destabilises trust in prosecutorial institutions specifically in contexts where prior institutional failures have already created a receptive audience for delegitimising narratives.

Banele @Gentlements · Dec 1, 2023



Ramaphosa told Indians to kill black people in Phoenix during the unrest but he didn't get sentenced. [#PhoenixMassacre](#)



Figure 5: Propagandistic mobilisation of racialised symbolism and colonial continuity framing

Figure 5 presents a tweet featuring an interview of President Cyril Ramaphosa on SABC News, commenting on the violence in Phoenix, KwaZulu-Natal, where he

described perpetrators as defenders of their assets and community during the July 2021 unrest. This characterisation was widely criticised as exonerating perpetrators of what counter-narrative actors named the Phoenix Massacre. In this tweet, Ramaphosa is framed as an agent of white supremacy and continued colonialism of Black South Africans. Despite lacking evidentiary grounding, the post operates propagandistically by asserting culpability without proof and framing presidential leadership as complicit in racial violence against the Black community. The NPA, as the constitutional body that would be responsible for prosecuting Phoenix violence, is thereby implicated in this framing as an institution serving the same racial interest that the post attributes to Ramaphosa.

The analytical significance of this tweet lies in the specificity of its propagandistic technique. Ramaphosa's actual words are selectively excerpted and reframed as a racial declaration, stripped of their original administrative context and reinserted into a narrative of presidential complicity in Black death. Martinerie (2021) identifies the association of post-apartheid leadership with colonial continuity as a structurally effective propagandistic strategy in South African digital political communication, because it draws on the deep moral authority of anti-apartheid struggle discourse to delegitimise contemporary institutional actors. The persuasiveness of the claim does not require verifiable evidence because, as Aiseng (2024a) demonstrates, racial memory functions as moral currency in South African digital politics, lending authority to claims that would otherwise be vulnerable to factual challenge. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026), alongside Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) contends that repeated exposure to propagandistic narratives of this kind can erode foundational democratic norms by making selective institutional accountability appear structurally normal rather than politically exceptional.

5.3.3 Misinformation and Disinformation in Political Narrative

Misinformation refers to inaccurate or misleading information shared without deliberate intent to deceive, whereas disinformation denotes deliberate attempts to mislead audiences for ideological or political purposes. This conceptual distinction,

established by Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2021) and developed into an influential tripartite framework by Wardle and Derakhshan (2018), is analytically essential for understanding how false and misleading information functioned within the counter-narrative ecosystem surrounding the July 2021 unrest. Both forms of information disorder thrive in digital environments where platform incentive structures reward engagement over accuracy. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) establish that false news reaches broader audiences and penetrates deeper into information networks than accurate information, which means that counter-narratives incorporating misinformational elements are structurally positioned to outpace institutional correction. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) further demonstrate that the design of digital platforms enables sharing before verification, systematically disadvantaging factual correction.

During the July 2021 unrest, misinformation and disinformation operated not simply as inaccurate claims but as strategic discursive genres through which meaning, blame, and political responsibility were reconfigured. Rather than relying on explicit falsehood, they operated through implication, symbolic suggestion, and the strategic omission of context, enabling claims to circulate and gain endorsement without requiring verification. Cinelli et al. (2021) demonstrate that algorithmically curated environments amplify misinformation by embedding it within ideologically homogeneous networks where endorsement without scrutiny becomes the default response. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) further confirms that public trust in institutions is particularly vulnerable when misinformation narratives align with pre-existing frameworks of institutional scepticism, precisely the conditions that characterised the digital environment surrounding the NPA at the time of the July 2021 unrest.

nkalakatamalume@gmail.com @nkalakatamalume · Nov 22, 2021  ...
#July2021unrest instigators...,...



Figure 6: Disinformation articulated through implication and symbolic suggestion regarding elite coordination

Figure 6 presents a widely circulated photograph of a meeting between Jacob Zuma and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leadership including Julius Malema, taken on 5 February 2021 at Zuma's Nkandla homestead (Mtshali, 2021). The meeting occurred shortly after Zuma had publicly signalled his refusal to appear before the Zondo Commission (Ferreira, 2021), and became widely known in public discourse as the Nkandla tea date (Khoza, 2021). The gathering included Malema and senior EFF representatives and was followed by visits by political actors such as Bheki Cele, who was serving as Police Minister (News24Wire, 2021a), the leader of Black First Land First, Andile Mngxitama, who expressed support for Zuma's refusal to appear before Zondo Commission (Shomolekae, 2020). Malema had previously been one of Zuma's most vocal supporters during his ANC Youth League presidency before their relationship deteriorated after 2010, and the 2021 meeting was widely interpreted as signalling factional realignment ahead of anticipated legal and political contestation (Booyesen, 2015). Singh (2021) confirms that "in politics, there are no permanent

friends and enemies", reminding us of the March 1848 speech by the late and former British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, Henry John Temple in the House of Commons (Temple, 1848).

Within the counter-narrative logic of Figure 6, the photograph of the Nkandla tea meeting functions as a political artefact that appears to confirm what it only implies, specifically that there was coordinated elite orchestration of the July 2021 unrest. The physical proximity of Zuma and Malema is deployed as visual evidence of a conspiracy that the tweet does not need to articulate explicitly because the image performs the discursive work itself. This exemplifies what Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) term fabricated context within a plausible ideological frame, in which the juxtaposition of credible political actors lends apparent evidentiary weight to a claim that is, in fact, merely inferential. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) demonstrate that in politically polarised digital environments, fact-checking has limited efficacy because audiences whose distrust of institutional sources extends to the fact-checkers themselves are not accessible through conventional correction mechanisms. Roberts and Bosch (2023) further confirm that in African contexts, disinformation about political actors and institutional conduct gains particular traction within digital counter-public formations that already operate outside the evaluative norms of formal media and institutional communication.

5.3.4 Ideological Framing in Digital Counter-Narratives

Ideological framing operates as a narrative genre through which the political meanings of institutional events are systematically organised around pre-established evaluative frameworks derived from political identity, worldview, and collective history. Van Dijk (2008) theorises ideological framing as a foundational mechanism of political discourse, through which groups construct cognitive and evaluative representations of themselves and their adversaries that are then deployed to interpret institutional conduct in ways that confirm and reinforce their ideological positioning. In digital counter-narrative production, ideological framing does not require explicit ideological declaration. Instead, it operates through the selective activation of cultural symbols,

historical references, and value-laden vocabulary that signal ideological alignment to targeted audiences without requiring formal political articulation. Chilton (2004) identifies this process as a key feature of contemporary political discourse, in which ideology is most effective when it operates through what appears to be a natural or commonsense interpretation of events.

In the context of the July 2021 unrest, ideological framing within the dataset consistently activated two intersecting ideological formations. The first was a liberation ideology framework in which prosecutorial action against Zuma was positioned as an assault on the revolutionary project of national liberation and post-colonial democratic self-determination. The second was a racial ideological framework in which the same prosecutorial action was positioned as the continuation of apartheid-era racialised state power through contemporary legal instruments. Both frameworks drew on structurally embedded political identities that, as Mukhudwana (2020) demonstrates, render digital counter-narratives resistant to correction because they speak to foundational identity commitments rather than empirically contestable factual claims.

Taddeus N. Shithigona 🇳🇬 @_ndeyatila · Sep 5, 2021



It doesn't matter what crime is committed; treason; murder; terrorism et al, you can never jail someone without a trial. Today marks 61 days of the UNLAWFUL incarceration of President Zuma by the ConCourt of Suid Afrika, F.W de Klerk is a free man

[#FreeJacobZuma](#)



Figure 7: Ideological framing of legal accountability as racialised political persecution through liberation symbolism

Figure 7 presents a tweet exemplifying ideological framing through Zuma's iconic political performance of his dance and the singing of *Umshini Wam*, translated as "My Machine Gun". The song originates from the armed anti-apartheid struggle era, linked to MK, the armed wing of the ANC, and was popularised by Zuma during his rise in ANC politics where he performed it at rallies including during his rape trial and political campaigns (Gunner, 2009). The tweet juxtaposes Zuma's incarceration with the freedom of an apartheid-era figure, advancing a racial ideological framework in which the post-apartheid constitutional state's legal authority over Zuma is framed as racially continuous with apartheid-era patterns of repression. The deployment of *Umshini Wam* as the discursive anchor is ideologically significant beyond its literal meaning. The song's history links it to the armed liberation struggle, making its performance in the context of Zuma's arrest a symbolic ideological declaration that this is not a constitutional legal matter but a political and civilisational struggle in which liberation credentials trump procedural legality. Gunner (2009) confirms it operated as a

symbolic bridge between the liberation struggle era and Zuma's contested political ascent, mobilising deep affective identification among constituencies for whom the song's armed struggle associations signified authentic revolutionary belonging.

The ideological force of this framing is theorised by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) as the populist logic of moral inversion in which legal accountability is reconstituted as political aggression against the authentic will of the people. Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) and Bamberg and Andrews (2004) illuminate through CNT how the tweet delegitimises prosecutorial institutions by presenting an alternative ideological framework in which justice is defined through popular affective identification rather than constitutional process. Chipkin and Vidojević (2025) and Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) confirm that in South African digital politics, ideologically charged counter-narratives of this kind are significantly amplified when they align with structurally embedded political grievances, providing a factual substrate upon which ideological amplification is layered and rendered credible within specific counter-public formations. The broader implication for the NPA is that ideological framing operates beyond the reach of factual rebuttal because it addresses not the substance of legal decisions but the legitimacy of the evaluative framework through which those decisions are interpreted.

5.3.5 Historical Memory and Emotive symbolism in Political Counter-Narratives

Historical memory and emotive symbolism emerged as powerful discursive resources within digital counter-narratives surrounding the July 2021 unrest. Rather than engaging the prosecutorial process on legal or procedural terms, many social media users drew on the symbolic vocabulary of South Africa's liberation history to reframe the legal treatment of Zuma within a broader narrative of racialised persecution and political betrayal. Figure 8 constitutes one of the most analytically rich units in the dataset, operating as a composite visual counter-narrative that simultaneously invokes colonial humiliation, liberation struggle identity, political martyrdom, and collective resistance within a single multimodal post.



Dima Msuthu
@DimaMsuthu



This is no cult but real

#FreeJacobZuma from yourself, ANC of Ramaphosa & Colonial clerks,
Helen Suzman Foundation, Afriforum & Apartheid judiciary



10:09 AM · Dec 17, 2023 · 1,081 Views

Figure 8: Visual symbolism evoking victimhood and moral outrage

The first image is a reproduction of Brett Murray's 2012 oil painting *The Spear*, which depicted Zuma in a Lenin-esque pose with his genitals exposed (Freedberg, 2012). Exhibited at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg and reproduced on the front page of City Press, the painting triggered one of the most intense public controversies of the post-apartheid era, resulting in its defacement and a court battle over artistic freedom and human dignity. Wale (2022) and Martinerie (2021) illuminate its symbolic economy within post-apartheid political culture, in which racialised imagery of liberation figures subjected to state power accumulates affective and ideological authority through the knotting of historical memory with present political grievance, while Freedberg (2012) documents in detail the institutional responses it provoked, from the ANC's court injunction and City Press controversy to the painting's physical defacement and subsequent settlement.. Freedberg's (2012) analysis of the symbolic economy of the image, and its capacity to concentrate multiple historical grievances into a single affective moment, provides the theoretical grounding for how a nine-year-old painting could function as a powerful discursive anchor within counter-narratives

produced during the July 2021 unrest. By invoking this image within the context of Zuma's 2021 incarceration, the tweet performs a deliberate act of historical layering: the humiliation of Zuma is constructed not as an isolated legal event but as the latest instalment in a recurring pattern through which prominent Black liberation figures are repeatedly diminished by forces associated with the historically white establishment. Thatelo and Motsaabeth (2024) describe this as a symbolic amplification strategy, in which a culturally charged image is redeployed to concentrate accumulated historical grievance into a single affective moment.

The second image depicts Zuma at Estcourt Correctional Centre following his surrender on 8 July 2021. Its juxtaposition with *The Spear* constructs a visual argument about temporal continuity: the white gaze that once stripped Zuma of his dignity through art has now stripped him of his freedom through law. Fanon (1967) identified the colonial construction of the Black body as perpetually susceptible to both fascination and punishment by the historically dominant group, and this framing positions the Constitutional Court's ruling not as a neutral constitutional exercise but as an act embedded within a longer civilisational project of Black subjugation. Within this logic, the NPA ceases to be an independent prosecutorial authority and becomes the instrument through which that project is given contemporary legal form where incarceration is transformed into moral validation. (Soudien, 2015; Buntman, 2003). The third and fourth images present Zuma in political settings surrounded by supporters, projecting political resolve and unbroken liberation credentials. Rather than depicting a broken figure, these images construct a counter-narrative of resilience in which imprisonment functions as political martyrdom consistent with liberation iconography through which Robben Island imprisonment was historically understood. Buntman (2003) confirms this pattern: incarceration is transformed into moral validation. The final image depicts scenes of public uprising, transforming the composite tweet from a personal narrative into a collective political statement. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) demonstrate that the documentation of collective resistance functions simultaneously as a record of evidence whose authority rests on collective visual testimony rather than formal procedural verification, while

Papacharissi (2015) confirms that its circulation functions as an invitation to further participatory alignment within the counter-public formations through which it travels.. Kinloch, Penn and Burkhard (2020) confirm that such composite visual counter-narratives are not merely oppositional but reconstructive, forging alternative meanings and collective identities through participatory engagement in ways that no single textual claim could achieve on its own, while Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) provide direct empirical confirmation that visual political communication circulating on X during the July 2021 unrest was characterised by deliberate rhetorical strategies that sustained and intensified the delegitimising impact on the NPA well beyond what text-based counter-narrative production could sustain alone.

ThabizHotep Afrika @ThabizAfrika · Jan 29, 2025



It is disgusting the @NPA_Prosecutes that has failed to prosecute Indians who brutally killed Black people in what is termed #PhoenixMassacre, have resource to persecute ANC political opponents for Twitter Post

SA judiciary is a scam

#HandoffDuduZuma



Figure 9: Historical memory and emotive symbolism mobilised through liberation iconography and communal defence narrative

Figure 9 features Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, daughter of former President Zuma, in MK Party regalia and branding. She was charged with public incitement to commit violence as well as terrorism related charges linked to the 2021 July unrest following Zuma's arrest (eNCA, 2026). The tweet invokes Black Consciousness (BC) and populist narratives that portray women as targets and victims in political persecution (Phungula, 2023a), presenting an African feminist dimension in which women function as mother figures and community defenders (Magadla, 2023). In South African political culture, women in politics are frequently cast as mother figures who are targeted by the system when their political families are under institutional attack. Zuma-Sambudla is positioned as a victim of her father's political battles in the ANC, evoking parallels with support for former President Mandela from his daughter Zinzi Mandela. The tweet's central discursive thrust is an implicit question of prosecutorial proportionality, it frames the NPA as willing to pursue Zuma's daughter while apparently lacking either the will or resources to prosecute those responsible for the deaths of 36 people during the Phoenix violence (Majola, 2023).

Historical grievance and contemporary legal critique are fused into a single narrative of racialised injustice. The absence of Phoenix prosecutions is interpreted not as evidentiary complexity but as deliberate institutional neglect. Martinerie (2021) identifies the strategic invocation of liberation credentials as a defining feature of South African digital counter-narrative production: it anchors present contestation within the moral authority of the anti-apartheid tradition, making prosecutorial action appear as a continuation of racialised state violence rather than a constitutional legal process. Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024), examining visual political posters circulated on X during the same unrest, confirm that MK imagery and Afrocentric visual rhetoric were systematically deployed by RET faction members to construct factional meaning and oppose institutional adversaries, demonstrating that Figure 9's visual symbolic strategy belongs to a broader and deliberately organised communicative pattern. Zuma-Sambudla's trial commenced at the Durban High Court in November 2025 and resumed in April 2026, with proceedings focusing specifically on the role of

her social media posts in inciting the violence that accompanied the unrest (Seeletsa, 2026; Mabaso, 2025). As of the date of this study's completion, no verdict has been delivered, and the trial remains ongoing with further dates scheduled through to September 2026. The prosecution of a political figure on the basis of her digital communicative conduct constitutes a direct institutional response to the counter-narrative ecosystem this chapter examines, one whose ambiguous outcome ensures that the NPA's prosecutorial authority in relation to the July 2021 unrest remains an active and unresolved object of contestation within the digital public sphere well beyond the acute phase of the unrest itself.

5.4 DIGITAL PARTICIPATION AND NARRATIVE AMPLIFICATION

The 20 tweets constituting the dataset in this study did not circulate as isolated expressions of individual opinion. They functioned as nodes within a larger participatory network through which counter-narratives about the NPA were collectively produced, endorsed, and amplified into discursive formations that acquired the apparent weight and authority of public consensus. What is analytically observable across the dataset is a consistent dynamic in which individual posts attracted replies, quote-tweets, and repost chains that extended their reach beyond the original audience and transformed personal grievance into communal political verdict. This dynamic is theorised by Papacharissi (2015) through her reformulation of the DPST for networked environments, in which she argues that the public sphere in digital contexts is not a single unified domain of rational deliberation but a networked formation of multiple, overlapping, and often conflicting counter-publics, each operating according to its own communicative norms and evaluative standards. The counter-publics identifiable within the dataset, specifically those organised around #FreeJacobZuma, #PhoenixMassacre, and #July2021Unrest, operated through precisely these alternative norms, in which emotional resonance and symbolic coherence determined the credibility and circulation of claims rather than evidentiary accuracy or procedural argumentation.

Fraser's (1990) foundational critique of the Habermasian public sphere is directly illuminated by the data. Fraser (1990) argues that deliberative democratic ideals systematically disadvantage marginalised groups by privileging modes of communication, forms of reasoning, and institutional registers that are accessible primarily to socially dominant actors. In the dataset, users who contested the NPA's legitimacy through hashtag networks, multimodal visual posts, and affective commentary were doing precisely what Fraser (1990) theorises as the formation of subaltern counter-publics, constructing parallel discursive arenas in which their alternative interpretations of Zuma's prosecution and the Phoenix violence could be rehearsed, circulated, and legitimised outside the formal institutional channels in which the NPA communicates. The discursive authority that counter-narrative claims achieved within these formations was generated not through formal argumentative logic but through participatory accumulation, specifically through the visible evidence of widespread sharing, affective endorsement, and hashtag repetition that functioned within the counter-public as social proof of the claim's validity.

PT provides the second explanatory framework necessary for a complete account of this dynamic. Freire (1970) establishes participation not as passive reception of political messages but as an active, dialogical, and transformative practice through which people develop critical consciousness about their social and political conditions and act collectively to contest the power relations they experience as oppressive. Arnstein (1969) operationalises this insight through her *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, demonstrating that meaningful participation involves genuine redistribution of evaluative authority rather than merely ceremonial forms of civic engagement. Applied to digital political communication as per Carpentier (2011), these insights illuminate a critical feature of the dataset, where social media users were not simply reporting or reflecting pre-formed views about the NPA. They were actively and constitutively producing the discursive environment within which the NPA's institutional legitimacy was evaluated, contested, and in the most consequential instances structurally eroded. Castells (2009) characterises this as the defining feature of networked political communication, in which digital participatory discourse does not supplement formal

institutional communication but actively competes with it for audience and authority. The data in this study provides a concrete illustration of how that competition operated during the July 2021 unrest, with participatory counter-narrative formations achieving a volume, velocity, and emotional intensity of circulation that the NPA's formal communication channels could not match or effectively address in real time.

Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) and Brady et al. (2021) theorises the aggregate effect of these participatory dynamics as cascading legitimacy effects, in which individual acts of endorsement, sharing, and affective commentary collectively produce the appearance of popular consensus even when the underlying counter-narrative claims are contested or factually misleading. The evidence for this dynamic within the dataset is observable in the sequential endorsement threads visible in Figures 12 and 13, in the repost chains extending the reach of the two tweets beyond their original accounts, and in the sustained recurrence of the same evaluative framings across tweets collected from different users across different points within the four-year collection period. Each of these participatory acts added to the apparent social weight of the counter-narrative, constructing what Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) describe as collective narrative formations in which the cumulative effect of participatory amplification becomes analytically inseparable from the narrative content being amplified. The practical consequence for the NPA was that it faced not merely individual critics but the appearance of a sustained and collectively affirmed public verdict about its institutional conduct, a verdict whose authority derived from participatory accumulation rather than from any single authoritative source.

5.4.1 Hashtag Mobilisation

The most analytically significant mechanism through which digital participation was converted into narrative amplification in the dataset was hashtag mobilisation. Zappavigna (2011) theorises hashtag use as ambient affiliation, through which users create imagined community bonds around shared value orientations without requiring direct interaction or organisational membership. The data substantiates this theory directly: the five core hashtags active in the dataset, specifically #July2021Unrest,

#July2021Riots, #FreeJacobZuma, #PhoenixMassacre, and #ZumaUnrest, each encoded a distinct political positioning and moral evaluation of the NPA that users activated through the simple act of hashtag attachment, signalling communal membership and narrative alignment simultaneously. Roberts and Bosch (2023) establish that hashtag-driven aggregation on X is a primary mechanism through which South African digital counter-publics achieve visibility and narrative coherence, and this study's dataset offers evidence consistent with that claim in the specific context of prosecutorial contestation.

What the data additionally reveals, and what extends beyond what the core hashtags alone suggest, is the emergence of a dense network of secondary and derivative hashtags that proliferated around the five primary hashtags throughout the collection period. These included hashtags directly naming accused actors such as #DuduzileZumaSambudla and #NgizweMchunu, which connected individual prosecutorial decisions to the broader counter-narrative formation of selective justice. Hashtags invoking liberation politics and factional alignment such as #HandsOffZuma, #JusticeForZuma, #WeSeeYou, #ZumaFreedom, and #MKParty emerged as amplification nodes that routed users from specific factional formations into the broader counter-public. Hashtags organised around the Phoenix violence such as #PhoenixKillings, #JusticeForPhoenixVictims, and #PhoenixMassacreJustice created a parallel counter-narrative axis that contested the NPA's prosecutorial prioritisation through a racial justice framing distinct from the Zuma-centred formations. Hashtags organised around the unrest's economic and social dimensions such as #July2021Looting, #KZNUrest, and #GautengUnrest extended the counter-narrative formation beyond explicitly political actors to include participants constructing the unrest as evidence of state failure requiring public explanation and accountability. Phungula (2023b) confirms that hashtag proliferation of this kind is a defining structural feature of South African digital counter-public formations during political crises, with each derivative hashtag functioning as a sub-network that connects specialised audiences to the primary counter-narrative formation while retaining its own specific discursive logic.

The analytical significance of this hashtag ecology for the study's central argument about the NPA's institutional legitimacy is that it demonstrates how counter-narrative production extended well beyond the political actors most directly associated with Zuma's prosecution to include a diverse range of participatory actors whose primary grievances were racial, economic, communal, and factional rather than specifically prosecutorial. Each of these actors attached their grievances to the hashtag network, contributing participatory weight to the counter-narrative formation while drawing on it for the legitimising authority of apparent popular consensus. Rikhotso (2021) situates the NPA's vulnerability as a convergence focal point within a broader pattern of institutional under-performance that made it structurally susceptible to serving as the common frame for diverse political grievances, while Petla (2023) confirms that prosecutorial counter-narrative claims achieved resonance precisely because they tapped into pre-existing public disillusionment that extended well beyond the specifically prosecutorial to encompass racial, economic, communal, and factional formations that would not otherwise have been directed at a prosecutorial institution.

Figure 10 illustrates how hashtag mobilisation appeared to operate, within this tweet, through the continuous and cumulative reassertion of a morally charged accusation directed at political actors and institutions, while exposing the NPA's perceived inaction or silence.

Truth and Solidarity Movement Mem... @Mehme... · Jun 20, 2024 🔄 ...
 Ian Cameron celebrated the racist [#PhoenixMassacre](#) killers and called them heroes for killing black people.

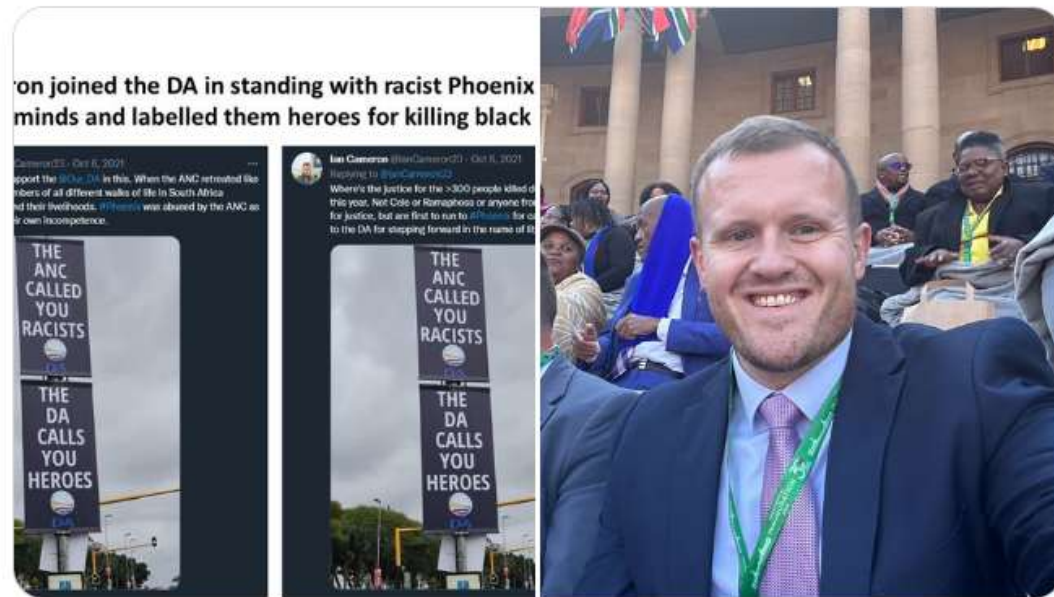


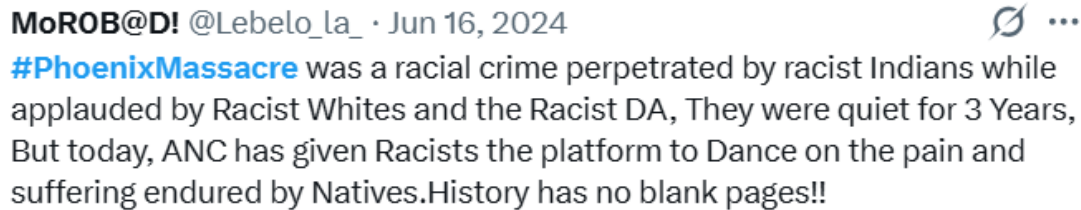
Figure 10. Repetition and hashtag mobilisation through persistent moral accusation

The above tweet is presented as a composite of two images that work together to construct a politically charged message within the discursive space shaped by the July 2021 unrest. The first image shows placards attributed to the Democratic Alliance (DA) bearing a statement that contrasts accusations of racism with a counter-characterisation of certain actors as heroes, a slogan that became contentious in the aftermath of the Phoenix Massacre. The second image depicts Cameron smiling in a group photograph outside what appears to be the Union Buildings in Pretoria, with the South African flag visible in the background, visually situating him within a space of national authority and constitutional legitimacy. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) demonstrate that multimodal compositions of this kind achieve a persuasive force and shareability that textual argument alone cannot replicate, because the combination of image and text generates layered meanings that are simultaneously politically charged and emotionally accessible to digital audiences.

Ian Cameron is a South African Member of Parliament (MP) representing the DA and serving as Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Police (Parliament of South Africa (2026)). He joined the DA in March 2024 (Goodall, 2024) following his three years of service as Director of Community Safety at Action Society (Action Society, 2024), a civil rights organisation founded in 2019 and advocating for policy changes and reform within the justice system. He rose to prominence through civil society activism focused on crime prevention and transitioned into formal politics, carrying a strong law and order orientation into his parliamentary role. His political stance frequently emphasised state accountability and critiques of governance failures, positioning him within the DA's opposition to the ANC. Within this framework, his public image was often tied to issues of security, justice, and institutional performance. The visual placement of Cameron before a symbol of state authority functions as what Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) describe as symbolic amplification, in which cultural and institutional symbols are strategically deployed to invest a political claim with credibility and moral weight that exceeds its literal content. Within the counter-narrative formations active in the dataset, this symbolic positioning became available for appropriation and recontextualisation, as users deployed the image within hashtag networks to produce a reading of Cameron's institutional alignment that contests the one the photograph was originally intended to convey.

The persistent circulation of this composite image through networked hashtag formations extended prosecutorial critique from a named political figure to the broader criminal justice system, with the hashtag architecture ensuring that the claim remained visible and searchable across the counter-public long after its initial circulation. Hyvarinen (2021) demonstrates that in digital spaces, the tellability of a narrative is determined not by evidentiary standards but by cultural resonance and emotional authenticity, which explains why this repeatedly asserted accusation accumulated credibility within hashtag-driven counter-public formations through frequency of reiteration rather than argumentative elaboration.

Figure 11 extends the analysis by introducing a text-based tweet that intensifies the counter-narrative through explicit racial framing and collective attribution of responsibility, demonstrating how hashtag-enabled repetition is further compounded by historical layering.



MoROB@DI @Lebelo_la_ · Jun 16, 2024

#PhoenixMassacre was a racial crime perpetrated by racist Indians while applauded by Racist Whites and the Racist DA, They were quiet for 3 Years, But today, ANC has given Racists the platform to Dance on the pain and suffering endured by Natives. History has no blank pages!!

Figure 11: Hashtag-enabled repetition through historical layering and moral condemnation

The tweet in Figure 11 contains no accompanying imagery yet constructs a narrative of considerable moral force through its explicit racial framing and the extension of culpability across racial and political groups, including the DA. Aiseng (2024a) demonstrates that racialised reframings of political conduct are a defining feature of South African digital counter-public discourse, in which racial identity functions as both an explanatory framework and a moral evaluative standard through which institutional actors and political parties are assessed. The reference to a three-year period of silence and the assertion that history has no blank pages situates the tweet within a longer temporal narrative of injustice and unresolved accountability, constructing the NPA's contemporary inaction as the latest chapter in a longer narrative of racialised institutional impunity that stretches back through the apartheid era. Wale (2022) theorises this as the knotting of past and present suffering, through which accumulated historical grievance is linked to present institutional failure to produce a lived affective condition of betrayal that grants contemporary claims the moral authority of historically documented persecution. Martinerie (2021) confirms that this deployment of historical memory to legitimate present grievance is a structural feature of South African digital counter-narrative production, in which liberation struggle narratives provide the moral reservoir from which present-day claims of racialised institutional failure draw their resonance and persuasive force. This historical layering

transforms the NPA's specific prosecutorial decisions into evidence of a structural and enduring pattern rather than a situational or individual failure, while the tweet's implicit invocation of dissatisfaction with the NPA's Phoenix-related prosecutorial record is substantiated by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) (2024) finding that the absence of convictions in Phoenix-related cases provided the factual substrate upon which this kind of sustained counter-narrative claim was built and maintained over time. In reinforcing the moral weight of the #PhoenixMassacre hashtag as a site of ongoing public memory and contestation, the tweet in Figure 11 illustrates what Phungula (2023b) identifies as the collective witnessing function of hashtag mobilisation in South African digital counter-public formations, through which individual expressions of grievance are transformed into sustained communal demands for institutional accountability that outlast the immediate crisis that generated them.

Cinelli et al. (2021) confirm that the algorithmic architecture of X structurally accelerates this virality by amplifying high-engagement content regardless of evidentiary accuracy, creating an environment in which participatory amplification through hashtag networks deepens apparent counter-narrative consensus at a rate and scale that institutional communication cannot match in real time. Roberts and Bosch (2023) and Bonilla and Rosa (2015) further demonstrate that hashtag-mediated political communication in African contexts functions as a form of networked solidarity-building that sustains counter-narrative formations across the temporal distance between the precipitating crisis and its eventual institutional resolution, which explains why the hashtag formations identified in this dataset remained analytically significant across the full four-year collection period and not merely during the acute phase of the July 2021 unrest itself.

5.5 ANALYSIS OF DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES IN DIGITAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Discursive strategies refer to the communicative techniques and rhetorical practices through which social media users produce, frame, and sustain particular interpretations of institutional conduct and political events within digital spaces (Van Dijk, 2008; Chilton, 2004). While Section 5.3 examined the narrative genres through which counter-narratives were organised as communicative forms, and Section 5.4 examined the participatory dynamics through which they were amplified, this section examines the level of communicative technique, specifically how individual tweets mobilise language, imagery, and rhetorical positioning to generate the delegitimising effects documented across the dataset. Chilton (2004) defines critical discourse analysis as the examination of how language and communication constructs, contests, and legitimises political power, authority, and identity. Van Dijk (2008) extends this to demonstrate how political discourse specifically constructs versions of social reality that serve particular political ends through the selective deployment of presupposition, framing, attribution, and moral evaluation. The four discursive strategies examined in this section, namely, emotive framing, scapegoating, symbolic amplification, and participatory engagement, represent the primary communicative mechanisms through which the NPA's institutional legitimacy was contested and eroded within the dataset.

While the preceding sections focused on dominant narrative genres, this section shifts attention to the level of technique, examining how emotive framing, scapegoating, symbolic amplification, repetition and virality, and participatory engagement were deployed to construct and sustain counter-narratives about the NPA. Across the dataset, these strategies enabled social media users to simplify complex legal processes into emotionally legible moral stories, elevating affective resonance and symbolic association over procedural reasoning.

5.5.1 Emotive Framing

Emotive framing emerged as the most pervasive discursive strategy in the dataset, operating across all five narrative genres examined in Section 5.3 and functioning as the primary mechanism through which complex institutional processes were made legible and emotionally compelling to digital audiences. Rather than engaging prosecutorial processes on legal or evidential terms, emotive framing mobilised personal narratives of trauma, victimhood, moral outrage, and communal solidarity to indict legal institutions for perceived failure or complicity. Papacharissi (2015) demonstrates that political expression in digital spaces is driven as much by emotional intensity as by deliberative argument, and that emotional expression functions as a form of political participation through which shared evaluative frameworks are constructed and sustained across networked publics. Figure 12 represents one of the most emotionally direct and analytically rich instances of emotive framing in the dataset.



Figure 12: Emotional absolutism driven by affective loyalty.

Figure 12 presents a tweet by Zuma-Sambudla, daughter of former President Jacob Zuma, expressing an intensely personal register of protection, urgency, and collective mobilisation in response to her father's incarceration. The phrasing "Until @PresJGZuma is FREE. SAFE. ALIVE!" deploys heightened emotional intensity through capitalisation and fragmented punctuation, constructing Zuma simultaneously as unjustly detained and physically endangered. This rhetorical construction shifts the discursive frame decisively away from a legal or constitutional matter and towards one of urgent moral concern, encouraging audiences to respond affectively rather than analytically. The invocation of vulnerability and threat personalises the broader political conflict, making it immediately emotionally resonant within the digital counter-publics through which the tweet was circulated. Turner (1967) theorises that symbols operating at the sensory (orectic) pole activate desires, feelings, and emotional responses that are analytically distinct from the ideological content of political arguments, and it is precisely this sensory register that Figure 12 exploits through its language of bodily danger and parental protection.

The inclusion of liberation struggle slogans such as "Amandla" and "Azishe Cdes," alongside raised fist emojis, amplifies the emotive framing by drawing on the symbolic repertoire of the anti-apartheid resistance tradition. These elements activate collective memory and solidarity, aligning the present incarceration with past political imprisonments and positioning support for Zuma within a morally legitimised tradition of popular resistance. Wale (2022) and Martinerie (2021) confirms that liberation iconography of precisely this kind functions in South African digital political communication not merely as historical reference but as a mechanism of contemporary moral legitimisation, transferring the accumulated symbolic authority of the liberation struggle to present-day political claims. In this way, emotion is not incidental to meaning-making but constitutive of it, binding individual sentiment to a shared political identity and intensifying narrative uptake within digital publics in ways that institutional communication operating in procedural registers cannot effectively counter.

The accompanying poster deepens this strategy through visual and colour symbolism. The directive "SHUT DOWN KZN 9 July 2021" introduces urgency and action, while the use of colours associated with MK evokes militancy and historical resistance linked to the MK. This visual framing transforms emotional expression into a call for collective mobilisation, channelling outrage and solidarity into political action. The convergence of text, colour, and symbolism illustrates how emotive framing can operate multimodally in a tweet of this kind, combining linguistic intensity with visual cues to produce a compelling and shareable counter-narrative artefact. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) describe multimodal digital posts of this kind as producing layered meanings that are emotionally compelling and highly shareable across networked publics precisely because they speak to shared emotional frameworks rather than contested factual claims, which explains both the rapid circulation of the tweet and its sustained presence within the counter-narrative formations active throughout the collection period.

What makes the tweet in Figure 12 analytically distinctive from the populist examples examined in Section 5.3 is the specific register through which its delegitimising force is generated. Where populist framing constructs an abstract moral opposition between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite, emotive framing as deployed by the tweet operates through the intimate emotional relationships of family loyalty, parental duty, and communal protection. The tweet draws an implicit parallel between Zuma-Sambudla's public advocacy for her imprisoned father and the widely recognised role of Zindziswa Mandela in publicly championing Nelson Mandela during his imprisonment on Robben Island, a parallel that invokes a specific and emotionally resonant cultural script through which the daughter of a liberation figure is expected to defend his honour and fight for his freedom. Justice is therefore articulated not as a procedural or constitutional concept but through the visceral language of familial love and protective instinct, which then becomes the template for collective moral conviction within the counter-public. Freire (1970) theorises this as the dialogical dimension of participatory communication, in which personal emotional experience

becomes the foundation for collective political consciousness rather than remaining confined to private sentiment.

The analytical implication for this study is that emotive framing of this kind operates beyond the reach of factual rebuttal, because it addresses the evaluative frameworks through which the NPA's conduct is experienced rather than the specific legal or procedural claims through which that conduct might be defended.

5.5.2 Scapegoating and Targeting of Institutional Actors

Scapegoating constitutes a prominent discursive strategy in the dataset, in which responsibility for perceived injustice is redirected from individual actors to institutional structures. In the context of the July 2021 unrest, this strategy was deployed against both the NPA and the Constitutional Court, with digital users framing prosecutorial and judicial decisions as the precipitating causes of violence and social breakdown. Figure 13 presents a tweet advancing scapegoating grounded in evidentiary scepticism.

warren Manning 🇳🇬🇮🇪🇪🇳🇵🇮🇹🇷 @IzweWarren · Jan 30, 2024 ...
@SAHRCCommission how is this possible without evidence?
#July2021Riots



Figure 13: Institutions reframed as politically compromised

The above tweet directed at the SAHRC is situated within the ongoing legal processes following the July 2021 unrest, particularly the Pietermaritzburg High Court appearance of 65 alleged instigators on 30 January 2024 (Duma, 2024). The retweeted post frames the accused as facing severe charges including terrorism, sedition, and public violence, while the accompanying image of multiple legal counsel visually emphasises the scale and seriousness of the case. By questioning how arrests could occur without evidence, the tweet foregrounds doubt about the integrity of the prosecutorial process led by the NPA. The explicit tagging of the SAHRC invokes its constitutional mandate to monitor human rights and positions it as a potential arbiter in assessing whether due process has been upheld. Within this context, the tweet reflects the discursive strategy of scapegoating by reframing the accused not as perpetrators but as unjustly targeted individuals who are bearing

responsibility for a broader and more complex socio-political crisis. Scapegoating operates here through the displacement of blame from systemic failures, including governance breakdown and security lapses, onto a select group of individuals whose prosecution becomes symbolically loaded. The presence of high-profile figures such as Zuma-Sambudla among those appearing in court and supported by Ngizwe Mchunu (Mavuso, 2025) reinforces this narrative, as their visibility enables the construction of a personalised injustice that can be more easily mobilised within digital counter-publics..

The visual inclusion of a large defence team further strengthens this framing by suggesting a collective mobilisation against perceived state overreach, while also signalling that the accused require substantial legal protection against potentially unjust charges. In this way, the tweet does not merely question evidentiary standards but constructs a broader narrative in which the legal system itself is implicated in unfairly assigning blame. This aligns with scholarship on scapegoating in political communication, where individuals or groups are discursively positioned as convenient bearers of collective responsibility in order to simplify complex crises and redirect public scrutiny (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2019; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Van Dijk, 2008). From the perspective of the study's focus on counter-narratives concerning the NPA, the tweet contributes to the delegitimisation of prosecutorial authority by framing legal action as selective and unjust. The appeal to the SAHRC amplifies this effect by invoking a rights-based discourse that contrasts sharply with the severity of the charges, thereby intensifying perceptions of imbalance and injustice. As a result, scapegoating functions here not only as a narrative about the accused but as a broader critique of institutional power, where the NPA is positioned as complicit in constructing and sustaining a politically convenient account of the unrest.

5.5.3 Symbolic Amplification



Figure 14: Graphic visual testimony used as symbolic amplification

Figure 14 illustrates symbolic amplification as a discursive strategy in counter-narrative production within the context of the Phoenix Massacre and the broader July 2021 unrest. The tweet begins with the assertion "We cannot unsee what we have seen during #PhoenixMassacre," which constructs memory as irreversible and morally binding, thereby transforming lived or circulated accounts into permanent evidence of injustice. The repetition of negation such as "cannot unsee" and "cannot unknow" intensifies emotional certainty and closes down interpretive ambiguity, positioning the South African justice system as already known and judged through collective experience rather than institutional process.

The tweet further escalates meaning through highly emotive and racialised language describing Black people being "bludgeoned to death" and "hunted down by group of

blood thirsty Indians". This language functions as symbolic amplification by intensifying violence through metaphorical and moral framing, turning a complex and contested event into a simplified binary of victims and perpetrators. The accompanying multimodal content, consisting of two images and two videos, extends this amplification by visually representing scenes from Phoenix involving armed individuals, vehicles, and residential settings. These visuals are presented as evidentiary anchors that reinforce the narrative, aligning with Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) and Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles's (2020) analysis of visual modality, where perceived realism strengthens interpretive authority because visual content assembles evidence whose authority rests on the immediacy of visual perception rather than formal procedural verification. The depiction of armed women, firearms, and large residential properties further operates as symbolic signifiers of defence, power, and territorial control, reinforcing the constructed narrative of organised violence.

From an analytical perspective, symbolic amplification in this tweet works by fusing textual intensity with visual immediacy to produce a heightened moral register in which perception is equated with truth. The repeated emphasis on "what we have seen" and "what we know" displaces institutional verification processes associated with the NPA, replacing them with experiential certainty. This reflects Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics, where emotional resonance rather than evidentiary validation drives narrative circulation and uptake. At the same time, the framing that follows suggests that state responses are inconsistent or unjust, reinforcing broader counter-narratives of selective accountability. In this way, symbolic amplification does not only intensify emotional engagement but also strengthens delegitimising interpretations of justice institutions by embedding them within a visually and emotionally saturated account of contested violence.

Here, graphic imagery operates as symbolic proof of systemic injustice. The language of irreversible witnessing transforms visual content into moral evidence, positioning trauma as self-authenticating and beyond contestation. Rather than engaging

evidentiary standards, the counter-narrative invokes the weight of lived experience and collective suffering to foreclose institutional explanation. This technique reflects what Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) describe as the mobilisation of protest imagery as symbolic politics, in which visual representations function not merely as documentation but as normative claims about whose lives are recognised and whose violence is rendered legible within the criminal justice system. The deployment of graphic imagery in this context activates the racialised dimensions of South Africa's historical experience of state violence, lending the counter-narrative a moral authority that institutional denial struggles to contest (Aiseng, 2024a; Martinerie, 2021).

5.5.4 Participatory Engagement

Participatory engagement as a discursive strategy refers to the active and interactive communicative practices through which users endorse, share, and reinterpret counter-narrative content, creating interactive discursive networks that reinforce the perceived legitimacy and apparent social weight of counter-narrative claims. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020), Bonilla and Rosa (2015) and Carpentier (2011) characterise the strategic appropriation of social media platform infrastructure for sustained political contestation as a form of platformed participation, in which communicative tools and affordances of platforms are repurposed as instruments of counter-public political action. Papacharissi (2015) and Fraser (1990) observe that participatory digital practices have fundamentally altered the dynamics of democratic contestation by enabling loosely organised counter-publics to exert sustained narrative pressure on institutions without the formal organisational structures that characterised earlier forms of political mobilisation. Figure 15 exemplifies participatory engagement through the convergence of platform governance mechanisms and demands for prosecutorial intervention.

Kerry Cullinan @kerrycullinan11 · Aug 3, 2021



So many people have reported @DZumaSambudla and got the same confirmatory tweet. It's time for @Twitter and @NPA_Prosecutes to act against one of the chief instigators as her corrupt old man spoils for a new confrontation by refusing a virtual court appearance. #ZumaUnrest



Figure 15. Social media platform governance appropriated as participatory civic action

The tweet in Figure 15 exemplifies participatory engagement through the convergence of platform governance mechanisms and demands for prosecutorial intervention. The reference to mass reporting and the confirmation screenshot within the tweet serves as collective proof of civic action, transforming a technically private and non-public platform action into a visible and politically charged communal practice. By framing mass account reporting as civic intervention directed at the NPA's perceived inaction, the tweet demonstrates how participatory communication transforms individual dissatisfaction into organised collective action within the digital public sphere. The hashtag #ZumaUnrest operate as a symbolic anchor ensuring that a technical platform interaction is understood as a politically motivated act of counter-public accountability.

Participatory engagement in this context also reinforces perceptions of selective justice by highlighting the responsiveness of private digital governance against the perceived sluggishness of state legal institutions, constructing an implicit contrast that deepens scepticism toward the NPA's independence and institutional resolve.

5.5.5 Moral Dichotomies

Moral dichotomies operate as a discursive strategy through which digital counter-narratives divide political and institutional actors into irreconcilable moral opposites, specifically the virtuous and the corrupt, the protectors and the perpetrators, the abandoned and their abandoners. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) argue that in political communication, this binary logic achieves its greatest persuasive force not when it is declared abstractly but when it is personalised, attached to named individuals whose public visibility makes the accusation immediately emotionally legible to the digital publics that encounter it. In digitally mediated environments; this personalisation is intensified by platforms that privilege affective resonance over deliberative complexity, amplifying morally absolute content at a speed and scale that institutional responses cannot match (Papacharissi, 2021). The tweet in Figure 16 constitutes one of the most analytically complete examples of this strategy in the dataset, constructing through multimodal composition a political universe in which ambiguity has been rendered not merely absent but morally inadmissible.

A Man has a name @sarel_lee · Jan 19, 2024



Never forget that Cyril Ramaphosa & John Steenhuisen applauded the murderers who killed our people during the [#PhoenixMassacre](#). ANC & DA hate African people with a passion. Africans should never again be caught in a situation where they are not legally armed to defend themselves..



Indian people, she testified, simply did not want to see African people that day. They attacked them on sight, even those who were known to them as neighbours.



Figure 16: Moral dichotomy through multimodal construction of bipartisan racial complicity

The above tweet's moral binary is constructed cumulatively across its four visual and textual registers. The embedded video, in which Ramaphosa characterises Phoenix perpetrators as defenders of their property and businesses, is recontextualised within the tweet's compositional architecture so that a presidential statement is transformed into prosecutorial exoneration and exoneration into complicity. The first photograph deepens this indictment by presenting testimony that "Indian people, she testified, simply did not want to see African people that day, attacking them on sight, including those who were known to them as neighbours", embedding the racial binary within a judicial register that codes it as established fact. The second photograph of a burnt vehicle and an armed figure functions as what Thatelo and Motsaabethe (2024) describe as visual proof of systemic injustice, investing the counter-narrative with the apparent authority of documentary evidence. The third photograph, a DA placard reading that the ANC called participants racists while the DA calls them heroes, is the post's most explicit enactment of moral dichotomy, presenting a party's own public words as institutional evidence of bipartisan collusion in the legitimisation of racial

killing. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) demonstrate that multimodal compositions of precisely this kind achieve a persuasive force and shareability that textual argument alone cannot replicate, because the layering of image, text, and testimony generates meanings that are simultaneously politically charged and emotionally accessible to broad counter-publics.

What distinguishes this tweet from mere accusation is the discursive economy with which the binary is made to appear self-evidencing. Entman and Usher (2018) argue that in digital environments the power to construct meaning has been distributed across vast networks of non-institutional actors who deploy selective emphasis, specifically the strategic highlighting of particular facts, symbols, and historical references, to make ideologically predetermined conclusions appear empirically grounded. The video is real; the testimony is drawn from a public record; the car is burnt; the placard was carried openly. Each element is individually verifiable. Yet their arrangement, and the caption's verdict that both the ANC and the DA hate African people with a passion, transforms selection into conviction. Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) identify this technique as card stacking, referring to the cumulative presentation of evidence so arranged that only one moral conclusion appears possible, and it is here deployed with considerable sophistication. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) and Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) further demonstrate that counter-narratives derive their delegitimising authority not from evidentiary strength alone but from their resonance with pre-existing frameworks of institutional scepticism, which in this context are abundant and structurally embedded.

The call to arms with which the tweet concludes, that "Africans should never again be caught in a situation where they are not legally armed to defend themselves", performs the final and most consequential function of moral dichotomy as a discursive strategy. Having convicted the state's most prominent political principals of complicity in racial killing, the post forecloses any remaining space for institutional legitimacy. Fraser (1990) argues that subaltern counter-publics form in response to dominant institutions that have systematically failed to recognise the knowledge claims of marginalised

communities; within this evaluative framework, the demand for legal self-armament is not an incitement but the logical conclusion of a moral binary in which the state has already been found guilty of abandonment. For the NPA, the structural implication is damaging. An institution whose political principals are publicly identified as applauders of racial murder cannot, within the same evaluative framework, be positioned as a credible arbiter of justice for the communities it failed to protect. Aiseng (2024a) confirms that in South African digital counter-public formations, racial moral binaries of precisely this kind function not as rhetorical exaggeration but as epistemic claims, assertions about whose knowledge of harm appears legitimate when institutional processes have consistently refused to recognise it.

5.5.6 Repetition and Virality

Repetition and virality function in the dataset not as incidental features of individual posts but as deliberate discursive strategies through which counter-narratives about the NPA were collectively sustained, deepened, and rendered apparently consensual across the digital public sphere. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) and Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) theorises that counter-narratives achieve their delegitimising force through cumulative circulation, as individually shared claims gather progressively into what appears to be a settled public verdict about institutional conduct without any single post bearing the full burden of proof alone. The dataset evidences this pattern directly. The same evaluative framings, specifically that the NPA was racially selective, politically compromised, and institutionally untrustworthy, recurred across tweets collected from different users at different points between July 2021 and July 2025, with each recurrence adding incremental weight to a judgement that accumulated force through frequency rather than fresh argumentation. Cinelli et al. (2021) confirms that algorithmically governed platforms structurally accelerate this process by amplifying high-engagement content irrespective of its factual grounding, and Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) provide empirical evidence that contested or emotionally novel content consistently outpaces accurate content in both speed and breadth of circulation. Hyvärinen (2021) explains why this matters analytically, demonstrating that in digitally networked spaces the persuasive standing of a narrative is determined by cultural

resonance and frequency of exposure rather than evidential standards, so that repeated encounter with a claim within a counter-public formation becomes its own form of verification, a pattern Brady et al. (2021) identify as cascading legitimacy effects through which participatory endorsement generates the structural appearance of popular consensus even where the underlying claims remain factually disputed.

Across the dataset, the discursive consequences of repetition and virality are most visible in the sequential endorsement threads attached to Figures 12 and 13, in the repost chains that extended individual tweets well beyond their originating accounts, and in the sustained recirculation of the same hashtag formations throughout the collection period. The five core hashtags, specifically #July2021Unrest, #July2021Riots, #FreeJacobZuma, #PhoenixMassacre, and #ZumaUnrest, did not exhaust their discursive function during the acute phase of the unrest but persisted as normative political claims whose evidential weight grew precisely through the repetition of their use (Papacharissi, 2021). Figures 10 and 11 illustrate this most explicitly, with Figure 10 demonstrating how persistent moral accusation directed at the NPA and its political principals was sustained through repeated hashtag attachment, and Figure 11 showing how historical layering was woven into that repetition so that each recirculation carried not only the original accusation but the accumulated symbolic authority of all its prior iterations. Phungula (2023b) confirms that the hashtag formations active during the unrest maintained continuous digital presence and emotional reach well beyond the violence itself because networked repetition kept their content retrievable and available to new audiences without requiring fresh origination. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) describe this as collective narrative formation, in which the cumulative force of participatory amplification becomes analytically inseparable from the content being amplified, while Roberts and Bosch (2023) and Bonilla and Rosa (2015) adds that in African digital political contexts, this temporal durability sustains institutional pressure across the considerable distance between a precipitating crisis and its eventual resolution. For the NPA, the practical consequence was that it faced not a series of discrete critiques but a structurally self-renewing public judgement whose authority derived from

collective repetition rather than from any single authoritative source, and Carpentier (2011) grounds this within PT by demonstrating that participation organised around virality does not merely reflect pre-formed institutional scepticism but actively constructs the evaluative conditions within which legitimacy itself is continuously assessed and found wanting.

5.6 THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES

This section presents the thematic analysis of the digital counter-narratives identified in the dataset, drawing on the reflexive thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2022). In this approach, themes are not pre-given categories applied to data but interpretive constructs generated through rigorous and iterative engagement with the dataset, capturing the shared narrative tendencies and evaluative frameworks through which diverse actors converged around common storylines when articulating grievance, blame, and moral judgement about the NPA. This analytical orientation is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm established in Chapter 4, which treats meaning as produced rather than discovered, and knowledge as contextual, perspectival, and relationally constituted. Papacharissi (2021) establishes that meaning in digital spaces is collectively produced through repetition, affective resonance, and participatory amplification rather than through formal coherence or factual consensus, and this principle governs the interpretive approach applied throughout this section.

The themes identified are analytically anchored in the study's research objectives: the first objective, to describe the counter-narratives concerning the NPA within the digital public sphere of X, is addressed across all four themes; the second objective, to examine discursive practices and strategies, is addressed primarily through the analysis of how themes are constructed and sustained; and the third objective, to interrogate ideological foundations including the use of misinformation, propaganda, and populism, is addressed through the ideological analysis within each theme.

Before presenting each theme in analytical depth, Table 1 provides a structural overview of the four dominant thematic formations identified, the key discursive logic operative within each theme, and the illustrative figures through which each is substantiated in the analysis that follows.

Table 1: Summary of thematic patterns identified in digital counter-narratives about the NPA during the July 2021 unrest

Theme	Key Discursive Logic	Figures
Theme 1 Political Persecution and Victimhood	Zuma and associates constructed as victims of politically orchestrated persecution; prosecutorial action recast as political aggression against the authentic will of the people.	Figure 17
Theme 2 Institutional Betrayal and Elite Corruption	The NPA and judiciary constructed as compromised instruments of elite factional interest; prosecution reframed as betrayal of the liberation movement and revolutionary ideals.	Figure 18
Theme 3 Racialised Violence and Communal Defence	Prosecutorial selectivity evaluated through a racial justice lens; Phoenix violence framed as evidence of structurally unequal legal protection along racial lines.	Figure 19
Theme 4 Hashtag Mobilisation and Symbolic References	Hashtags functioning as connective infrastructure and symbolic repertoire through which counter-narrative formations are organised, amplified, and sustained over time.	Figure 20

5.6.1 Theme 1: Political Persecution and Victimhood

The first and most prominent theme in the analysed dataset is the systematic construction of former President Zuma and his associates as victims of politically orchestrated persecution. These narratives portray the NPA, the judiciary, and associated state institutions as instruments of a corrupt political elite seeking to marginalise Zuma rather than uphold constitutional accountability. The analytical significance of this theme lies in how it functions within CNT; as Hagström and

Gustafsson (2019) and Bamberg and Andrews (2004) theorises, counter-narratives achieve their delegitimising force not by arguing against the factual accuracy of institutional claims but by substituting an alternative moral framework in which the institution's actions are reinterpreted through a completely different evaluative logic. In this case, legal accountability is reinterpreted as political victimisation, transforming a constitutional sanction into an act of oppression against a liberation figure. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) demonstrate that victimhood narratives are central to populist political communication, enabling political actors to claim moral immunity from legal accountability by positioning themselves as representatives of collective suffering rather than subjects of individual criminal culpability.

The Musician @bongzmessi · Apr 26, 2024



Concourt decision to jail President Zuma without trial led to the [#JulyUnrest](#), [#PhoenixMassacre](#) and economic catastrophe as a result of infrastructure damage.

Cyril and his corrupted judges knew about the implications but they didn't care.



4

58

160

7.1K



Figure 17. Judicial system reframed as biased and politically compromised through liberation iconography

The tweet in Figure 17 uses a photograph of the late former Deputy President David Mabuza to frame Zuma's incarceration as unlawful and politically motivated, positioning him as a victim of a judicial system represented as corrupt and biased. In ANC internal politics, Mabuza was associated with power blocs initially aligned with Zuma or Zuma-backed factions, particularly ahead of the 2017 ANC conference. His photographic inclusion in this tweet carries specific factional meaning that extends the persecution narrative beyond Zuma personally to include the broader support network that the tweet implies has been systematically targeted. By linking Zuma's detention to the subsequent unrest and socio-economic consequences for ordinary South Africans, the tweet constructs a causal chain in which legal process produces collective social harm, positioning the NPA as the originating cause of the very conditions that justified the unrest. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) identifies this causal construction as a defining rhetorical feature of victimhood-themed counter-narratives, which derive their moral force not only from the immediate injustice they claim but from their attribution of downstream social damage to institutional action. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) and Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) demonstrate that such reframing positions prosecutorial institutions within a narrative logic in which legal correctness is insufficient to establish legitimacy, because legitimacy is evaluated through the social consequences of institutional action rather than the procedural quality of the action itself.

5.6.2 Theme 2: Institutional Betrayal and Elite Corruption

The second theme articulates institutional betrayal not as an abstract governance failure but as a deeply moral rupture between political elites, state institutions, and the constituencies they claim to represent. The dataset reveals a recurring construction in which formal institutions are framed as no longer functioning as guardians of justice but as instruments through which elite interests are protected and revolutionary ideals diluted or actively subverted. This theme extends the analysis of ideological framing established in previous sections by demonstrating how ideological positioning generates specific thematic formations that recur across multiple tweets in the dataset. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) and Castells (2009) identify institutional legitimacy crises

as defining features of contemporary digitally mediated political environments, observing that social media platforms accelerate the collapse of institutional credibility by enabling rapid, decentralised contestation of official narratives. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) and Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) further demonstrate that when institutions fail to communicate clearly or respond promptly to counter-narrative formations, counter-narratives fill the interpretive void by framing institutional silence as evidence of concealment or complicity rather than as procedural restraint.

Dima Msuthu @DimaMsuthu · Feb 18
Mbeki is a wedge driver [@TMFoundation_](#). An attack on JG Zuma is an attack on the revolution & black people
[#FreeJacobZuma](#) from Thabo Mbeki



Figure 18. Criminal justice system portrayed as serving elite factional interests against the liberation constituency

Figure 18 presents one of the most visually striking tweets in the dataset, featuring a symbolic image of Zuma being stabbed from the back by figures associated with ruling party leadership including former President Thabo Mbeki. The analytical significance of this image is its political geography of betrayal; the threat comes not from an external adversary but from within the liberation movement itself. This visual rhetoric is particularly devastating in the South African political context because it attacks not merely the NPA's impartiality but the moral coherence of the post-apartheid democratic project as a whole. The inclusion of former President Mbeki specifically

invokes the well-documented factional warfare between the Mbeki and Zuma camps within the ANC, lending the betrayal narrative the specificity and grounding of established political history. Imagery of this kind reinforces the perception that prosecutorial authority is aligned with historically antagonistic forces (Schönteich, 2014), with the NPA positioned as the institutional instrument through which factional enemies pursue Zuma's political destruction under the appearance of constitutional legality. Petla (2023) and Rikhotso (2021) confirm that through this thematic construction, the NPA becomes a symbol of institutional betrayal, embodying a justice system perceived to have shifted its allegiance from constitutional ideals to elite preservation. The moral corruption constructed here is not primarily material but civilisational, defined by the use of state power to undermine revolutionary legitimacy under the guise of legal process.

5.6.3 Theme 3: Racialised Violence and Communal Defence

The third theme concerns the racialisation of institutional conduct and the mobilisation of communal defence narratives through which the NPA's prosecutorial selectivity is evaluated through a racial justice lens. Social media users frequently juxtaposed prosecutorial attention directed at Zuma-aligned actors with the perceived absence of equivalent prosecutorial urgency in relation to violence directed against Black communities during the unrest, particularly in the Phoenix area of KwaZulu-Natal. The NPA's slow progress in securing convictions in the Phoenix cases, documented by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) (2024), meant that this racial justice framing drew on documented institutional shortcomings in a way the other themes did not, lending it a persuasive grounding that the tweets themselves exploited, rather than a claim this study independently verifies.

Katt Mokgosi 🇿🇦 🇷🇺 @bassybee_kby · Nov 30, 2022

@NPA_Prosecutes is considering adding "terrorism" to the July 2021 "instigators", but what of the White and Indian criminals that physically assaulted and in some cases murdered Black people for entering "their" neighborhoods? Is that not terrorism? @Newzroom405 #July2021Unrest

Figure 19: Challenge to prosecutorial legitimacy and racial neutrality through juxtaposed accountability claims

Figure 19 presents a tweet that contests the selective application of legal categories, particularly the invocation of terrorism, by juxtaposing prosecutorial attention toward alleged unrest instigators with the perceived under-prosecution of violence committed against Black individuals in neighbourhood-based attacks in Phoenix, KwaZulu-Natal. The tweet's direct address to the NPA is analytically distinctive. Rather than making a general claim about racial inequality in the abstract, it asks the NPA to account publicly for its specific prosecutorial distinctions. This rhetorical strategy enacts the kind of democratic accountability that the tweet simultaneously claims the NPA is evading, positioning the tweet's author as a legitimate civic interlocutor of a constitutional institution. Rikhotso (2021) demonstrates that this framing aligns with broader patterns in South African digital counter-narratives in which legal institutions are depicted as uneven arbiters whose decisions validate or invalidate communal suffering along racial lines. Aiseng (2024a) confirms that racialised reframings of institutional conduct are a defining feature of South African digital counter-public discourse. The SAHRC's (2024) documented findings on Phoenix related convictions gave the tweets in this theme a documented institutional shortcoming to draw on, which this study reads as a factor in the theme's persuasive force within the sampled discourse, rather than as a basis for adjudicating the underlying accusation of racial bias.

5.6.4 Theme 4: Hashtag Mobilisation and Symbolic References

The fourth theme concerns the way in which hashtag mobilisation and symbolic referencing function not merely as communication tools but as constitutive elements of the counter-narrative formation itself, without which the individual tweets examined in this dataset would not have achieved collective discursive force. As Bonilla and

Rosa (2015) and Zappavigna (2011) establish, hashtags encode complex political meanings, moral judgements, and historical references within a single searchable symbol, and their recurrence across multiple posts produces narrative consolidation, in which complex socio-political events are distilled into recognisable symbolic frames that circulate and accumulate across digital counter-publics. The five core hashtags active in the dataset, specifically #July2021Unrest, #July2021Riots, #FreeJacobZuma, #PhoenixMassacre, and #ZumaUnrest, each encode a distinct political positioning and moral evaluation of the NPA that users activated through the act of hashtag attachment. This theme is illustrated in Figure 20 to demonstrate the progression from institutional failure, to political manipulation, to communal rights denial.

If they could instigate Indians into killing blacks during the [#PhoenixMassacre](#) just so they can blame Zuma; orchestrate [#TavernKillings](#) just to distract us from the [#phalaphalafarmgate](#) scandal...what are few kids to them if it means Rupert will take over township economy? 😏



Figure 20. Prosecutorial processes framed as instruments of political manipulation through hashtag-amplified disinformation

The tweet in Figure 20 deepens the institutional betrayal theme by alleging that violence in Phoenix was deliberately instigated to frame Zuma and divert attention from serious political scandals, such as the famous Phala Phala farmgate and the #TarvenKillings of young people at Enyobeni Tarven in the Eastern Cape province (Maseko, 2022), reframing the NPA's role from legal authority to complicit actor within a broader strategy of narrative control. A brief contextual reference to the Phala Phala scandal clarifies the interpretive frame within which the tweet operates. The controversy centres on the 2020 theft of foreign currency from a private farm owned by President Cyril Ramaphosa (Roelf, 2022), and the subsequent public dispute regarding whether the incident was properly reported and investigated. The matter entered the public domain in 2022 following a criminal complaint by former Director-General of the State Security Agency, Arthur Fraser, prompting scrutiny of executive accountability and the consistency of legal processes (Harper, 2022). It has since functioned within public discourse as a key reference point in debates about selective accountability, particularly in relation to prosecutorial decisions involving the NPA. The tweet's use of Zuma's image, where his gesture suggests innocence and persecution, visually reinforces this interpretation. Prosecutorial action and inaction are recast not as outcomes of legal procedure but as politically calculated decisions, repositioning the NPA from an impartial authority to a complicit actor within a broader strategy of narrative control. Schönteich (2014) documents the institutional history through which the perception that prosecutorial authority is aligned with historically antagonistic forces gained factual grounding, with the NPA's own senior leadership having been divided along pro-Mbeki and pro-Zuma factional lines from as early as 2003, making the counter-narrative claim that the NPA acts as an instrument through which factional enemies pursue Zuma's political destruction under the appearance of constitutional legality analytically coherent rather than merely rhetorical. The surrounding hashtag infrastructure amplifies this narrative by transforming an individual conspiracy claim into what appears to be a collectively endorsed position. Through repetition and alignment, the claim acquires the status of a shared interpretive framework rather than a singular assertion. This reflects the cascading legitimacy effects theorised by Brady et al. (2021), where cumulative digital participation produces the impression of

widespread agreement. In this way, the tweet in Figure 20 demonstrates how symbolic framing, political scandal, and networked amplification converge to sustain counter-narratives that question the neutrality of prosecutorial institutions and recast legal authority as embedded within contested political dynamics.

5.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented an empirically grounded interpretive analysis of 20 purposively selected tweets drawn from the digital counter-narrative ecosystem surrounding the NPA during and after the July 2021 unrest in South Africa. Through the application of CNT, DPST, and PT as the three analytical frameworks established in Chapter 3, the chapter has demonstrated how digital discourse on X actively constructed, sustained, and amplified alternative interpretations of justice and prosecutorial authority that positioned the NPA not as a constitutional institution exercising its mandate but as a politically compromised, racially partial, and institutionally delegitimised actor.

Section 5.2 established the foundational counter-narrative formation of the dataset, in which the NPA's prosecutorial conduct is evaluated not through legal standards but through the moral lens of deliberate selectivity, with both prosecution and acquittal interpreted as evidence of institutional bad faith. Section 5.3 examined the five narrative genres through which this formation was produced and organised, demonstrating how populism, propaganda framing, misinformation and disinformation, ideological framing, and historical memory and emotive symbolism each contributed distinct delegitimising force while mutually reinforcing one another through their shared deployment within the same counter-public formations. Section 5.4 demonstrated how DPST and PT together explain how individual acts of digital participation through hashtag use, sharing, and affective endorsement transformed individual counter-narrative claims into the collective discursive formations through which institutional legitimacy is publicly negotiated in digitally networked environments. Section 5.5 identified the four primary discursive strategies through which these genres and participatory dynamics were operationalised at the level of

communicative technique. Section 5.6 identified four interconnected thematic formations, namely political persecution and victimhood, institutional betrayal and elite corruption, racialised violence and communal defence, and hashtag mobilisation and symbolic references, that collectively constituted the discursive terrain within which the NPA's legitimacy was contested across the full dataset.

The findings presented in this chapter carry implications that extend beyond the immediate dataset. They demonstrate that in digitally networked democratic environments, institutional legitimacy is not a stable achievement secured through constitutional mandate or procedural compliance but a continuously contested discursive accomplishment that requires active, responsive, and emotionally intelligible communication to sustain. Castells (2009) and Sunshine and Tyler (2003) argue that institutions which communicate only in procedural terms during crises surrender the moral and political dimensions of legitimacy to counter-narrative actors, and this study provides detailed empirical evidence of how that surrender occurs and why it is structurally difficult to reverse once counter-narrative formations have achieved sustained digital circulation. Chapter 6 synthesises these findings in relation to the study's theoretical framework and research objectives, drawing conclusions about the broader implications for institutional communication, governance, and democratic accountability in South Africa's digital public sphere.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter brings the study to a close by synthesising the key arguments, findings, and theoretical contributions developed across the preceding chapters. The research set out to examine how digital counter-narratives concerning the NPA emerged and circulated during and after the July 2021 unrest in South Africa, and how these narratives shaped public perceptions of justice, legitimacy, and the rule of law. Drawing on CNT, PT, and DPST, the study demonstrated that social media platforms can function as contested arenas in which legal authority was actively negotiated through emotive, symbolic, and participatory discourse. This concluding chapter revisits the aims and objectives of the study, summarises the principal research findings, addresses the broader implications of digital counter-narratives for governance and the rule of law, reflects on the study's limitations, and offers recommendations for future research before providing a final integrative conclusion.

6.2 REVISITING THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of this study was to analyse the discursive practices employed by social media users in constructing counter-narratives about the NPA within the digital public sphere during the July 2021 unrest in South Africa. To address this aim, the study was guided by a set of interrelated objectives that were exploratory, descriptive, interpretative, and interrogative in nature. These objectives were as follows.

- The first objective was to explore the underlying counter-narratives concerning the NPA within the digital public sphere of X during the July 2021 unrest.
- The second objective was to describe the dominant discourses through which counter-narratives about the NPA were articulated and circulated on X during the period of unrest.

- The third objective was to deconstruct the discursive practices deployed in the construction of counter-narratives about the NPA within these digital spaces.
- The fourth objective was to interrogate the ideological foundations of the recognisable counter-narrative genres, including the use of propaganda, populism, historical memory and emotive symbolism, ideological framing, as well as misinformation and disinformation as digital counter-narrative genres.

These objectives were addressed through a qualitative and interpretive research design that treated social media discourse as a site of narrative struggle and meaning-making. In revisiting these objectives, the findings of the study confirm that the discursive construction of counter-narratives about the NPA were central to how legal authority, accountability, and justice were publicly contested during and after the July 2021 unrest.

6.3 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of the study suggest that digital counter-narratives surrounding the July 2021 unrest did not merely challenge isolated prosecutorial decisions, but appeared to reshape how justice was discussed and evaluated within the specific online spaces analysed. Social media users constructed narratives that framed the NPA as selective, politicised, and institutionally inconsistent, often interpreting delays, evidentiary challenges, or limited prosecutions as evidence of institutional bias or incapacity rather than procedural complexity. These interpretations were reinforced through emotive language, moral dichotomies, and symbolic references that resonated strongly with historical grievances and collective memory. The study further found that participatory engagement played a central role in amplifying these narratives. Hashtag mobilisation, multimodal content, and networked interaction enabled individual expressions of dissatisfaction to coalesce into shared discursive formations that carried significant persuasive power. Within these spaces, legitimacy was assessed less through formal legal criteria and more through perceived moral alignment, responsiveness, and visibility.

Importantly, the findings demonstrate that misinformation, disinformation, populist framing, and propagandistic techniques were deeply embedded within these counter-narratives. Whether deployed deliberately or unintentionally, such discursive strategies contributed to the erosion of public trust by presenting prosecutorial processes as politically mediated and ideologically driven. This erosion was not temporary but sustained through repetition and emotional reinforcement, highlighting the enduring impact of digital discourse on institutional credibility. Collectively, the findings underscore the fragile nature of legal legitimacy in digitally mediated societies where narrative contestation is constant and highly participatory.

6.4 BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES FOR GOVERNANCE AND THE RULE OF LAW

The findings of this study carry implications that extend beyond the immediate institutional context of the NPA and the specific crisis of the July 2021 unrest. They point to a broader and structurally significant challenge confronting democratic governance in digitally networked societies, specifically the growing asymmetry between the communicative capacities of formal legal institutions and the participatory counter-narrative formations that contest their authority within digital public spheres. Castells (2009) and Sunshine and Tyler (2003) argue that institutional legitimacy in democratic societies is not a stable achievement secured through constitutional mandate, but a continuously contested discursive accomplishment, and the dataset examined in this study offers illustrative evidence of how that contestation may operate at the intersection of digital participation, historical memory, and political identity. Within the sampled tweets, the NPA was frequently represented as shifting in public discourse from a constitutional guardian of the rule of law to a politically compromised adversary of the people, a shift whose consequences, if sustained more broadly, would extend beyond reputational damage to the institution itself and reach into the normative infrastructure upon which democratic governance depends.

A central governance implication suggested by this study is that the rule of law in digitally networked societies may not be sustained through legal procedure and constitutional authority alone. Sunshine and Tyler (2003) establish that public compliance with and support for legal institutions is governed significantly by procedural justice perceptions rather than by formal legal correctness alone, and that institutions which fail to appear consistent, impartial, and morally aligned with public values risk losing legitimacy regardless of their constitutional mandate. The counter-narratives examined across Chapters 4 and 5 indicated that, within the sampled tweets, the NPA was frequently evaluated not on the quality of its prosecutorial decisions but on their perceived consistency, racial equity, and apparent alignment with popular moral expectations about accountability. Where those evaluations produced negative verdicts, the delegitimising effect appeared to be amplified through participatory digital dynamics that gave individual expressions of dissatisfaction the apparent weight of collective public consensus. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) and Castells (2009) observe that institutions which fail to engage the emotional and symbolic dimensions of digital counter-narrative production risk lasting damage to their public legitimacy, a pattern broadly consistent with the sustained four-year circulation of NPA directed counter-narratives observed in this dataset.

For governance more broadly, the study illustrates what Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) and Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) identify as the communicative void that forms when institutions delay responding to crisis counter-narratives, a space that alternative interpretations rapidly fill and which becomes structurally difficult to reclaim. The finding that hashtag formations such as #PhoenixMassacre and #FreeJacobZuma remained analytically significant across the full four year collection period, rather than dissipating after the acute phase of the unrest, suggests that digital counter-narrative formations of this kind can carry a temporal durability that exceeds the news cycle and outlasts conventional institutional communication strategies. This durability poses a challenge to governance institutions that operate through formal communication channels and legislative or judicial timelines that are structurally slower than the participatory dynamics of digital counter-public formation. Petla (2023) and Rikhotso

(2021) confirm that the NPA's perceived failure to communicate transparently and responsively during the period of acute counter-narrative contestation contributed to the entrenchment of delegitimising narratives that proved resistant to subsequent correction.

The study further suggests that the rule of law may be particularly vulnerable to digital counter-narrative delegitimation in societies where legal institutions carry unresolved historical burdens of racialised injustice. Mukhudwana (2020) confirms that South African digital counter-publics draw consistently and powerfully on liberation struggle memory and apartheid era patterns of racialised state violence to evaluate present day institutional conduct, and the analysis in Section 5.3 illustrated how this historical grounding can transform specific prosecutorial decisions into apparent instances of a broader and enduring pattern of racialised injustice, within the framing offered by the sampled tweets, rather than being treated as situational institutional failures. Wale (2022) theorises this as the knotting of past and present suffering, through which accumulated historical grievance and present institutional failure are bound together into a lived affective condition of betrayal that lends contemporary counter-narrative claims the moral authority of historically documented persecution. For governance, this suggests that legal institutions operating in postcolonial democratic contexts may benefit from communication strategies that engage explicitly with the historical legitimacy concerns forming the factual and emotional substrate upon which counter-narrative claims are layered, rather than confining institutional communication to the procedural and evidential registers through which present decisions are defended.

Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) and Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023a) warn that repeated exposure to narratives positioning legal institutions as structurally biased and politically compromised can erode the foundational normative commitments through which democratic governance operates, making selective institutional accountability appear structurally normal rather than politically exceptional. The findings of this study lend some support to this warning within the scope of the sample analysed. Where five narrative genres, namely populism, propaganda framing,

misinformation and disinformation, ideological framing, and historical memory combined with emotive symbolism, converged within a single counter-narrative ecosystem and were amplified through participatory hashtag networks, the cumulative effect within the sampled tweets appeared to extend beyond contestation of specific institutional decisions towards a broader reframing of how legal authority was evaluated by the users represented in this dataset. Seidemann, Weißmüller and Geiger (2026) and Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b) further suggest that this kind of delegitimisation may be more difficult to reverse than reputational damage arising from specific institutional failures, since it can operate at the level of foundational assumptions about institutional integrity rather than at the level of contestable factual claims. The governance implication indicated by this study is therefore that preventing this kind of entrenched delegitimisation may benefit from proactive, culturally responsive, and affectively intelligent institutional communication, rather than relying solely on reactive factual correction after counter-narrative formations have already become established within specific digital counter-publics.

6.4.1 Alternative Interpretations and Competing Explanations

The interpretation offered in this chapter, that digital counter-narratives contributed to a discursive delegitimisation of the NPA, is not the only plausible reading of the sampled data, and it is worth considering explicitly what else the findings might indicate. One alternative explanation is that the counter-narratives examined here reflect genuine, independently formed public concern about specific institutional failures, particularly the NPA's documented delay in securing convictions related to Phoenix violence, rather than a coordinated or structurally driven campaign of delegitimisation. Read this way, the tweets analysed in this study would represent an appropriate public response to a real accountability gap rather than a discursive strategy that distorts institutional reality. A second alternative explanation concerns the apparent amplification and durability of certain hashtags and narrative formations across the four year collection period. This study has read that durability as evidence of a sustained counter-narrative ecosystem, but it is equally possible that platform

level dynamics, such as algorithmic promotion of emotionally engaging content or periodic renewed newsworthiness driven by unrelated political events, account for some of the recurrence observed, independent of any cumulative delegitimising effect. A third possibility concerns the direction of causality assumed throughout this study. This dissertation has treated counter-narratives as a force that shapes public perceptions of the NPA, but it is equally plausible that already existing public distrust of the NPA, formed prior to and independent of the July 2021 unrest, shaped which counter-narratives gained traction rather than the reverse. These alternative readings do not undermine the central findings of this study, which remain grounded in close analysis of the sampled tweets, but they do indicate that the discursive patterns identified here are open to more than one explanation, and that the delegitimation account offered in this dissertation should be understood as the most persuasive reading of the sampled evidence rather than the only one available.

6.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the study provides valuable insights into digital counter-narratives and institutional legitimacy, several limitations must be acknowledged. The analysis was based on a relatively small and purposively selected dataset of social media posts. Although this approach allowed for in-depth interpretive analysis, it limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised across all digital platforms or user communities. The focus on a single platform and a defined set of hashtags may have excluded other relevant narratives circulating in less visible or private digital spaces. The study also prioritised discourse and meaning-making over audience reception. While the analysis reveals how narratives were constructed and circulated, it does not empirically assess how different audiences interpreted or internalised these narratives. As a result, conclusions about public perception are inferred from discursive patterns rather than measured through direct engagement with users. Finally, the research was situated within a specific socio-political moment, and the exceptional nature of the July 2021 unrest means that the dynamics observed may differ from those present during periods of relative political stability. Beyond limiting generalisability, the 20 tweet purposive sample also constrains the strength of claims made elsewhere in this

dissertation about the counter-narrative ecosystem exerting a wider normalising effect on public perceptions of the NPA. These findings are best read as insights drawn from a specific, small sample, rather than as demonstrated population level effects.

6.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSSIBLE FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could build on this study by expanding the scope of analysis to include multiple social media platforms, allowing for comparative insights into how platform-specific affordances shape the construction and circulation of counter-narratives. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining how digital narratives evolve over time and whether their influence on institutional legitimacy persists, diminishes, or transforms in the absence of acute political crisis. Further research could incorporate audience-centred methodologies such as interviews or surveys to explore how users interpret, negotiate, or resist digital counter-narratives, which would deepen understanding of the relationship between discourse production and public belief. Comparative studies across different legal institutions or national contexts could also illuminate whether similar patterns of narrative contestation emerge in other democracies facing crises of trust in the rule of law. Finally, future work might explore how state institutions themselves engage with digital publics and whether strategic communication approaches informed by the narrative genre and discursive strategy framework developed in this study can meaningfully mitigate the delegitimising effects of sustained counter-narrative production.

6.7 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that digital counter-narratives play a powerful role in shaping public discourse about justice, legitimacy, and institutional authority in contemporary South Africa. Through participatory, emotive, and symbolically charged communication, social media users actively contested the authority of the NPA during the July 2021 unrest, reframing legal processes through alternative moral and political lenses rooted in liberation history, racial memory, and political identity. These narratives did not merely reflect public dissatisfaction but actively contributed to the

reconfiguration of how justice was understood and evaluated within the digital public sphere, producing a counter-narrative ecosystem in which the NPA's constitutional mandate was systematically repositioned as political persecution, racial bias, and institutional betrayal. By integrating theoretical perspectives on counter-narratives, participation, and digital publics with empirical analysis of 20 purposively selected tweets, the study offers a critical contribution to scholarship on law, communication, and governance in postcolonial democratic contexts. It highlights the necessity for legal institutions to recognise the communicative dimensions of legitimacy and to engage more transparently, responsively, and affectively within digitally mediated environments. Ultimately, the findings underscore that in an era of networked communication, the rule of law is not sustained by legal procedure alone but is continually negotiated through public discourse, participatory meaning-making, and the symbolic and emotional registers through which justice is experienced and evaluated by the communities legal institutions are constitutionally obligated to serve.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



**CONFIRMATION LETTER BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE DEPARTMENTAL
SCIENTIFIC REVIEW COMMITTEE (DSRC) OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNICATION SCIENCE**

Name of candidate: Kholofelo Solomon Serota Mogotlane

Student/employee number: 63877228

Qualification: MA in Communication

Supervisor(s): Dr Mopailo Thatele and Mr Trevor Hlungwani

Working title: Exploring social media counter-narratives of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) regarding the July 2021 South African unrest.

The Departmental Scientific Review Committee (DSRC) in the Department of Communication Science at Unisa has reviewed the research proposal for the MA degree compliance for scientific validity. DSRC confirms that:

- The research approach, design, recruitment method(s), data collection protocol(s) and relevant ethical considerations regarding informed consent, the rights of participants/respondents to withdraw from the study, the protection of the participants' privacy, confidentiality and management of the information are clearly articulated.

DSRC recommends that the application be reviewed for ethics acceptability.

We hope that you find this in order.

Kind regards,

Mr Gibson Chauke

Chairperson: Departmental Scientific Review Committee

Department of Communication Science

05 February 2025



University of South Africa
Pretorius Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
PO Box 952 UNISA 0003 South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Fax: +27 12 429 4130
www.unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B: CODING FRAMEWORK AND ANALYTICAL PROTOCOL

Exploring social media counter-narratives of the national prosecuting authority regarding the July 2021 South African unrest.

Study Information	Details
Student	Kholofelo Solomon Serota Mogotlane (63877228)
Institution	University of South Africa (UNISA)
Degree	Master of Arts in Communication Science
Supervisors	Dr Mopailo Thomas Thatelo; Dr Trevor Hlungwani
Data Source	X (formerly Twitter) - publicly accessible tweets
Dataset	20 purposively selected tweets
Collection Period	July 2021 – July 2025
Five Primary Hashtags	#July2021Unrest #July2021Riots #FreeJacobZuma #PhoenixMassacre #ZumaUnrest

PURPOSE OF THIS FRAMEWORK

This coding framework documents the systematic analytical process applied to the dataset of 20 tweets. It establishes the audit trail supporting the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and demonstrates that the interpretive work in Chapter 5 was theoretically grounded and consistently applied. The framework integrates deductive codes from CNT, DPST, and PT with inductive codes emerging from close engagement with the data, following the combined approach recommended by Schreier (2012).

FIVE HASHTAG FORMATIONS AND THEIR ANALYTICAL FUNCTION

Data collection was conducted through five primary hashtags, each encoding a distinct political positioning and moral evaluation of the NPA within the digital counter-public formations that emerged during and after the July 2021 unrest.

Hashtag	Counter-Narrative Orientation	Primary Theme
#July2021Unrest	Broad institutional critique of state response to unrest; NPA framed as ineffective or complicit in governance failure	T2: Institutional Betrayal & Elite Corruption
#July2021Riots	Delegitimisation framing linked to violence, looting, and prosecutorial inconsistency across racial and political lines	T3: Racialised Violence & Communal Defence
#FreeJacobZuma	Victimhood and liberation symbolism framing Zuma's prosecution as political persecution of a liberation figure	T1: Political Persecution & Victimhood
#PhoenixMassacre	Racial justice framing contesting prosecutorial selectivity through the perceived failure to pursue Phoenix-related violence	T3: Racialised Violence & Communal Defence T4: Hashtag Mobilisation and Symbolic References
#ZumaUnrest	Factional and ideological framing positioning the NPA as an instrument of elite interests opposing the liberation constituency	T2: Institutional Betrayal & Elite Corruption

DEDUCTIVE CODING CATEGORIES

Narrative Genre Codes - Five Genres (from CNT)

Code	Theoretical Source	Definition	Operational Indicators
NARRATIVE GENRE CODES			
NG-1: Populism	Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2017)	Construction of a moral binary between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite, positioning prosecutorial action as politically motivated	People/elite opposition; demonisation of institutional actors; collective will language; liberation solidarity.

Code	Theoretical Source	Definition	Operational Indicators
NG-2: Propaganda Framing	Jowett & O'Donnell (2019)	Strategic organisation of meaning through selective emphasis and emotional appeal to construct ideologically predetermined conclusions about the NPA	Card stacking; selective historical reference; scapegoating; demonisation; emotional amplification
NG-3: Misinformation / Disinformation	Wardle & Derakhshan (2018)	False/misleading content (misinformation = without deliberate intent; disinformation = deliberately deployed for political gain)	Unverifiable claims; misleading juxtapositions; false context; implication without evidence.
NG-4: Ideological Framing	Van Dijk (2008)	Activation of liberation ideology or racial ideology to interpret prosecutorial conduct as civilisational or racial oppression rather than legal process	Liberation vocabulary; apartheid continuity framing; racial binary construction; anti-colonial imagery
NG-5: Historical Memory & Emotive Symbolism	Wale (2022); Turner (1967)	Deployment of liberation iconography, apartheid memory, and affective symbols to anchor institutional critique within a historically authorised moral framework	Robben Island; Umshini Wam; MK imagery; The Spear; liberation regalia; martyrdom symbolism.

Digital Public Sphere Codes (from DPST) and Participatory Theory Codes (from PT)

Code	Theoretical Source	Definition	Operational Indicators
DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE CODES			
DPST-1: Counter-Public Formation	Fraser (1990)	Formation of subaltern discursive arena outside mainstream media where alternative interpretations of NPA conduct circulate	Hashtag aggregation; shared evaluative norms; anti-institutional orientation

Code	Theoretical Source	Definition	Operational Indicators
DPST-2: Affective Organisation	Papacharissi (2015)	Structuring of digital participation through shared emotions (outrage, grief, solidarity) rather than deliberative argument	Capitals for emphasis; moral absolutes; grief language; solidarity expressions
DPST-3: Algorithmic Amplification	Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023b)	Platform-level reinforcement of emotional content enabling counter-narratives to achieve reach without evidentiary grounding	Retweet chains; trending hashtag use; virality signals; endorsement threads
DPST-4: Narrative Delegitimisation	Hagström & Gustafsson (2019)	Systematic reframing of the NPA from constitutional authority to politically compromised or racially partial actor	Institutional failure language; corruption accusation; factional alignment claims
PARTICIPATORY THEORY CODES			
PT-1: Hashtag Mobilisation	Zappavigna (2011)	Hashtags as ambient affiliation devices transforming individual expressions into nodes within larger counter-public formations	All five primary hashtags; secondary derivative hashtags
PT-2: Networked Amplification	Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles (2020)	Collective production of counter-narratives through retweeting, endorsement, and thread participation generating participatory weight	Retweet counts; quote-tweet commentary; thread continuation
PT-3: Multimodal Participation	Thatelo & Motsaabeth (2024)	Combined text, image, video, and hashtag producing meanings beyond what any single modality achieves alone	Image-text combinations; embedded video; meme use; visual testimony

Code	Theoretical Source	Definition	Operational Indicators
PT-4: Testimonial Witnessing	Phungula (2023b)	Survivor or community accounts as participatory counter-narrative contributions whose authority rests on lived experience	First-person testimony; survivor account; eyewitness claim; community voice

DISCURSIVE STRATEGY CODES

Code	Definition	Operational Indicators	Illustrative Figure
DS-1: Emotive Framing	Mobilisation of trauma, victimhood, solidarity, and moral outrage to render institutional critique emotionally compelling	Parental/familial language; bodily danger claims; liberation slogans; capitalised urgency	Figure 12: “Until @PresJGZuma is FREE. SAFE. ALIVE!”
DS-2: Scapegoating	Redirection of institutional responsibility to specific named actors or bodies, simplifying complex processes into clear blame attribution	Direct naming; blame attribution; selective causation	Figure 13: NPA framed as complicit in denial of justice
DS-3: Symbolic Amplification	Deployment of culturally charged images, liberation iconography, and historical reference to intensify the moral weight of counter-narrative claims	MK imagery; Robben Island; The Spear; burning infrastructure	Figure 8: The Spear + Estcourt prison + uprising composite
DS-4: Participatory Engagement	Active interactive practices (endorsing, sharing, reinterpreting) that create visible networks of collective counter-narrative authority	Reply threads; retweet chains; quote-tweet commentary; platform reporting	Figure 15: Mass account reporting as civic action

Code	Definition	Operational Indicators	Illustrative Figure
DS-5: Moral Dichotomies	Division of actors into irreconcilable moral opposites, rendering ambiguity inadmissible and closing interpretive space	Good/evil binaries; victim/perpetrator; patriots/traitors; racial moral absolutes	Figure 16: ANC and DA both framed as complicit in racial killing
DS-6: Repetition & Virality	Cumulative recirculation of evaluative framings across multiple tweets and over time, producing apparent popular consensus through frequency	Same hashtag reused across collection period; same claim across multiple accounts	Figures 10 and 11: NPA accusation recirculated over four years

INDUCTIVE CODES

Code	Description	Evidence from Dataset
IC-1: Bekker Comparison	Misleading juxtaposition of Zuma's prosecution with Koos Bekker's non-appearance at Zondo Commission as apparent evidence of racial selective justice (confirmed misleading by Africa Check, 2021)	Figure 4: Zuma alongside Bekker photograph
IC-2: Tea Party Signification	Nkandla tea meeting (5 February 2021) redeployed as implied evidence of elite coordination of the July 2021 unrest	Figure 6: Meeting photograph captioned to suggest pre-planned insurrection
IC-3: Phoenix Selectivity Frame	Speed of NPA prosecution of Zuma-aligned actors contrasted with slow pace of Phoenix violence prosecutions, constructing a racial double standard	Figures 3, 9, 14, 19: Phoenix survivor testimony and institutional indictment
IC-4: Martyrdom Coding	Zuma's political imprisonment positioned as martyrdom within liberation tradition, drawing on Robben Island symbolism to transform legal sanction into moral validation	Figure 8: Estcourt prison image alongside liberation imagery; Figure 9: MK regalia

Code	Description	Evidence from Dataset
IC-5: Phala Phala Deflection	Ramaphosa's Phala Phala farm scandal introduced to frame NPA as applying prosecution inconsistently across political lines	Figure 20: Phala Phala reference framing NPA as instrument of political manipulation
IC-6: Communal Defence Rationalisation	Phoenix violence reframed as legitimate communal self-defence abandoned by state protection institutions, not as perpetration of racial killing	Figure 14: Graphic imagery of armed residents coded as self-protection

THEMATIC CODE CLUSTERS

Theme	Core Narrative Logic	Associated Codes	Illustrative Figures
T1: Political Persecution & Victimhood	Zuma and associates recast as victims of politically orchestrated persecution; legal accountability repositioned as political aggression against a liberation figure	NG-1; NG-4; NG-5; DS-1; DS-5; IC-4	Figure 17
T2: Institutional Betrayal & Elite Corruption	NPA framed as instrument of factional elite interest rather than constitutional authority; prosecution of Zuma positioned as betrayal of the liberation project	NG-2; NG-4; DPST-4; DS-2; DS-3; IC-2	Figure 18
T3: Racialised Violence & Communal Defence	Prosecutorial selectivity evaluated through racial justice lens; NPA's slow Phoenix prosecution contrasted with its pursuit of Zuma-aligned actors to construct a racial double standard	NG-4; DPST-1; DS-3; DS-5; IC-3; IC-6; PT-4	Figure 19
T4: Hashtag Mobilisation & Symbolic References	Hashtags as connective infrastructure and symbolic	PT-1; PT-2; PT-3; DS-4; DS-6; NG-5	Figure 20

Theme	Core Narrative Logic	Associated Codes	Illustrative Figures
	repertoire encoding political positioning within a single searchable marker; recirculation sustaining apparent public consensus over four years		

TWEET-BY-TWEET CODING RECORD - ALL FIVE HASHTAGS REPRESENTED

The table below records the primary hashtag, genre codes, discursive strategy codes, and thematic formations for each of the 20 figures in the dataset. The hashtag distribution is: #July2021Unrest (Figures 1, 2, 3, 6, 19); #July2021Riots (Figure 13); #PhoenixMassacre (Figures 5, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16, 17, 20); #FreeJacobZuma (Figures 4, 7, 8, 12, 18); #ZumaUnrest (Figure 15).

Fig.	Collection Hashtag	Primary Genre Code(s)	Discursive Strategy	Theme
1	#July2021Unrest	NG-1 (Populism); NG-3 (Misinformation)	DS-2 (Scapegoating); DS-6 (Repetition)	T2: Institutional Betrayal
2	#July2021Riots	NG-1 (Populism); NG-2 (Propaganda)	DS-2 (Scapegoating); DS-4 (Participatory)	T1: Political Persecution
3	#PhoenixMassacre	NG-3 (Mis/Disinformation); NG-4 (Ideological)	DS-1 (Emotive Framing); DS-3 (Symbolic)	T3: Racialised Violence
4	#FreeJacobZuma	NG-1 (Populism); NG-3 (Misinformation)	DS-3 (Symbolic Amplification); DS-5 (Moral Dichotomy)	T1: Political Persecution
5	#PhoenixMassacre	NG-2 (Propaganda); NG-4 (Ideological)	DS-3 (Symbolic Amplification); DS-5 (Moral Dichotomy)	T3: Racialised Violence
6	#July2021Riots	NG-3 (Disinformation); NG-1 (Populism)	DS-3 (Symbolic Amplification)	T2: Institutional Betrayal

Fig.	Collection Hashtag	Primary Genre Code(s)	Discursive Strategy	Theme
7	#FreeJacobZuma	NG-4 (Ideological Framing); NG-5 (Historical Memory)	DS-3 (Symbolic Amplification); DS-1 (Emotive)	T1: Political Persecution
8	#FreeJacobZuma	NG-5 (Historical Memory & Emotive Symbolism)	DS-3 (Symbolic Amplification); DS-1 (Emotive)	T1: Political Persecution
9	#PhoenixMassacre	NG-5 (Historical Memory); NG-4 (Ideological)	DS-1 (Emotive Framing); DS-3 (Symbolic)	T3: Racialised Violence
10	#July2021Unrest	NG-1 (Populism); NG-2 (Propaganda)	DS-6 (Repetition & Virality); DS-2 (Scapegoating)	T4: Hashtag Mobilisation
11	#PhoenixMassacre	NG-4 (Ideological); NG-5 (Historical Memory)	DS-6 (Repetition & Virality); DS-3 (Symbolic)	T4: Hashtag Mobilisation
12	#FreeJacobZuma	NG-5 (Historical Memory); NG-1 (Populism)	DS-1 (Emotive Framing); DS-3 (Symbolic)	T1: Political Persecution
13	#July2021Unrest	NG-1 (Populism); NG-3 (Misinformation)	DS-2 (Scapegoating); DS-4 (Participatory)	T2: Institutional Betrayal
14	#PhoenixMassacre	NG-3 (Misinformation); NG-4 (Ideological)	DS-3 (Symbolic Amplification); DS-5 (Moral Dichotomy)	T3: Racialised Violence
15	#ZumaUnrest	NG-1 (Populism); NG-2 (Propaganda)	DS-4 (Participatory Engagement)	T4: Hashtag Mobilisation
16	#July2021Riots	NG-1 (Populism); NG-4 (Ideological)	DS-5 (Moral Dichotomies); DS-3 (Symbolic)	T3: Racialised Violence
17	#ZumaUnrest	NG-4 (Ideological); NG-5 (Historical Memory)	DS-1 (Emotive Framing); DS-3 (Symbolic)	T1: Political Persecution

Fig.	Collection Hashtag	Primary Genre Code(s)	Discursive Strategy	Theme
18	#ZumaUnrest	NG-2 (Propaganda); NG-4 (Ideological)	DS-3 (Symbolic Amplification); DS-5 (Moral Dichotomy)	T2: Institutional Betrayal
19	#PhoenixMassacre	NG-3 (Misinformation); NG-4 (Ideological)	DS-2 (Scapegoating); DS-5 (Moral Dichotomy)	T3: Racialised Violence
20	#ZumaUnrest	NG-2 (Propaganda); NG-3 (Disinformation)	DS-4 (Participatory); DS-6 (Repetition)	T4: Hashtag Mobilisation

HASHTAG DISTRIBUTION SUMMARY

Hashtag	Figures	Count
#July2021Unrest	1, 2, 3, 6, 19	5 tweets
#July2021Riots	13	1 tweet
#PhoenixMassacre	5, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16, 17, 20	8 tweets
#FreeJacobZuma	4, 7, 8, 12, 18	5 tweets
#ZumaUnrest	15	1 tweet
TOTAL	—	20 tweets

CODING DECISION RULES

Decision Point	Rule Applied
Multiple genre codes per tweet	Where a tweet operated through more than one narrative genre simultaneously, all applicable codes were assigned. Intersecting genres were treated as a finding in themselves.
Distinguishing primary from secondary hashtags	The five primary hashtags (#July2021Unrest, #July2021Riots, #FreeJacobZuma, #PhoenixMassacre, #ZumaUnrest) are the collection gateways. Secondary derivative hashtags (e.g. #JusticeForZuma, #HandsOffZuma, #PhoenixKillings) appearing within tweet text were coded

Decision Point	Rule Applied
	as inductive evidence of networked amplification (IC or PT codes) rather than assigned as collection hashtags.
Misinformation vs disinformation	Disinformation (NG-3D) was coded only where deliberate fabrication was present (e.g. forged documents, demonstrably false claims). Misinformation (NG-3M) was applied to misleading or contextually distorted claims without clear evidence of intent.
Coding visual elements	Images, video stills, and graphic content were coded using the same category set as verbal text. Visual indicators were recorded in brackets: e.g. NG-5 [MK imagery]; DS-3 [Estcourt prison photograph].
Theme assignment	Each tweet was assigned to the thematic formation most directly operative in its primary evaluative claim. Tweets contributing to multiple themes were assigned to the most dominant logic.
Reflexive memos	A memo was recorded for each analytical session documenting interpretive decisions and alternatives considered, maintaining the dependability and confirmability audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

APPENDIX C: EDITING CERTIFICATE FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR

DR RICHARD STEELE

BA HDE MTech(Hom)

HOMEOPATH

Registration No. A07309 HM

Practice No. 0807524

Freelance academic editor

Associate member: Professional Editors'
Guild, South Africa

154 Magenta Place

Gxarha [Morgan Bay]

5292

Eastern Cape

082-928-6208

rsteele@vodamail.co.za

rsteele201@outlook.com

EDITING CERTIFICATE

Re: **KHOLOFELLO SOLOMON SEROTA MOGOTLANE**

Master's dissertation: **EXPLORING MEDIA COUNTER-
NARRATIVES OF THE NATIONAL PROSECUTING
AUTHORITY REGARDING THE JULY 2021 UNREST**

I confirm that I have edited this dissertation and the references for clarity and language. I returned the document to the author with track changes so correct implementation of the changes and clarifications requested in the text and references is the responsibility of the author. I am a freelance editor specialising in proofreading and editing academic documents. My original tertiary degree which I obtained at the University of Cape Town was a B.A. with English as a major and I went on to complete an H.D.E. (P.G.) Sec. with English as my teaching subject.

Dr Richard Steele

18 May 2026

per email