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The *Japa syndrome* and the migration of Nigerians to the United Kingdom: an empirical analysis

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Abstract

Since the early years of independence, Africa has witnessed varying degrees of migration-regular and irregular. Scholarships in African regional studies have mainly attributed this phenomenon to factors such as high poverty levels, rising unemployment, and the deplorable economies of most African countries, Nigeria inclusive. However, the post-Covid-19 trend of out-migration of Nigerians to the UK, known as *japa* to the United Kingdom (UK) and other parts of the world, is concerning with multi-faceted implications. The study investigates the endogenous and exogenous variables responsible for this *Japa syndrome* in Nigeria. It contends that beyond the unfavourable economic climate and the lingering security issues among other internal vices in Nigeria, the current trend of out-migration bears a connection with the neo-liberal structure of the UK and the emerging global trend. The study argues further that the *mad rush* out-migration portends hydra-headed implications for the two countries and Africa at large. The study adopts a qualitative research design, including the utilisation of primary and secondary data. It draws primary data through pre-set standard e-interviews with thirty-six (36) Nigerian University students from seventeen (17) universities in the UK. The thematic analytic framework is applied to this data, with the product being an essay defined by seven sections.

Keywords: Out-migration, Africa, Nigerians, The United Kingdom, Study permit, *Japa syndrome*

Introduction

The 'new normal' in Africa's regular or irregular migration can be directly traced to the last two decades (Nwalutu et al., 2022). This involves a massive transnational migration of Africans, including Nigerians, to other parts of the world, especially Europe, through illegal routes, porous land borders, the Sahara, and across the Mediterranean into Europe, or through legalised routes with the required documents. The irregular migration culture is a notorious endeavour that, over the years, has led to the deaths of many Nigerians and fellow 'backway' migrants in the Sahara Desert, the Maghreb region, and the Mediterranean (Awosusi et al., 2021; Ikuteyijo, 2020; Okunade, 2021a). The inadequate national and economic restructuring, among others, to

address the cross-border menace has further put many African states in a situation of fragility. Beyond the age-long irregular migration trend, many Nigerians are desperately paying 'the price' for legal migration from the country for the golden fleece abroad. This is not to say that the culture of irregular migration has become extinct on the continent; indeed, scores of Nigerians and other African nationals, especially from the West Africa sub-region, are daily leaving the country through irregular means (Okunade, 2021a)).

However, the recent frenzy for outmigration among Nigerian youths is alarming. The new trend has bred the 'adoption' of the colloquial term *Japa* among the populace to describe the mass outmigration in Nigeria. *Japa* is a novel term used by Nigerians to describe the outmigration trend of Nigerians into Europe and other parts of the world. At a recent Youths in Business Forum, a French Ambassador curiously quizzed one of the Nigerian youths to understand the context and meaning of *japa*, as popularly used in the country. In response, Peter Dingba, a Nigerian youth, averred that it is 'a word that describes the entrepreneurial spirit of Nigerians; in that same word, it means that Nigerians want to export their contents, gifts, skills, and products, including themselves'. This goes to say that *japa* is a 'self-exportation' of Nigerians abroad. According to Professor Toyin Falola, *Japa* is a Yoruba word that means to flee, and once achieved, a celebration comes with it as it feels more like gaining freedom at last (Premium Times, 2022). *Japa* means 'fleeing' beyond the shores of Nigeria. That is, deploying any migration strategy (regular or irregular) to escape from Nigeria's territory to other parts of the world. Although novel in literature, *Japa* is not a new development in Nigeria. As a concept, it explains not only the exodus of Nigerians through its international air borders (a phenomenon that attracted the terminology), but also the age-long practice of irregular migration, which seems to be ignored by the people and the concerned local actors.

Available statistics have further put the *japa syndrome* among Nigerians into better perspective. In 2018, for instance, Schengen countries such as Germany, Hungary, Finland, Italy, and Spain, which are Nigerians' popular destinations, saw an increase in visa applications from Nigeria (The Guardian, 2019). A total of 88,587 visa applications were received, of which 49.8% were rejected (The Guardian, 2019). This means that 44,076 applications were denied (Sahara Reporters, 2018). The most recent statistics show an increase of 51% in the rejection rate of Schengen visa applications lodged by Nigerians (Schengen visa info, 2022). Furthermore, according to recent statistics released by the UK government, 486,869 study visas were granted as of June 2022, 71% more than in 2019. Nigeria ranks third after India and China, increasing from 8,384 to a record high of 65,929 in study visas to the UK. This shows a geometric increase in the mobility of people between Nigeria and the UK.

Our analysis proves that many internal and external factors have contributed to this trend. The recent EndSars national youth protests of October 2021 and the attendant Toll Gate Massacre have been argued to have influenced the massive outmigration of Nigerians. The Nigerian youth's protest, which was an outburst against police brutality over the years, was alleged to have been ruthlessly aborted by the Nigerian government (U.S. News, 2020). The response, which was greeted with public criticism, especially from the youths, instigated an increased outmigration of the Nigerian youth (Okunade, 2021b).

Literature is replete with various works on the phenomenon of youth migration from sub-Saharan Africa with a focus on Nigeria (Akinyemi and Ikuteyijo, 2009; Hammond, 2015; Ikuteyijo, 2020; Okunade, 2021a; Adhikira et al., 2021; Nwosu et al., 2022). These scholarly works explored the push and pull factors responsible for out-migration. Though they could be generally classified as being political, economic, and socio-cultural (Okunade and Bakare, 2020), scholars have identified specific factors such as high level of poverty, poor economic conditions, a high rate of unemployment, the quest for a greener pasture, the desire to acquire international academic qualifications, a high level of insecurity, the fear of persecution and so on. In a different study, Okunade (2021a) identified greed and disinformation as salient factors that could also be responsible for this drive. The study approached the *Japa syndrome* in the context of the recent exodus of Nigerians into the United Kingdom (UK). It investigated the core factors (push and pull) responsible for this recent *japa syndrome* in Nigeria. As the available statistics reveal that most Nigerians enter the UK through study channels (study permits), the study sought to determine if this migration is aimed at acquiring knowledge or it is a mere survival strategy. Lastly, the authors projected the implications of this phenomenon for the national lives and economies of Nigeria and the UK.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design utilising a case study approach. This was most suitable for this study, as we delved into the mass outmigration of Nigerians into the UK through study channels. Secondary data, such as literature, reports, online commentaries, reviews, video clips, and others, on migration, were consulted, while primary data were obtained via interviews. The target population for this study comprised Nigerian students in the UK. The participants included cisgender males and females. Through telephone discussions and the Google Forms Survey Tool, 36 Nigerian students across 17 universities in the UK were interviewed. This enabled us to reach our targeted audience quickly and seamlessly. Of the total sampled population, responses were gotten from 23 respondents via the online Google forms, 6 via WhatsApp chats, and telephone interviews were conducted with the last 7 respondents. The respondents were between the ages of 20 and 50 and hail from different geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Out of the total study population, the age bracket of 36–40 years has the highest number with a percentage of 38.8%, while the age bracket of 20–25 years has the lowest percentage of 8.7%. The age bracket of 46 had an appreciable rate of 13%. The majority is 13%. Many of the respondents were postgraduate students, while a very small proportion of 7% were undergraduate students. The male population was the highest, with a percentage of 52.2%, while the female population had 47.8%. Before leaving Nigeria, 87% of the respondents were middle-class individuals, and business owners, while 13% of the respondents were unemployed. Of the 87% in the middle class, 73.5% were gainfully employed and had businesses running, while 26.1% were underemployed. 69.6% had dependents in the UK, while 30.4% had no dependents. The collected data were thematically analysed vis-à-vis the crux of the study. For ethical reasons, the respondents were anonymously cited.

Out-migration of Nigerians to the UK: theoretical perspectives

Migration and its attendant contemporary patterns in Africa and elsewhere in the world have been framed and explained using different paradigms such as Neoliberalism, Globalisation, and the Political Economy of Migration (Massey et al., 1994; Adeyanju et al., 2011; Kotz, 2015; Jua, 2003; Beneria, 2012). Albeit relevant, none is sufficient to explain the endogamous and exogamous migration dynamics on the continent and in other parts of the world. This is because international migration results from what Massey et al. (1994) denoted as cumulative causation, which is beyond what a single paradigm can capture. In addition to the above frameworks, the State Fragility and Anomie paradigms have also been engaged to identify and explain the internal variables responsible for the *japa syndrome* of Nigerians to the UK.

In his article "Neoliberalism, Globalization, and Financialization: Understanding Post-1980 Capitalism," David Kotz explicates the idea of neoliberalism with a focus on the United States. Neoliberalism involves creating an economic structure that weakens the functioning of public systems and institutions such that they become inefficient while private businesses and companies operate freely within the market, making a maximum profit with optimal performance. This implies that employee-employer relations decline and unions' role in determining wages and working conditions becomes marred. Consequently, the determination of working conditions and wages was left in the hands of market forces as opposed to labour-management negotiation in a regulated capitalist era, giving employers the free will to institutionalise the casualisation of workers (Kotz, 2015). Explaining this within the context of the UK, the government/public funding of educational institutions in the country has been a subject of debate (Brazzill, 2021). Among other things, the UK government took away funding decisions of schools from the elected Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to the schools (Royna 1995), and imposed per capita funding on students, deepening the inequalities witnessed in the state, making the rich richer and the poor coming poorer (Kotz, 2015; Whitty et al., 1998). Entrance into UK tertiary institutions, thus, requires top-up fees. By implication, tertiary institutions have become racialised and hierarchised, segregating the poor from attending such universities and restricting them to universities that fall under the country's lower divisions of higher education (Hill and Roskam, 2009).

To cushion the resultant effects of the decline in public funding of education, most UK tertiary institutions increased the enrolment of international students who could afford the "top-up fees" at the expense of local students' enrolment (Blanden & Machin, 2004; Brazzill, 2021; Chowdry et al., 2013). Most higher institutions achieved this by using different "international admission agents" and other concessions to attract international students from Africa and beyond (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Woodhall, 1989). Young people from African states, Nigeria included, then leverage this "open check" to migrate. According to University UK (2017), in 2016, international students comprised 43% of total student enrolment for postgraduate research programmes, while 30% of research and academic staff were non-UK citizens. Meanwhile, the tuition fee for international students from outside the UK or EU is three times more than that of nationals from the UK or EU (Hillman, 2018).

Further, the contemporary trend of outmigration in Nigeria and elsewhere can also benefit from the political economy of international migration, which draws on the

relationships between the capitalist economy, migration, and exploitation or oppression (Adeyanju and Oriola, 2011). This critical approach to migration is premised on the argument that developing countries such as Nigeria and other African states have a substantial human capital exploited by developed/wealthy countries such as the UK (Richmond, 1994). That is, the uneven economy of the global system pushes people to migrate from a poor and unstable territory to a rich and stable one. The argument, in essence, is that the economic needs of poor countries serve as a push for the migration of their citizens, while the pull factor has to do with the attraction of developed/wealthy countries to migrants (Li, 2003). In context, the unstable and poor economies of Nigeria and some African states serve as a push variable for this new trend of outmigration in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, while demand for labour to service the post-industrial economy in the UK could be seen as a *pull* factor. As small business service firms keep growing in Britain, the demand for more professionals has grown to service the economy (Bryson 1997). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institute for Fiscal Studies noted a drop in vacancies across all sectors by at least 20%,¹ with food services and accommodation falling to 93%. Sectors such as social care, health, and education remained stable.² However, vacancies were seen to be on the increase since April 2020, with a record of 1.3 million vacancies between November 2021 and January 2022.³ According to the Office of National Statistics, this amounts to an increase of 65.5% from the pre-COVID period.⁴ Three major factors are responsible for the increase in labour shortages. First, as given by the Institute for Employment Studies, has to do with the growing number of people not working and not looking for work either.⁵ Second, the decline in foreign workers in the UK due to Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic made many return to their countries (BBC, 2022). Third are increasing jobs with low wages with little or no benefits.⁶ International students, thus, serve as a source of supply to fill this vacuum as casual workers in most sectors of the UK economy.

According to Giddens (2003), globalisation has birthed a politically, culturally, and economically interconnected world, whereby distant/global events influence individuals' local lives, actions, and perceptions. In the words of Giddens (2003: 87), 'although everyone lives a local life, phenomenal worlds, for the most part, are truly global'. This entails that the nuances of globalisation in terms of breakthroughs in technological tools, such as the internet and social media, have bridged the gap between local and global lives. Globalisation has engendered a 'virtual world' through which individuals, especially youths, can interact seamlessly with their peers in other parts of the world through the internet and other social media networks. These virtual networks, as engaged by migrants to impress their peers and familiarise them with available opportunities in other parts of the world, consciously and unconsciously drive them to stretch beyond

¹ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/job-opportunities-during-pandemic>.

² <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/how-has-the-pandemic-affected-industries-and-labour-in-the-uk/>.

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/jobsandvacanciesintheuk/february2022>.

⁴ *ibid*.

⁵ <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/labour-market-statistics-january-2022>.

⁶ <https://ifs.org.uk/news/no-jobseekers-paradise-vacancies-above-pre-pandemic-levels-only-low-paid-occupations-and>.

their local boundaries (Ballard, 1987). According to Adeyanju and Oriola (2011), virtual networks create a new form of cross-border interaction between migrants, friends and families in their home country, resulting in admiration and desire by the latter for a similar life abroad. Hence, the drive of Nigerian youths to outmigration to savour opportunities in the UK, as portrayed by their peers through social media.

Drawing from the State Fragility framework, when a state fails in its social contract to guarantee basic security to its citizens, maintain the rule of law and justice, or provide a public good, it results in the prevalence of criminalities; refugees, and outmigration (regular or irregular) of its populations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-OECD, 2007, 2012; Sternehäll, 2016; Di John, 2010). Accordingly, a state of fragility is unleashed in a country when a government no longer meets the needs of its people, loses popular support, and when the state-society relationship (social contract) in terms of security and service delivery is fraying (Menocal, 2011). Rotberg (2003) averred that the ripple effect is usually cross-border issues such as migration (regular and irregular which aptly captures Nigeria's situation. The failure to provide its increasing population with job opportunities, basic infrastructure, security, and other essentials has created a fragile system resulting in massive outmigration of Nigerians.

Robert K. Merton's anomie paradigm also put the Nigerians' *japa syndrome* in perspective. Merton (2010) posits that anomie (youth anti-social behaviour) occurs when there is a cultural breakdown, owing to the societal emphasis on monetary success with little or no attention on the legally acceptable ways to achieve such success. Once this culture commences in a society, the result is usually a drive for almost everyone to achieve lofty goals through whatever means. This culture breeds greed. In the case of Nigeria, the ostentatious lifestyle of politicians depicts them as selfish individuals who only seek power to enrich themselves and tend to forget their primary obligation when in power. 'Vulnerable' individuals in such society, especially youths, are thus 'forced' into criminality like cybercrime, armed robbery, kidnapping, and ritual killing to meet up with the luxurious lives of the corrupt politician (Nwankwo and James, 2016). This malaise has spawned criminalities such as cybercrime, kidnapping, and outmigration in Nigeria, even when some have good jobs and profitable businesses.

The push and pull factors responsible for the *Japa syndrome* of Nigerians to the United Kingdom

From the data collected, Nigerian students in the UK advanced various *push* and *pull* factors for their actions and decisions to *japa* to the UK. These include declining economic conditions, career projection, exhaustion, mainly by professionals, the quest for a secured future for their children, migration delusion or obsession, lingering security issues, and study to obtain the Golden Fleece in the UK.

Declining economic conditions

Nigeria's poor economic state accounts for many Nigerians' pushes to study in the UK. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, the living conditions of Nigerians were already on the brink of collapse while the pandemic unleashed its 'terror' on the national space and its people. This period welcomed inflation, unemployment, and other economic vices that have overtaken the country. Many of the respondents

from the interview survey noted that, as university graduates, they were underemployed for many years and had to move on in the quest for a better life. The UK provides a better environment where they can thrive, explore their potential and live a good life. In the words of one of the respondents, 'UK is a well-organised society, with a system that's working when compared to Nigeria, there are many job prospects here (the UK) and the health system is much better than Nigeria.'⁷ Another respondent noted that 'Nigeria is a no-go country. The situation is very bad at the moment',⁸ an assertion that mirrors the mentality of Nigerian youths, which Adeyanju and Oriola (2011) captured as a 'front page' portrayal of the West by immigrants to impress peers in their home countries.

However, the question to ask at this point is how some of these 'Japa-ists', previously underemployed or unemployed in Nigeria, managed to raise the enormous funds needed for this capital-intensive project. Studying in the UK is financially demanding. Most of the higher education institutions in the UK require a minimum initial financial commitment from international students before they are even issued the required documents for visa processing. This payment ranges from 30–50% of the total tuition fee, which is about 3,000–7,000 euro, depending on the school. Besides, visa processing and other documentation come with costs. On the migration expenses and funding of their study, some respondents gathered funds from different sources, such as personal savings, the sale of private properties, and loans from friends, families, and financial institutions. A respondent narrated thus: 'My mum sold our landed property inherited after the demise of my father, and I took a loan too'.⁹ This shows the extent a man can go in the quest for survival. This ongoing massive migration trend implies a colossal capital flight or transfers from an economically-backward country, like Nigeria, to a developed country like the UK.

Career projection

Sequel to the earlier argument, the drive to study in the UK was stirred by some respondents' desire to advance their careers, which the Nigerian space currently denies them. Some respondents believe the UK offers a better space for realising their visions and aspirations. Notably, however, although an average Nigerian youth is naturally career-driven with a flair for formal education, the educational system in Nigeria is currently failing due to non-payment of lecturers' salaries/arrears, and poor educational facilities, among others. For example, the leading academic body in the country, known as the ASUU-Academic Staff Union of Universities, was involved in industrial action which was conditionally halted over eight months later in October 2022.¹⁰ Notably, all academic activities ceased in public universities during the strike, thereby disrupting the academic calendar in all public universities. The respondents claimed that this worrisome situation in the country pushed them to the UK. According to one of the respondents, 'too many strikes by the academic body (ASUU) in Nigeria has caused delays in completing a course, and with the huge dissatisfaction with the standard of study,' hence

⁷ Interview, November 2022.

⁸ Interview, November 2022.

⁹ Interview, November 2022.

¹⁰ See <https://punchng.com/breaking-asuu-suspends-strike-after-eight-months/>.

japa became inevitable. Similarly, a respondent stated, ‘I choose the UK because it allows self-development for global opportunities’. In the words of another respondent, ‘I took this decision to add to my professional qualifications and also work in a better environment.’¹¹ Also, some noted that the prolonged ASUU strike had made it difficult to complete their postgraduate studies, which could enhance their chances of getting desired jobs, and those who had paid jobs needed the certificate for promotion. As noted earlier, some were underemployed and were getting frustrated already. Since the ASUU and the government had failed to reach a compromise, meaning that the end of the strike was not in sight, they needed a ‘Plan B’, and that was to leave the country.

Career exhaustion/saturation

In sharp contrast to the above point, some respondents averred that they did not leave Nigeria because they did not have the financial capacity for the lives that they wanted to live in Nigeria. Those in this category are professionals in different industries, such as banking, education, and health as well as a few business individuals. According to many professionals, they had reached the peak of their careers and felt saturated; hence, they wanted a change of environment. According to a respondent who was a bank manager in Nigeria, “as a bank manager, I got to a point where I was no longer getting challenged in my career. I was totally exhausted and bored of the job and the country as a whole.”¹² A businesswoman who ran a chain of supermarket stores in a major city in the southwest explained: “I got tired of everything because the cost of running these stores increased geometrically.....had to buy heavy duty generators.....the cost of fuelling them with diesel as well as the cost of maintenance....workers asking for a pay rise which I do not blame them for....terrible public infrastructure like bad roads and increased crime that made us close early even after arranging for private security. I just abandoned everything and left.”¹³ With the sense of urgency, those in this group had, the study channel is currently the easiest path to achieve their aspiration. Hence, they utilised the opportunity. This equally explains why older Nigerians between the ages of 46–50 have also explored this route and are among the ‘japa-ists’ in the UK.

Dependents’ future ‘security’

Most of the respondents alluded to having dependents in the UK, indicating that they have families living in the UK. This corroborates the recent statistics released by the UK Home Office showing the presence of many Nigerian dependents in the UK. Nigerians make up 40% of dependents accompanying foreign students in the UK.¹⁴ The surge in the number of dependents accompanying Nigerian migrants to the UK, informed the recent policy statement by UK government to reduce the number of dependents international students could take to the country. This decision has, however, raised arguments for and against the UK. The rationality and legality of this decision are not the concern of this study, but they call for future investigation. A sample of Nigerian students in the

¹¹ Interview, November 2022.

¹² Interview, November 2022.

¹³ Interview, November 2022.

¹⁴ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11302375/Migrants-Nigeria-bringing-highest-number-relatives-UK.html>.

UK noted that they had decided for their children because they wanted them to grow up in a sane environment, which Nigeria currently deprives them. Many of the respondents lamented that the Nigerian government has no system to secure children's futures. A participant noted, 'This decision was taken so that my children have good and functional education'¹⁵; hence, the quest to migrate to a more functional country where the children's education, health and career are guaranteed. A few of them, for instance, noted that they do not have the intention of staying back after their studies initially, but given the quality of education that they have seen their children exposed to, they will never return to Nigeria. A respondent also noted, 'I have seen what this country has to offer my kids, I am willing to pay the sacrifice to keep them here.'¹⁶

Migration delusion and obsession

A category of individuals holds a strong opinion and a misguided conviction that they will never succeed in Nigeria unless they migrate to other countries. In other words, they believe that their success only lies beyond the shores of Nigeria. The responses of some sampled Nigerian students in the UK affirm this. A respondent confessed that he had since made plans to relocate. He, therefore, took the study route because of the ease of securing admission and a visa in the UK. According to him, 'the ease of gaining admission and the certainty of getting a visa makes it a good means to an end'¹⁷ The end, in this instance, refers to relocation. Some gave other reasons for their decisions that do not sound logical and justifiable for study purposes. Another participant also confessed that he has been desperate to 'escape' Nigeria at all costs, as his siblings currently live in America. According to him, 'All attempts made to enter the United States proved abortive as I was denied multiple times by the Embassy in Lagos. I had no choice but to switch to the UK, which is much faster though expensive.'¹⁸ This shows that the UK provided an *escape route* for him. In addition, a participant declared that he took the decision because of the opportunity to be in a multicultural space. He said, "I took the study route because of the 'multi-diverse culture' in the UK. As much as the respondent understood what he meant, it is difficult to place the relationship between the acquisition of an academic certificate and being in a multicultural environment. These responses reflect the illogical mindset of some Nigerian youths, an aftermath of anomie currently ravaging the Nigerian space. For them, it is not important wherever they go, as what is paramount to them is just to leave Nigeria. This resonates with the mindset of many Nigerian youths who embark on irregular migration through the Sahara and the Mediterranean to cross Europe.

Lingering security issues

The state of insecurity in Nigeria has heightened the fear of many Nigerians. This continues to manifest in the form of hijacking, kidnapping, armed robbery, and so on within the Nigerian space. Nigerians have responded to this differently by evolving different

¹⁵ Interview, November 2022.

¹⁶ Interview, November 2022.

¹⁷ Interview, November 2022.

¹⁸ Interview, November 2022.

survival strategies. One of the coping strategies is emigration, which is currently the order of the day in the country. While many respondents noted the high level of insecurity in the country, some affirmed their fear and unwillingness to continue living in such a situation. According to a female respondent, 'Nigeria's situation is getting worse....in terms of security, economic advancement, police harassment, etc.'¹⁹ This confirms the assertion made earlier in the study on the effect the aborted *EndSARS* movement would have on the outmigration trend of Nigerians. Additionally, while some respondents confessed that they were just fearful when they thought of the country's future, others pointed to the trepidation surrounding the 2023 general election. In fact, the conduct of some politicians towards the 2023 general election raised tension within the polity as ethnoreligious sentiments, which usually trigger electoral violence in the country, was playing out. As noted by a respondent, 'No one is sure of the outcome of the election and the chaos that might happen thereafter. As we can see, our politicians making inciting speeches that can lead to violence....no one is sure of what will happen really' The Nigeria Police Force's assurance that a peaceful election that would be free and fair was considered reliable by the people.²⁰

Study as a means to an end

It is noteworthy that many of the respondents' intentions point to relocation. A question that arises here is, 'Why the UK?' There is a rush to the UK because of the seamless process for international students to gain admission into UK universities, especially for postgraduate studies. As a result, many Nigerians have decided to explore and exploit the study route to gain access to the UK, despite the huge demands required and the process involved. These will be touched on in this section. This remains a *pull* factor responsible for this phenomenon. Whereas many stated that they took the decision to develop themselves and be better equipped for the labour requirements in the new sphere, the majority avowed that they would never return to Nigeria. A respondent noted that he had taken that route to join his family in the UK. A participant asserted that 'the study was a means to an end; the end is relocation.'²¹ This shows that the intention was not to go study but only a sure way to exit Nigeria and transit into a better environment. Another maintained as follows: 'the UK is the most open country that accommodates foreigners at the moment so, I decided to grab the opportunity'²² She noted further that she encouraged many of her friends to utilise the opportunity while it lasts. While many had succeeded, some did not because of the huge financial demands required for the process. This implies that, though the process requires huge financial outlay, many commit themselves to it as they are more concerned about the result.

¹⁹ Interview, November 2022.

²⁰ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/10/2023-elections-no-cause-for-alarm-police-assure/>.

²¹ Interview November 2022.

²² Interview November 2022.

Easy access to jobs

Many participants' responses pointed to the fact that the UK is a country of choice because it allows them to work legally and earn a living as students. According to a respondent, 'Being a foreign education consultant, I can boldly say that up to 60% took the step to study in the UK just to get out of the country and have the legal right to work and get their indefinite leave to remain. Most are doing it to buy a future for their children in a more enabling environment.'²³ another participant admitted that 'most students came for work if we will be honest....care jobs obviously.'²⁴ Looking at the jobs available to Nigerian students or international students, a participant said, 'most of the jobs available do not require qualifications.'²⁵ she added that 'security, care, support jobs, and warehouse' as jobs many Nigerian students take up.²⁶ This situation stirs the curiosity to inquire if these individuals were prepared for such jobs. Responses showed that many were aware of the reality before leaving Nigeria, but some were ignorant of the situation. However, because they knew why they had left Nigeria, they were encouraged to adapt to the system as a participant pointed out, 'I think we all know there are no opportunities back home (in Nigeria), so we came here to hustle'²⁷ Another respondent noted that, 'many of them did not prepare but trust Nigerians, they are resilient, and they learn very fast.'²⁸ On the other hand, a female participant stated, 'I believe many are prepared; however, some were not prepared for the consequences of disobeying the laws that come with these responsibilities.'²⁹ This implies that beyond the physical demands of such jobs, which many possess and are able to fulfil, they are ignorant of some professional ethics involved. In the words of a participant, 'physically, yes many are prepared, but most people are not prepared for the psychological demands of these jobs.'³⁰ Above all, a lady who is a project Officer for international students, declared, 'from my experience as an International Students' Project Officer, I will say that most of the Nigerian students were aware they would need to do such jobs as students, but not to get work sponsorship after completing their study' which is the reality of many currently.³¹

Furthermore, when asked about their living conditions in the UK and if they would consider returning to Nigeria, the majority averred the good life they were living and enjoying in the country and would never return to Nigeria. According to a participant 'it has been an awesome experience. No power outages, less struggles. Good roads, food is affordable, safety. Loving the experience here.'³² In a respondent's words, 'the UK is a very expensive and stressful country but better than Nigeria in terms of basic amenities such as water, good road, security etc.'³³ Chukwuma supported the perspective thus: 'I

²³ Interview, November 2022.

²⁴ Interview, November 2022.

²⁵ Interview, November 2022.

²⁶ Interview, November 2022.

²⁷ Interview, November 2022.

²⁸ Interview, November 2022.

²⁹ Interview, November 2022.

³⁰ Interview, November 2022.

³¹ Interview, November 2022.

³² Interview, November 2022.

³³ Interview, November 2022.

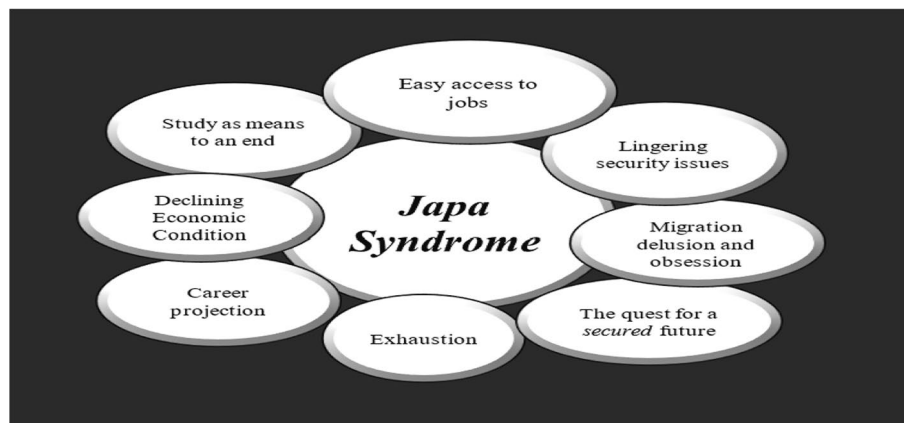


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework on the *Japa Syndrome* of Nigerians into the United Kingdom. Source: The Authors

am not as stressed as I was in Nigeria, and since the situation back home is still the same, I will not go back.³⁴ A participant noted that ‘The UK is a more structured society than Nigeria because the basic amenities are easily accessible to all irrespective of social status. There is also a reward for labour in the UK. Accommodation is just a bit expensive compared to Nigeria.’³⁵ For a participant, that ‘it is a completely better life, everything works here, you labour for your money, and you can enjoy it in peace without fear of kidnappers, you do not have to worry about little things like power and healthcare. I went to the hospital for my general check up, only a little blood sample was taken with ease, gave us all the results. In Nigeria, you will be moving from pillar to post in the hospital, it’s a shame because Nigeria has more resources than here, where all they have is tax’³⁶ This shows the lapses in the system, especially in the healthcare sector. Many politicians, including President Muhammadu Buhari, prefer medical vacations abroad. Recently, the president-elect, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, was alleged to have followed suit by travelling to London,³⁷ and later to France on medical vacation.³⁸ This act has been argued to be a replication of the trend that the outgoing president upheld throughout his tenure.³⁹

To conclude, a participant noted that ‘most international students after completing their studies are getting their work sponsorship through caregiver jobs. This is the major sector where many international graduates easily obtain work sponsorships now as employers of skilled talents are limited and can only take a certain number amidst tight competition.’⁴⁰ This implies that, even after spending so much on the acquisition of an international degree, which according to many, will make them more marketable in

³⁴ Interview, November 2022.

³⁵ Interview, November 2022.

³⁶ Interview, November 2022.

³⁷ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/539454-tinubu-travels-to-france.html?tztc=1>.

³⁸ <https://www.africanews.com/2023/03/23/tinubu-travelled-for-vacation-not-ill/>.

³⁹ <https://guardian.ng/news/youre-replicating-buharis-distasteful-foreign-medical-trips-huriwa-tells-tinubu/>.

⁴⁰ Interview, November 2022.

the global market, they end up picking up care jobs, which are the only readily-available options, so that they could remain legally and continue to work in the UK.

The aforementioned implies that a better life in the UK has been stated by many as the reason for their unwillingness to return to Nigeria. However, a few participants mentioned that they were only in the UK to study and would return on completing their studies. According to a participant, 'life in the UK is good and easy-going compared to Nigeria, but honestly, staying here has taught me that there is no difference between UK and Nigeria. The only difference is that the UK is more organised but when compared to living, Nigeria is far better.'⁴¹ A respondent observed the dynamics in the system, which is a reality many have to acknowledge. According to him, 'it's been challenging especially when you have to take on an unprofessional job as a student when you were already established before leaving Nigeria.'⁴² The lifestyle Nigeria permits is significantly better than that of the UK, according to a participant, who also mentioned that he had a job and family waiting for him there.⁴³ This suggests that he would return home after completing his education in the UK. The current situation, however, calls for a follow-up study in the near future to ascertain if these views remain valid.

Conceptualising the *Japa Syndrome* in Nigeria: a case of the United Kingdom

Given that this study's aim to unpack the push and pull factor the *japa syndrome* in Nigeria within the context of the UK, it is essential to develop a conceptual framework that speaks to the phenomenon based on the study's findings. A conceptual framework outlining the causes of the significant emigration of Nigerians to the UK for study is provided below (Fig. 1).

Implications of the massive outmigration for Nigeria and The United Kingdom

The stories of Nigerian immigrants to the UK show that the impact of outmigration is complex and hydra-headed for both the home and receiving countries. Nigeria is renowned for having a sizable human capital, which continues to be one of its soft power assets in the international arena. For instance, other wealthy/developed nations in Europe and Asia are openly and secretly hiring professionals from Nigeria in addition to Nigeria's deployment of human capital aid to several other African governments and the Caribbeans through its Technical Aid Corps Scheme (TACs). There is a brain drain and a loss of international influence when the majority of these professionals, who are national assets, are now voluntary migrants to the UK. All sectors of the Nigerian state have been negatively affected by the current migration spike. University lecturers, high school teachers, medical doctors, bankers, and so on are resigning their appointments out of frustration to navigate their way to a *sane system* (the UK) in anticipation of a better life. This is one of the features of a fragile/failed state as citizens are pushed out in search of greener pastures and, in this case, it comes with so much desperation given the current situation of the Nigerian state. One of the respondents, who had been a professional in one of the key sectors in Nigeria, lamented that, out of frustration with

⁴¹ Interview, November 2022.

⁴² Interview, November 2022.

⁴³ Interview, November 2022.

the country, he had been pushed to resign from his professional job in Nigeria and taken up an unprofessional one in the UK. In the authors' phone discussion with one of the respondents, a computer engineer in Nigeria, it was revealed that the bulk of professional migrants, including himself and his wife, were employed in the health sector in the UK as caregivers (unprofessional health assistants). Adding that skilled medical practitioners from Nigeria are easily absorbed into the health sector with 'better' working conditions. Available records show that over 5,600 Nigerian-trained or licensed medical doctors have migrated to the UK in the last eight years. This record includes nurses/midwives and other health professionals. Recently, the head of the Nigerian Medical Association publicly lamented that the Nigerian health sector is experiencing an unusual brain drain, with only 24, 000 licensed medical officers, less than 10% of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) minimum required standard. He noted further that the proportion of the available doctors to patients in the country now stands at a ratio of 1–30, 000 in some parts of the country⁴⁴ This is the current situation in all sectors of the country. Globalisation could be said to have assisted Nigeria's professionals to explore opportunities beyond the shores of Nigeria. While some have succeeded in relocating, the internet continues to provide information and as well facilitate communication between those that have emigrated and those still in Nigeria. With the process in place, there is constant exchange of opportunities and links which those in Nigeria continue to explore. As a result, there would continue to be outmigration of citizens, as students or professionals, from Nigeria.

Further, Nigeria's waning economic situation, which most respondents attributed to their migration, may be worsened, given the colossal capital transfer from the country to the neoliberal economy of the UK in terms of payment of tuition fees, relocating their families, and getting accommodation. In a survey carried out by SBM Intelligence, an estimated amount of 1,931,821,923.75 pounds was generated by the UK government from Nigerian students and their dependents during the 2021/ 2022 academic year.⁴⁵ Given Nigeria's deteriorating economic situation, this aroused curiosity about how and where such funds were generated. According to the testimonies of the respondents, the majority of them sold their own assets, obtained loans, and invested all of their savings in the project. This goes along with the political economy of migration thesis, which places migration in the context of economic inequalities between wealthy and poor countries, whereby migrants are drawn to, or induced from, the former into the latter. The corollary effect of this is economic exploitation, which is what most student migrants who are temporary or casual employees in the UK health sector suffer. They receive little salary and few or no benefits. It is important to stress that, contrary to what many migrants believe, the UK is not El Dorado. The lived experience of migrants in the UK will be a topic of research in our future treatise. According to Adeyanju and Oriola (2011), migrants' stories of life abroad typically disguise the unpleasant realities of their experiences, such as exploitation, racism, and unemployment. We predict a stark mismatch

⁴⁴ See <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/560772-brain-drain-nigeria-needs-363000-doctors-but-has-only-24000.html>.

⁴⁵ <https://www.sbmintel.com/2022/10/the-empire-strikes-back-how-britain-is-handling-the-japa-wave/>.

between the student migrants' experiences and their expectations, given the UK's neo-liberal system.

Also, given the massive dependents' migration cum unstable socio-political landscape of the country, we project that Diaspora remittances, which constitute a substantial percentage of Nigeria's GDP, may drastically drop. Aside from the fact that the migrants whose immediate families have relocated may have little or no one back home to send money to, the country's security situation might discourage the migrants from building up their 'treasures' at home country. This is borne out of the many negative experiences of Nigerians in the diaspora who visited Nigeria for different purposes. A recent story is that of a Nigerian who had invested in his hometown's agricultural and hospitality sectors and was kidnapped by bandits on arrival.⁴⁶ His abductors eventually killed him and others. Equally, the evidence reflects a decline in Diaspora remittances since 2019, when this massive migration peaked. According to available statistics by the World Bank, in 2018, the Diaspora remittance stood at 25 billion USD, which was 6.1% of the GDP. In 2019, it dropped to 23.81 billion USD; in 2020, it reduced to 17.21 billion-4% of the GDP.⁴⁷ The World Bank attributed the increased remittances to 19.2 billion USD in 2021 to the relative stability of the Naira-US Dollar rate (Olanrewaju, 2022). But with the current naira devalued status cum the massive migration in 2022, we project an enormous drop in overseas remittance in the country.

For the UK, as much as the Nigerian migrants would enhance/boost its economy and cushion its human resources deficit, it should prepare for the unexpected soon. As most of the migrants who migrated through the study channel paid between 30–50% of their tuition fees with the hope of balancing out as they worked and saved in the country, the UK may not be able to handle/absorb the socio-economic shock if such 'relocation strategy' failed. Since the major aim of some of the migrants is to *japa* from the 'hard life' in Nigeria and not necessarily to study, they may not mind dropping out. Besides, managing the rigours of UK academics with the hustling needed to raise funds for survival in the UK system and paying tuition fees may not be easy. Hence, dropping out and entering the UK informal sector may be inevitable. This would pose migration challenges to the country, leading to massive deportations of Nigerians, which could upset diplomatic relations between the two countries. Suppose the July 2022 'deportation agreement' between Nigeria and the UK is a 'Schlieffen plan' of the latter to prepare for outmigration eventualities, it may result in one of the highest international blunders of the twenty-first century. Because such a move would provoke public opinion in Nigeria and the UK, it may result in strained relations between the two countries.

Finally, if the UK government eventually produces a policy to prevent Nigerian migrants from bringing their dependents with them into the UK, the implications may be grievous for the migrants and the Nigerian state. Aside from the fact that the rate of divorce and broken marriages will peak, the number of vulnerable populations in the country will increase. Considering that the Nigerian Government does not have a structure or system that caters for citizens' essential needs, most of the children left behind

⁴⁶ <https://guardian.ng/news/gunmen-kill-kidnapped-hotelier-lautech-student-after-collecting-n5m-ransom-in-ogbomoso/>.

⁴⁷ See <https://guardian.ng/opinion/enough-of-nigerias-dependence-on-diaspora-remittances/>.

by their parents might become vulnerable to criminal gangs such as rapists, kidnappers, bandits, and terrorists in their quest to survive in an insecure country.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the lived experiences of Nigerian students in the UK vis-à-vis the Nigerian state, this article unpacks the *push* and *pull* factors responsible for the *japa syndrome* that Nigeria currently faces. Findings show that, though many Nigerians have found their way into the UK through the study channel, realistically, many used it to *japa* from Nigeria. Notably, since the process allows and accommodates immediate family members as dependents, it is a more effective pathway to be explored and utilised by many Nigerians as an *escape route* against poverty, under/unemployment, security threats and others.

The *japa syndrome*, discussed in the preceding section, shows more serious economic implications for an economically-declining state like Nigeria, given the colossal human and capital flight Nigeria is currently experiencing. It is critical to note that, despite the huge capital outflow in human and financial resources that this phenomenon affords the UK, it remains unacknowledged by the latter through factual statements and statistics. What is available so far in the public space is that Nigerian dependents account for 40% of all dependents who accompany international students in the UK, without corresponding statistics to show the turnover the UK government has benefited from the process and Nigerians specifically. This calls for careful attention by the UK government, as the effect of the process might have negative implications for Nigerians in the country. Nigerians might soon be seen as intruders in the UK, resulting in possible Afrophobia or xenophobic prejudice or attacks, as they are experiencing in South Africa.

Therefore, a holistic appraisal of this phenomenon lands solutions on the tables of Nigeria's politicians and governments at all levels. It is high time they started to adjust and see why they must show intentional commitment towards the performance of their primary functions as custodians of public funds for their management and utilisation for the common good of all. This is the only way they would fulfil their part of its social contract with Nigerian citizens. However, scholars have established that development will never stop migration. Thus, we argue that a deliberate effort by the Nigerian government to address internal crises would mitigate the desperation amongst Nigerians to emigrate and address the *Japa syndrome*, and Nigerians would be more rational in their decisions as it relates to migration. This is suggested as a major measure that can adequately address the current *japa syndrome* in Nigeria. As one of the respondents puts it, in line with our thought, 'the massive exodus of young Nigerians, I believe, is due to the economic hardship faced in Nigeria. Everyone is searching for a good life and wants that for their family. This trend will keep repeating itself until the Nigerian government puts things in order back home rather than stopping people from leaving. This assertion presents a solution capable of addressing this phenomenon in Nigeria. Until the Nigerian state shows the political will to make things right, the *japa syndrome* appears to be here to stay, and if the government only implements measures to stiffen the outmigration process of Nigerians through legitimate means without addressing the root causes of the drive, then many Nigerians would be pushed to consider the second option; that

is, through irregular migration that comes with numerous dangers and horrors as previous studies have shown.

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Author contributions

SK drew an abstract, problematized the study alongside a brief review of literature. He also drafted the interview protocol and analysed the findings of the study. EO identified the theories utilized in underpinning the study and discussed the implications of the *japa syndrome* on both countries while both authors drew a short conclusion. Both authors reviewed and edited the manuscript. Additions and deletions were done where deemed necessary by both authors.

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