

Original Article

WE ARE NOT ECONOMIC SCAVENGERS, BUT MIGRANT STUDENTS: TRUE LIVE EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN MIGRANT STUDENTS IN EUROPE

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Abstract

Millions of African migrant students have crossed and continue to cross the Mediterranean Sea yearly to Europe in search for better source of livelihood and foreign degrees. The migration of Africans to Europe, therefore, had made the hosts to be apprehensive and hostile towards the migrants. Based on the foregoing, the study explored the true-life story of African migrant students in Europe. Two research questions were formulated to guide the study. Qualitative approach was adopted, interpretive paradigm used to make sense of the migrants' narrative. Purposive sampling technique was deployed to select eleven European countries. Twenty-two migrant students were used to gather the information for the study. In line with qualitative approach adopted, narrative analysis was used to analyse the information narrated by the migrant students. Findings indicated that aside from the fact that the majority of African migrant students were segregated in all sphere of life, they also bullied emotionally. Furthermore, African migrant students were treated the way they were treated based on the allegation that they were criminals and economic scavengers.

Keywords: African migrant students, economic scavengers, Europe, migration.

Introduction

Political disharmony, natural disasters, socio-economic hardship, acquisition of high academic standards and the desire to obtain a better standard of living have compelled many young Africans to migrate to European countries. It is pertinent to say that no week passes by without a report of the death of African migrants in either the Sahara Desert or the Mediterranean Sea trying to cross to Europe for academic pursuit or greener pastures. According to Serraglio and Adaawen (2023), more than 400 migrants and refugees were drowned in early 2023 while attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean

from North Africa to Europe. Despite this yearly fatality, millions of African migrants still embark on the dangerous journey from the shores of Libya and Egypt often in small, inflatable boats, in search of a better life in Europe. The essence of migration is borne out of migrants strong believe that once they land in Europe economic and other challenges would be a thing of the past (Manik & Sigh, 2013). In similar circumstance, Adam, Trauner, Jegen and Roos (2020) opined that African migrants sees Europe as a continent where their dreams could be easily fulfilled, considering enormous opportunities available. In a similar circumstance, Horwood, Forin

and Frouws (2018) was of the view that the major drivers of migration from Africa to Europe are economic hardship, unemployment, political conflict, poor state of education and natural disasters. Most African migrants' dreams of accomplishment were dashed on arrival, as they are greeted with unfriendly disposition by the host countries. In other words, African migrants' joyful mode on arrival on their dream's land was suddenly turned to nightmare as they are detained in refugee camps or even jailed. Tevera (2013) argued that the hitherto high hopes by migrants on arrival in Europe were turned to perpetual fear which was occasioned by xenophobia, police brutality and tag of refugees by the host country. According to Garcia and Martin (2015), most European governments are currently working to cut the flows of migrants and asylum seekers through the introduction of unfriendly policies. In recent times, police brutality on migrants has emerged as one of the major contributing factors to violence in Europe. From all indications, the phenomenon has become an urban management challenge that deserves academic inquiry and policy attention (Tevera, 2013). The attack on migrants and other various forms of intolerance is a source of concern because it generates rhetoric that at times provides moral justification for the exclusion of migrants from accessing basic social services that naturally they are entitled to (Abraham, 2010). Aside from the above, most European coined the name such as refugees for all non-nationals living in Europe. This name given to the migrants was aimed at degrading their already battered image. Various studies such as Valentin (2018), Baysu and Phalet (2019) on social identity of migrants have been conducted during the past five years, however, there were disturbing findings from these studies. Despite these studies, literature has not shown any research carried out on topic under investigation. However,

De Haas (2013), Idemudia, Boehnke, Idemudia and Boehnke (2020), Laine (2020) has conducted landmark research on various areas on African migration to Europe. In light of the gap created, the researchers find it appropriate to unravel migrant university students' lived story in Europe. The research questions that would guide in arriving at valid findings are as follows:

- a. How do African migrant students have been treated by the Europeans?
- b. Why African migrant students have been treated the way they were treated by the Europeans?

Research Method

This study situates in qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2008), a qualitative approach is a process of understanding a social or human problem which is based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting. Similarly, the main strength of adopting qualitative research method lies in the depth of understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). It is on this strength that the researchers adopted the approach in order to unpack into African migrant students' lived experience in Europe. Based on qualitative design adopted, the researchers choose an interpretive paradigm to make sense of the African migrant students' life stories.

The population of the study is the entire African migrant students who reside and study in all universities in Europe. Based on the nature of the study which focused on African migrant students lived experience in Europe, a purposive sampling technique was deployed in the selection of eleven European countries where African migrant students are found. For clarity purposes, the countries purposively selected are; Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Norway,

Poland, Spain, Romania, and Turkey. Furthermore, two African migrant students each who studied for one academic programme or the other were purposively selected from each of the eleven countries. There was intensive debate between the researchers on the appropriate sample size for the study. Bearing in mind the nature of the study which is qualitative which requires a small sample size, moreover, Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, and McKibbin (2015); Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, and Young (2018) were of the view that qualitative research always need small sample size due to its rich and in-depth information that will be generated from the participants. Drawing from these scholars' positions, the researchers settled for twenty-two (22) participants for the study. Meanwhile, the participants' real name was replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality purpose.

In any study, the instrument that is used for the generation of the data is very important in the research study. The reason is based on the fact that poorly constructed instrument, negatively impacts the study which ultimately invalidates the findings. In light of the above, a semi-structured interview was designed to elicit information from twenty-two African migrant students. The semi-structured interview schedule consists of sixteen interview questions which border on the research questions. Before the interview, the researchers ensured that all ethical issues were taken care of. To ensure that participants willingly accept participation in the research, a Consent Form (CF) was designed and given to each participant for endorsement indicating their voluntary participation in the study. The researchers employed one research assistant in each country where the participants reside for the interview. Research assistants were virtually trained on ways to conduct the interview with the participants. Each research assistant was provided by

audio recorder and field note during the interview which lasted for a week. After the interview, the information was collated, and it was transcribed using Nvivo. After transcription, the data was subjected to open coding for categorisation. Moalusi (2020, p.85) stated that "categorisation of data is necessary for a qualitative study to reduce the number of concepts a researcher must work with and to build a big picture of the issues salient to understanding a social phenomenon under investigation." After categorisation of the data, the emergence themes were analysed using narrative analysis.

Results

Question 1: How do African migrant students have been treated by the Europeans?

Segregation of African migrant students

The majority of the participants interviewed reported in unionism that they are being segregated by the host countries in Europe. Diallo and Simo who live in Finland for the past ten years reported that they are treated by the Finnish like a leprosy patient. Diallo stated that the majority of white people have not seen black people, therefore, seeing him for the first time creates negative anxiety and a state of exclusion. Additionally, Kaula who is doing a master's degree programme in Norway categorically stated that he was segregated wherever he goes. When Kaula was asked to specifically mention the area in which he experienced segregation, he declared:

I want to state that segregation happens minutes in this country. However, the most annoying part is the one where I am being segregated by my classmates and educators. Most often, the majority of my classmates refused to share anything with me.

Notwithstanding the position expressed by Kaula, another migrant student (Sella) from Kenya narrated that she does not only experience segregation in the

university campus, she experienced segregation every day and in public spaces. She went further to report that every time she went to the shopping mall to buy some foodstuff, the kind of segregation she often experienced inside the bus or train by the whites make her to question whether God made a mistake in creation of black people. Sella concluded her story by saying that in spite of being segregated, she was once physically attacked by the white's street boys because of the colour of her skin.

Emotional Bully

Participants interviewed unanimously informed the researchers that they were usually bullied emotionally by Italian youths on social media. Fru who migrated from Cameroon to Italy said that anytime he accessed his Facebook page, he always saw the pictures of Monkey eating banana posted on his page. Fru continued his narrative by saying that he found the picture extremely disgusting and often felt less human. Similarly, Kasmile from Rwanda reported that he was not only bullied emotionally on social media, he was also bullied physically by the three Italian police. The researchers interrogated him how he was subjected to bullying by the police officers, he replied:

I met these Italian policemen on my way to my friend's house. I was accosted by two of them who requested that I should be searched. I did not resist being searched. However, the most frightening part of it was I search by the huge dog. I was emotionally terrified and traumatised.

The above excerpts indicated ways in which African migrant students are often treated by the hosts. From the interpretive perspective, oral narrative has shown that they were treated as second-class citizens by the hosts. Migrant students were often labelled with unspeakable social identity such as monkey.

Research Question 2: Why African migrant students have been treated the way they were treated by the Europeans?

Criminalisation of migrant students

The majority of participants interviewed reported that they are subjected to discrimination by the majority of the Europeans due to their perceived belief that they are criminals. Ruto and Jomo who reside in Turkey informed the researchers that anytime they found themselves in public space, most white men and women treated them as armed robbers, rapists, among others. In addition to the above assertion, Jomo narrated that black migrant students are often stopped and thoroughly searched by the police officers on patrol. When the researchers asked why they often treated the way they were treated, Jomo replied:

White people have this strong belief that black people are thieves and rapists. Aside from labelling most black people thieves, they also have this strong negative perception that blacks commit all forms of atrocities hence should be treated with disdain.

Notwithstanding the oral narrative of Ruto and Jomo, Nwenti and Sitkilla who school in one of the universities in Poland and Switzerland respectively, narrated that they are very often subjected to inhuman treatment by the whites, because of the colour of their skin and age long belief that all negative activities are perpetuated by black people in the country. Sitkilla went further to say that the mere fact few illiterate blacks who entered the country illegally engaged in criminalities does not in any way means that all black people in this country are criminals, therefore, he should never be treated as one. When Nwenti was further interrogated on the truism of the position of blacks' involvement in criminalities in the country. In Nwenti angrily said:

Let me inform you that people always give dog a bad name in order to kill it. How do you call the whole

African migrant students criminals? Few migrant students may have involved in criminalities that does not mean that all of us are criminals. Moreover, check official police statistics during the past ten years, you would establish that only two percent of criminal activities were perpetuated by the black migrants in this country.

In a similar circumstance, Kabilla who has stayed in Romania for over 12 years reported that the perception held by the majority of the Europeans irrespective of their educational attainment and social status is that black migrants are criminals. However, Kabilla went further to corroborate the position held by Nwenti by saying that if you are forced to look at the official police criminal records, you may agree with me that some of the criminal activities such as armed robbery, killing, public disturbance, and gangsterism, among others were committed by the natives. Kabilla, therefore, questioned whether a Norwegian far-right extremist by the name Anders Brivik who killed 77 teenagers ten years ago through a bomb attack and gun rampage was a black migrant student. Again, was Thomas Matthew Crooks who shot Donald Trump during a campaign rally in Pennsylvania was a black migrant, he queried.

Economic scavengers

Based on the views of the majority of the participants, most of the Europeans treated African migrant students with disdain. In fact, Taylor specifically informed the researchers that most Europeans held this unpopular and undiluted believe that African migrant students migrated to Europe for economic reason, not for scholarship as they made the world to believe. Taylor made these researchers to believe that Europeans are of view that migrants used acquisition of international degrees to migrate to Europe, whereas the migrants' intention is for economic exploration and exploitation. Similarly,

Geoginia who was very categorical with her statement said that most Spaniards are of the view that migrants are in the country to take jobs away from the natives and also drive down the wages. Geoginia went on to declare; *whites are of opinion that migrants are seen as economic scavengers, looking for any available job everywhere for any amount.*

In the same circumstance, Mathabo reported that she was called economic scavenger face-to-face by most Romanians when she went out to look for a job she is currently doing. She maintained that all the whites who works in this factory are always look at her as someone who can work for meagre Romanian Leu (RON) (Romanian currency).

Ambokile said that any migrant student can work up to 20 hours a week, provided his/her work does not interfere with his/her studies. Ambokile question why she is regarded as economic scavenger by the hosts when the Visa policy permits her work legally for 24 hours per week.

Discussion

Findings indicated that most African migrant students who lived in most countries in Europe were segregated by the majority of the Europeans. In fact, the subjection of the African migrant students to segregation was in all spheres of lives. One of the interviewees stated that she was segregated upon even by her some teachers who rarely asked her questions in the classroom. It was also uncovered that segregation happened in public space such as bus terminal, hospital, recreational park and shopping centre. From all indications, the segregation of African migrant students aside from making them (migrant students) to feel inferior to the white, it also have negative affects their overall academic achievement. Demintseva (2020) had earlier found that migrant students' segregation by the Whites has been growing for decades, therefore,

it has affected their academic attainment. Similarly, Murillo and Belavi (2021) held that segregation of migrants exerts a strong and negative impact on their academic outcomes. Possibly, that might have been the reason Schiff, Felouzis, and Perroton (2011) advised French authority to implement the policy of social mixing at the city level and at schools.

Another finding indicated that most African migrant students were subjected to emotional bullying by most white people. Participants such as Fru and Kasmile reported that they faced series of bullying both in the social media and social spaces. It was further discovered that they (African migrant students) were given some derogatory names by the hosts which affect them emotionally. The finding is corroborated with the position held by Sigona's (2018), Findor, Hruška, Jankovská and Pobudová (2021) who argued that the choice of migrants-related labels and categorizations such as refugees, economic scavengers, asylum seekers and monkeys has enormous implications on their emotional disposition.

Basic reason the participants gave why they were treated the way were treated in Europe by most white people was their frequent involvement in criminalities. Migrant students all over Europe established that the whites have this unsubstantiated perception towards the majority of them that they were notorious criminals. In fact, this position held by the whites and the inhuman treatment they also subjected was based on the believe that most criminal activities which happened in most part of European countries were perpetuated by migrants, the position they refuted. In line with the findings, Melossi. (2012, Frontuto (2017) have argued that migrants usually avoid deviant or criminal behaviour because they would lose than the natives when caught such as deportation after their jail term. Further findings revealed that migrant students were treated the way they were treated based of the fact that the hosts regarded them as economic scavengers who scrambled for available jobs in their countries.

From all indications, migrants established that they were seen as people who take all available jobs from the natives, hence the maltreatment. The finding is at variance with position held by Verwiebe, Kittel, Dellinger, Liebhart, Schiestl, Haindorfer and Liedl (2019); Olliff, Baak, Baddeley, Lino Lejukole, Munyonge, Saidi and Treuren (2022) who argued that migrants' jobs search is hindered by ability to speak country's language, devaluation or non-recognition of foreign educational degrees, lack of work experience, legal hurdles in accessing labour market, unfamiliarity with host country labour market norms and customs and discrimination.

Conclusion

African migrant students' desire to seek greener pasture outside their country of origin has compelled hosts to look at and treat them with high level of suspicion that they were in their country for sinister motives. The unsubstantiated allegation by hosts that they are criminally minded is worrisome, because it has been established that the majority of the criminal activities were perpetuated by the natives. Furthermore, the ill-treatment muted to migrant students which was based on the notion that they economic scavengers is unfortunate. This is because Münz, Straubhaar, Vadean and Vadean, (2007), Pearson and Sweetman (2019), Magni (2024) argued that though migrants are not wanted in most European countries, however, they contribute substantially to economic stability and growth of these countries.

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