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SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON HIGHLY SKILLED NIGERIAN
MIGRANTS' PERCEPTION OF RETURN MIGRATION

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List of Acronyms

UK   United Kingdom

US   United States

EU   European Union

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

NELM   New Economics of Labour Migration

ISCED   International Standard Classification of Education

PR   Permanent Residency

NYN   Nigerian Youths in Netherlands

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Abstract

This research delves into the perceptions of highly skilled Nigerian migrants towards returning to their home country and the role of social media in shaping and influencing their decisions. Through a qualitative approach, this study uses a semi-structured interview to elicit and investigate the narratives of twelve highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands. The findings indicate that the motivation for migration encompasses professional, economic, and personal factors. Returning to Nigeria is perceived as a retirement option after the achievement of personal and professional goals or as a viable alternative to illegal stay. Return visits serve as a practical alternative to permanent return, given the current economic, political, and security challenges in Nigeria. Social media has a significant influence on the non-return decisions of these migrants. Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter enable them to stay connected with family and friends across the globe while also providing real-time information on migration pathways, settlement guidance, and the state of the home country. The study concludes that social media plays a crucial role in shaping return perceptions by influencing aspirations, capabilities, and social networks. The findings bear direct implications for policy for both the origin and host country.

Relevance to Development Studies

The migration or return of highly skilled people is recognized as a significant driver of economic growth and development. The research is therefore relevant to development studies because it sheds light on the motivations and the factors influencing the decision-making process of skilled individuals regarding (return)migration. Understanding these factors can help policymakers and development practitioners in designing strategies and initiatives that can attract and retain highly skilled migrants, thereby contributing to the overall development and improvement of human capital in both the home and host countries. This study contributes to the body of literature which seeks to understand the nexus between migration and development.

Keywords

Return Migration, Perception, Decision-making, Highly skilled Migrants, Social Media, Nigeria.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Nigeria has one of the world's highest emigrant populations. Around 15 million Nigerians are estimated to live outside the country, primarily in neighbouring West African countries, the United States, and Western Europe (Gordon, 2003 in Carling 2006: 21). Many of these emigrants are skilled workers or students seeking better opportunities. According to a report published in 2021 by the African Polling Institute, the skilled work and study visas given to Nigerians by the UK alone between 2019 and 2021 increased by 210%, and if given the opportunity, seven out of ten Nigerians would be willing to emigrate abroad (The Guardian, 2022). This indicates a strong inclination among Nigerians to emigrate. The desire to leave Nigeria is driven by various factors, including the increasing lack of job opportunities and the dysfunctional institutional systems within the country. As noted by Carling (2006), immigration from Nigeria is motivated by factors such as crime, corruption, conflict, and economic deterioration leading to poverty (Carling, 2006: 7).

In addition to these push factors, diverging demographic trends between developed and developing countries contribute to the mobility of immigrants. Several European Union member states have implemented policies to encourage the immigration of highly skilled individuals to address labour market challenges caused by an aging population. The Netherlands has emerged as a significant destination for Nigerian immigrants. Through its "knowledge migrants" (kennismigranten) scheme, the country attracts approximately 7,000 skilled non-EU migrants annually, with Nigerians constituting one of the largest groups of foreign immigrants.[1] In 2021, around 1,315 Nigerians migrated to the Netherlands, comprising both students and labour migrants[2].

Nevertheless, when people migrate for reasons such as studies and work, it is expected that someday they will return to their home country, probably after their studies as in the case of students. However, most of these students upon completion of their studies tend to seek ways to extend their visas, secure a job, and become permanent residents (Adepoju, 2000:386 in Akinrinade and Ogen, 2011:74). Specifically, many skilled Nigerian immigrants in Europe and other parts of the world are discouraged from returning to Nigeria to settle permanently due to institutional factors such as political instability, insecurity, poor health facilities, lack of basic amenities, concerns for their children's education and past negative experiences (Amagoh and Rahman, 2014:42). Even those who planned to return in their old age are re-considering because of the above reasons[3]. However, there have been forceful return of Nigerians, who are not able to maintain their legal status often because they are low-skilled immigrants or have taken illegal means to their country of destination (Edeh, 2021:1; The Nation, 2016a).

While existing research on return migration in the Nigerian context has mainly focused on factors that drive or hinder return migration (Nwozor et al., 2022), its implications for the

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[1] https://web-archive.oecd.org/2016-09-06/412812-the-netherlands-should-strengthen-policies-to-attract-and-retain-migrant-skilled-workers.htm

[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/525804/netherlands-largest-groups-of-immigrants-by-nationality/

[3] https://www.npr.org/2023/01/26/1151803344/nigerians-who-left-their-country-planning-to-return-in-old-age-are-reconsidering

development of the origin country (Eborka, 2014), and the challenges associated with the reintegration of returnees (Arowolo, 2000), what Nigerian emigrants feel about returning to their home country and the decision-making process of their return have received little or no attention.

Scholars have traditionally employed several models and theories to understand and explain migration decision-making processes (See, Massey et al.,1993 and Cassarino, 2004). In recent times, the role of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram, has become increasingly significant. These platforms influence decision-making and facilitate migration by providing essential information and exchange of social capital within migrant networks, offering new opportunities for individual migrants (Ihejirika and Krtalic, 2020; Hidayadi, 2020; Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). Notably, there is a gap in understanding the influence of social media on return decision-making. This research paper, therefore, aims to address this gap by investigating the role of social media in shaping the perceptions and decisions of highly skilled Nigerian migrants living in the Netherlands about whether or not to return to origin country.

1.1 Justification and Relevance of this Research

Migration decision-making processes are complex, including the decision to return to one's country of origin (Senyurekli and Menjıvar, 2012). This is because the decision to migrate is often a result of interconnected social factors within which migrants' lives are embedded. While most migration research has focused on how and why people decide to migrate, there is limited study on how migrants view and decide about their return to origin country. This paper, in contrast to existing research primarily centered on the motives behind return migration (Kunuroglu et al., 2018; De Haas et al., 2015; Carling and Pettersen, 2014; Dustmann, 2001), shifts its focus on the perceptions that inform the decision to return. It does so by examining the considerations and steps that migrants go through in arriving at a decision and how social media plays a role in this process.

The growing impact social media on public opinion formation and our daily lives cannot be ignored. Globally, social media has had a significant impact on migration by facilitating the process of migration (Gusakov, 2021; Hidayati, 2020; Ihejirika and Kratalic, 2020; Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). However, despite the extensive research on social media impact on migration, there remains a significant gap in understanding its potential influence on migrants' intentions to return to their home countries. This notable gap in the literature underscores the importance of investigating the effects of social media on the perceptions of highly skilled Nigerian migrants regarding return migration.

The choice to focus on highly skilled Nigerians in the Netherlands is hinged on the assumption that this group of immigrants is more likely to have distinctive experiences, resources, and reasons to return to Nigeria. Highly skilled migration is recognized as a significant driver of economic growth and development. Additionally, they are also social media savvy and often use it for communication both at home and abroad. Furthermore, as a highly skilled immigrant residing in the Netherlands, this group of immigrants is more readily accessible to me.

This research is relevant because it tends to contribute to the academic discourse on return migration and sheds light on the role of social media in shaping migration decisions and intentions,

which has important implications for migration policies, economic development, and brain drain concerns. Understanding the perceptions of highly skilled Nigerian migrants towards returning to their home country is crucial for policymakers, organizations, and governments of both origin and host countries. For Nigeria, this research can inform the development of effective strategies and initiatives that can address the underlying issues that influence the decisions of highly skilled individuals towards returning to Nigeria. Additionally, the findings of this study will equally be relevant to the Netherlands and European Union (EU) member countries at large. They can incorporate these perceptions into their immigration policies, focusing on both return policy enhancements (such as removing barriers to return by improving opportunities in Nigeria) and general immigration policy enhancements such as providing more pathways for people to maintain their legal stay, thereby reducing the need for return.

1.2. Background to the Proposed Study

Nigeria has a rich history of emigration. However, the scale, nature, and direction have changed over time (Carling 2006: 21). In the early 1980s, before the 1986 structural adjustment program took effect, local salaries in Nigeria were internationally competitive, and the Naira, the country's currency, was strong. Inflation and cost of living were low, and as a result, not many Nigerians were keen to leave the country. However, following the economic crisis, the implementation of liberalization policies, and the ensuing period of repressive military rule, many Nigerians began to flee the country with some claiming asylum across Europe (Adepoju, 2017:126; Carling, 2006: 39). Since the 1990s, there has been a notable emigration of highly skilled professionals, including doctors, nurses, and paramedics, to Western and Middle Eastern countries. By 2002, over half of the 247,500 Nigerians in OECD countries were highly skilled professionals (Adepoju, 2017:127). The primary destinations for Nigerian migrants are the US and the EU, particularly the UK, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, and France. The percentage of tertiary-educated Nigerian emigrants in OECD countries went from 36.1% in 2007 to 51.2% in 2011 (The World Bank, 2016, in Nwozor et al., 2022:433).

In the context of the Netherlands, it is noted that many Nigerian migrants arrived at a child-bearing age, with a significant proportion married with children living in the same household. Consequently, the population of Nigerians living in the Netherlands increased significantly from 3,136 in 1996 to 11,466 in 2013 partly because of the substantial number of Nigerian children born in the Netherlands within this period (White et al., 2019:8). During this time, the Dutch government has further tightened its immigration and family reunification policies, making it one of the strongest and most restrictive in Europe. Like most Africans, many Nigerians have made their journey to the Netherlands for several reasons. From family reunification, and educational reasons to jobs and career growth, they work in different sectors such as banking, tech, healthcare, engineering, arts, etc. They contribute immensely to both countries' economic, social, and cultural growth while still maintaining their Nigerian roots. There are currently 18, 833 registered first- and second-generation Nigerian immigrants in the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2023), making them one of the largest African immigrant groups in the country. Additionally, there are reportedly many undocumented Nigerian migrants also residing in the Netherlands (Haagsman et al., 2015).

The emigration of the Nigerian workforce has continued to be on the increase. From 2000 to 2021, Nigeria has had a negative migration rate of -0.29 per 1000 people. This means that more people were going out of Nigeria than coming in[4]. In a recent PEW survey of 12 countries across five continents, Nigerians emerged as the group with the greatest desire to leave their countries in search for a better life elsewhere, a phenomenon commonly referred to as '*Japa*' in Nigerian parlance (Uchechukwu, 2023). The recent emigration wave of young Nigerians has been fuelled by the increasing hardship and lack of jobs in the country. In the last quarter of 2020, the employment rate hit 33.3% with projections for 2023 expected to hit as high as 41%, as reported by the National Bureau of Statistics.[5] Furthermore, the security challenges prevalent in Nigeria such as kidnapping, police brutality, armed robbery, 'unknown gunmen', herdsmen attack, etc., have intensified fear among citizens, prompting many to emigrate abroad. The aftermath of the EndSars protests in October 2021, aimed at addressing police brutality, saw a violent response from the government, further fuelling the exodus of Nigerian youth (Okunade, 2021b in Okunade and Awosusi, 2023). Moreso, due to the aspiration to transcend borders and access global opportunities, many Nigerians pursue a second passport or permanent residency in countries offering such privileges.

This migration of academics and professionals has resulted in a brain drain, a phenomenon where large number of skilled workers leave their countries of origin due to a lack of competitive opportunities (Güngör, 2004:6). Despite the significant outflow, the return rate is notably low due to the lack of comprehensive data on return migration in Nigeria and the absence of an effective registration system. The limited information available from existing records on return migration in Nigeria suggests, that except for cases of deportation and voluntary return of migrants who were unable to maintain legal status or who travelled illegally to their country of destination, many Nigerian migrants are hesitant to return home (Nwozor, 2022; Arowolo, 2000). Meanwhile, return migration is an integral part of human mobility. It refers to the movement of individuals back to their native country or locality after a period spent abroad or in another region (King, 2000 in King and Kuschminder, 2022:3). This act of relocation can take place either internally, such as when a person who has experienced internal displacement returns to their place of origin, or internationally, involving movement between a host nation and the person's birth country. While some Nigerians intend to return, prevailing conditions in Nigeria often deter them. Many Nigerians who studied abroad have refused to return home after completing their studies, citing limited job prospects and lower living standards compared to their experiences abroad.

(Return) migration decisions are a complex process that is shaped by micro-level factors such as individual characteristics, as well as macro-level factors such as push and pull factors either in the host or origin country or a combination of the two. At an individual level, elements such as socio-demographics, human capital, assimilation, immigration factors, and ties with the home country play a pivotal role in immigrants' return decisions (Carling and Pettersen, 2014). On a broader scale, macro-level factors such as economic and political instability, immigration policies, and labour market integration also wield considerable influence on the return migration process (Paparusso and

Ambrosetti, 2017). For highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands, the decision of returning or moving to another country to is shaped by a complex interplay of several constraints, partly related to the economic, political, and security issues in the origin country, and partly the restricting immigration policies including citizenship in the host country.

Further complicating this already intricate decision-making process is the rise of social media and how much sway it holds in people's choices. In the migration process, social media helps migrants to plan and make decisions for their movement. Beyond serving as a communication channel for migrants, social media acts as a vital tool for developing and social social ties with family and friends, thereby facilitating the migration process (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). Recent studies, such as those by Gusakov (2021), Ihejirika and Kratalic (2020), and Hidayati (2019, 2020), underscore the instrumental role of social media in migrants' decision-making. Through these platforms, migrants not only gather essential information for their journey but also connect with both fellow migrants and locals in their destination country. This connection serves as a valuable source of insight into the situation at the destination country and helps them integrate and access opportunities (Hidayati, 2020). Against this background, this study explores the perceptions of highly skilled Nigerian migrants regarding return migration and, importantly, unravels the influence of social media in shaping these perceptions.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

The objective of this research is to examine the role of social media in shaping the perspectives of highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands towards returning or choosing to stay in their host country. By exploring this dynamic, the study aims to contribute to the emergent scholarly understanding of the various factors that shape migrant return intentions and decisions.

In specific terms, this study aims to:

i. Explore the perspectives of highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands towards returning to Nigeria.
ii. Investigate the role social media plays in shaping the perception of highly skilled Nigerian migrants towards returning or not returning.

To achieve these objectives, this research is guided by the following research question(s):

Main question:

- How does social media use shape the perception of return migration among highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands?

Sub questions:

- What perceptions do highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands hold towards returning to Nigeria?
- How do highly skilled Nigerian migrants make use of social media?
- How does social media influence their (non-) return desires and beliefs?

1.4 Chapter Outline

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the overall insights and debates underlying the research objectives, justification, and questions. Chapter 2 embodies a review of related literature and discourses on return migration and migrant decision-making processes, the role of social media in migration as well as the theoretical framework for the study. Chapter 3 comes next, providing a more detailed discussion of the study procedure, research approach, and data collection challenges and limitations. The fourth and fifth chapters present the findings and analysis of the narratives of highly skilled Nigerian migrants living in the Netherlands to find answers to the research question and sub-questions. The findings of the study are summarized in Chapter 6, along with recommendations for additional academic research.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature, Conceptual, and Theoretical Framework

2.0. Introduction

The first section of this chapter provides a review of the concept of return migration and existing studies on migrant decision-making processes and social media's role in this decision-making. The last section discusses the theories of social networks, social capital, and social support, providing a theoretical framework for this study.

2.1. Overview of the Concept of Return Migration

Return migration is a broad concept with no universally accepted definition. This is because return migration can be interpreted in various ways - "in relation to place of birth, citizenship, place of residence, and duration of stay" (IOM, 2020:20). Additionally, a widely acceptable definition of the concept appears to be complicated by its association with several terms in academic literature, including "counter-stream migration, reverse migration, U-turn migration, homeward migration, and re-migration" (King and Kuschminder, 2022:3).

In earlier studies, return migration is basically understood as immigrants moving back to their native land to resettle (Gmelch, 1980:136 in Sinatti, 2011:154). Return migration was conceptualized as a "natural completion of the migration cycle" (Gmelch, 1992:284 in Senyurekli and Menjıvar, 2012). This is reflected in two of the earlier migration theories that provide views and interpretations of return migration, the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) and Structuralist theories. According to NELM theory, migration is a temporary household strategy for income and risk diversification and return migration is the result of the successful accomplishment of these migration goals or "targets" (Cassarino, 2004). Additionally, return is preferable to staying if there is no income or the possibility of securing a job is slim (Model, 2006) because, as target earners, migrants seek temporary access to paid labour and unemployment predicts a return journey (Constant and Massey, 2002). In addition to goal achievement, social and transnational ties in the home country promote return. This means that having a spouse or children in the country of origin increases the incentive to work harder to reach the migration goal and the intention to return. At the same time, the presence of a spouse in the destination country increases the chances of return as targets will be met faster (Cassarino, 2004).

In line with the NELM, the structuralist views return as the end stage of migration. However, they argue that while economic resources are considered, return decisions lie in the broader social and institutional factors in the origin countries. The success or failure of returnees is seen as linked to the economic realities of the home country and the expectations of the returning individuals (Cassarino, 2004). In exemplifying this complex relationship between social and economic context and return expectations, Cerase (1974) based on his research of Italian returnees from the United States (US)

identified four types of return: 1) *"Return of failure"*, which pertains to migrants who return because they could not integrate into the host country; 2) *"Return of conservatism"* applies to those who migrated with the intention to make enough money to buy land, hence returns as soon as sufficient capital has been acquired; 3) *"Return of retirement"* refers to retired migrants and pensioners who decide to return to the house or land that they acquired in their origin country; 4) *"Return of innovation"* refers to migrants who purposefully travelled abroad to acquire skills with the intention of returning home to contribute to homeland development (Cerase, 1974 in Cassarino, 2004).

However, subsequent academic studies of the migration patterns have presented a more nuanced understanding of return migration. Scholars have argued that return migration may not be a simple and permanent event. Utilizing the transnational framework, researchers categorize various types of return migrants, including those who become permanent settlers in their country of immigration as well as individuals who regularly shuttle between their places of origin and temporary residences abroad. Transnationalism emphasizes mobility and constant movement and depicts return migration as part of an ongoing cycle that involves remigration, circular, ongoing, back-and-forth movement, including return visits (Muller, 2023, Sinatti, 2011; Cassarino, 2004). As pointed out by Bilgili (2022), return migration is not just about physical return moves but also about myths, ideologies, and imaginaries of return (Bilgili, 2022 in King and Kuschminder, 2022:6).

At the core of transnationalism lies the point that migrants maintain "regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders" (Portes et al., 1999:219 in Muller, 2023:39) through modern communication technologies and return visits (Muller, 2023; Carling and Erdal, 2014; De Haas and Fokkema, 2011). Cassarino (2004:262) argues that these return visits serve as a preparation for their eventual resettlement and reintegration in their home country or can even act as a substitute for permanent return if deemed problematic or unfeasible (King and Kuschminder, 2022:6). Furthermore, transnationalism encompasses not only these ties and social relationships but also refers to the simultaneous identities, affiliations, and attachments that migrants have with multiple locations. As a result of these connections and commitments, migrants often partake in various transnational activities such as economic activities (remittances, small businesses, and investments), political activities (hometown community groups, homeland politics), and socio-cultural activities (marriage, religious activities, media, and commodity consumption) and have different levels of institutionalization (Muller, 2023:39). Within this context, the concept of 'return' serves as both a desire stemming from nostalgic memories and emotional ties to the home country, as well as a motivating factor for transnational practices.

Moreover, one of the additional complexities involved in the effort to define return migration is the precise location of the return. If "return" is defined as spatial movement and refers to returning to one's original location, it should be noted that determining one's place of origin can be difficult (King and Kuschminder, 2022:3). Migrants may decide to move to different region within their home country rather than their original communities, or they may choose to return to a third country, which may or may not be their country of origin (Graviano and Darbellay, 2019). It becomes imperative to take into cognizance what this 'concept' mean to immigrants as these perceptions shape their future plans and goals.

These perspectives, therefore, illustrate the dynamic, fluid, and unpredictable nature of return as a continuous process rather than a singular event. It also highlights the complexities of return migration and its potential destinations beyond a person's original community. However, for this study, return is conceptualized as returning to one's native country to settle after spending a significant period abroad.

2.2. Migration Decision-making: A theoretical overview

Migration decision-making is a complex process that is shaped by various factors, such as economic, social, political, personal, and environmental conditions. Early migration literature focused mainly on economic reasons as the driving force behind migration decisions. Neoclassical economists argue that people decide to migrate based on rational calculations of potential benefits, such as higher wages in the destination country (Todaro, 1969 in Massey et al., 1993:433). Within this framework, migration is viewed as an individual's pursuit of income maximization (ibid:432).

Similarly, Lee (1966) building upon Ravenstein's law of migration (1888) developed the push-pull theory, which suggests that migration results from rational and progressive decisions. According to this framework, migration is determined by weighing the costs and benefits encountered by potential migrants in both their current location and intended destination (Lee, 1966). Thus, this theoretical framework highlights how individuals make decisions about whether to migrate based on an evaluation of perceived advantages compared to current circumstances. Specifically, individuals assess various aspects related to the quality of life, employment prospects, and social networks before deciding whether or not to move.

Nevertheless, subsequent research has demonstrated that neoclassical economic theory alone is insufficient in providing a comprehensive explanation for migration decision-making. The growing literature on migration decision-making has revealed that individuals base their decisions not only on rationality as proposed by neoclassical economics, but also consider social, familial, and interpersonal factors (Tabor et al., 2015; Yanasmayan, 2014). For example, a simple desire to reunify with family or quest for international experience. In response to such criticism emerged the New Economics of Labour Migration theory which contends that migration is a household collective decision aimed at maximizing income and reducing risks (Stark and Bloom, 1985). In line with this perspective, researchers have explored how family dynamics are connected to migration decisions. Studies have shown that family dynamics are essential in the decision-making process, with factors like household composition, age, and care obligations at the origin or destination influencing migration choices (Tabor et al., 2015:130; De Haas and Fokkema 2010) Moreover, these factors are highly gendered and can differ based on spatial and cultural contexts, as women's household responsibilities and cultural contexts can shape their participation in international migration (Vives & Vázquez, 2016). Additionally, the presence of children significantly affects decision-making, as parents consider their children's well-being in the migration process (Tabor et al., 2015:130; Adams 2004:475 in Achenbach and Achenbach 2017:35).

Moving beyond the economic considerations of migrants' decision-making, scholars have delved into the concept of "cultures of migration", which investigates how migration decisions are influenced by social practices, beliefs, desires, and myths related to migration (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011; Thompson, 2017). The notion of aspiration, hope, and imagination is found at the center of migrant decision-making. Aspiration for migration is linked to migration possibilities and it is positively perceived by potential migrants while also being embedded within institutional structures. Migration is thus conceptualized as a function of an individual's ability to aspire and the ability to actualize the desire. Carling (2002) introduced the term 'involuntary immobility', or 'aspiration/ability model', to describe having the desire to migrate but being unable to do so (Carling, 2020 in Niraula and Triandafyllidou, 2022: 6).

Furthermore, research on the "culture of migration" highlights the significant impact of community norms in shaping migration decisions. This theory posits that when communities experience a large emigration rate for extended periods, their values and perspectives change which ultimately increases the likelihood for people to move in the future (Ryo, 2013: 578). In other words, as migration becomes common in a society, it becomes normalized and expected. This is captured in the assertion by Heering et al., (2007), that "over time foreign labour migration becomes integrated into the structure of values and expectations of families and communities. As a result, young people contemplating entry into the labour force do not consider other options" (Heering et al., 2007 in Kwek Kian, 2019). Hence, comprehending the migration decision-making process necessitates an understanding of individuals' underlying values, norms, and perceptions.

2.2.1. Highly skilled migrant decision-making processes

The question of who a highly skilled migrant is has been contested and debated in academic literature, leading to different definitions and interpretations. Typically, highly skilled migrants are defined based on three criteria: education, occupation, and visa type. According to the OECD definition cited in Igbokwe (2019), highly skilled migrants are individuals who have attained postsecondary education, (e.g., ISCED 5 and 6) (Igbokwe, 2019). This definition implies that possessing a tertiary education degree is synonymous to being highly skilled, and that education is equivalent to skill. What skill encompasses is unclear within this context (Niraula and Triandafyllidou, 2022: 3). However, another OECD publication (2002:2) broadens this definition to include university students, IT specialists, business executives, managers, researchers, and intra-company transferees, among others. Furthermore, some definitions and records focus on skilled individuals who arrive through specific immigration streams and visa policies, excluding other skilled migrants, such as international students (Weinar & Koppenfels, 2020 in Niraula and Triandafyllidou, 2022: 6).

The migration of highly skilled individuals is often seen as a voluntary and desirable choice, with highly skilled migrants being more inclined to relocate compared to less skilled migrants. However, despite this understanding, there has been limited attention given to the decision-making processes and underlying dynamics that drive highly skilled migrants' mobility. This may be attributed to the slow progress of the migration theory in differentiating between the migration patterns of individuals with different skill levels (Favell et al., 2006 in Achenbach and Achenbach 2017:40).

Nevertheless, existing studies have highlighted perceived opportunities, higher wages, and better career prospects as key factors shaping the migration decisions of highly skilled migrants. For instance, a study by Meijering and Van Hoven (2003) on migration decisions and experiences of Indian IT professionals in Germany found that career prospects, financial considerations, and personal experiences were significant factors guiding their decisions to move to Germany. Similarly, a study conducted by Kõu and Bailey (2013) on migration decision-making of highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, in the context of their life stages, indicated that international migration was used strategically by these migrants to enhance their professional careers, with their migration plans heavily influenced by their current life course stages and associated connections. Self-actualization in addition to economic motives served as the major driver of migration.

Beyond economic and structural factors, various personal, familial, and social factors all play a role in the decision-making process of highly skilled migrants. The study of migration decision-making and destination choice among skilled migrants discovered that both intrapersonal and social factors are key motivators for highly skilled migrants moving to New Zealand, along with long-term negotiations with families (Tabor et al., 2015). While exploring the motivation and dynamics of migration of skilled migrants from mainland China to post-colonial Hong Kong, Wang (2013) found that the decision to migrate is driven by multifaceted motivations, including aspirations, geo-political context, and the cultural allure of Hong Kong as a desirable destination. On the other hand, professional, familial, and the quest for a better quality of life were observed to be vital factors for the migration of highly skilled Turkish migrants to European cities like Amsterdam, Barcelona, and London (Yanasmayan, 2014). In another study, Koikkalainen (2011) looked into the motivations for the migration of Finns to other countries in Europe and found that lifestyle choices and a thirst for adventure significantly influenced their migration decision-making.

While the current pieces of research on highly skilled and migration decision-making shed light on the intricate and diverse social realities of individuals moving to new destinations, there remains a notable gap in understanding the perceptions of highly skilled migrants regarding return migration. Existing research has primarily concentrated on skilled migrants who have already completed their migration journey, leading them to retrospectively evaluate their decision to migrate. While this line of research provides valuable insights into the various factors that influence migration decision-making, it is also important to understand the considerations and steps that migrants go through in arriving at a decision, especially in the context of return migration. This thesis, therefore, seeks to complement existing research by specifically focusing on highly skilled migrants' perceptions of return migration and exploring the role of social media in shaping these perceptions.

2.3. The Role of Social Media in Decision-making

Social media is a term that encompasses a range of online platforms and tools that allow users to create, share, and engage with user-generated content. These platforms allow users to communicate through text-based messages, images, videos, and audio recordings. As defined by Kietzmann et al. (2011: 242), "social media is a platform utilizes mobile and web technologies to create interactive

spaces for the sharing, co-creating, discussing, and modifying user-generated content" (Kietzmann et al., 2011:242 in Ihejirika and Kratalic, 2020:51). This definition emphasizes the fundamental characteristics of social media, including interactivity, connectivity, communication, and the crucial mobile-based component, which is particularly important in today's migration process.

Social media platforms can take different forms, such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp), weblogs/microblogging platforms (e.g., Twitter, blogs), media sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram), and content aggregation platforms (e.g., Reddit, Pinterest) (Ihejirika and Kratalic, 2020:51). On these platforms, users can make and share their own content, follow or subscribe to what other users post, and join in discussions by commenting, liking, sharing, and using other interactive features.

Social media has become integral to human interaction and communication, significantly influencing people's behaviour and decision-making (Cheung and Lee, 2010). These platforms provide a space for people to express their opinions, and when a particular perspective gains traction, it can influence others' views, contributing to the shaping of collective perceptions. In the political landscape, social media has become a potent tool, shaping public opinion, influencing election outcomes, and impacting decision-making at various levels (Ohme et al., 2017). Emotional content on social media, whether positive or negative, plays a significant role in swaying perceptions and decision-making.

Studies have shown that social media platforms have an impact on decision-making in various aspects of life, including politics, consumer purchasing decisions, and even social movements. For instance, Kirkpatrick (2011), highlighted the pivotal role of social media in sparking the "Arab Spring" in the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, the significant role of social media in influencing the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, as well as the protests in Hong Kong is noted in literature (Frosina, 2021; Kirkpatrick, 2011 in Power and Phillips-Wren, 2011).

On the other hand, social media creates an "echo chamber" of media attention where users are exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs and opinions while opposing viewpoints are excluded and discredited. Social media allows users to engage with content that fits their preferences, creating a comfortable, self-confirming feed (Malecki et al., 2021:702; Modgi et al., 2021). This phenomenon is known as 'confirmation bias', which refers to how individuals process information by filtering it through their existing beliefs and views (Modgi et al., 2021). Social media fosters both informational and normative conformity within networks. Informational conformity influences individuals to seek accurate information from their social network members, which has a significant impact on their decision-making. Normative conformity, on the other hand, can bias decisions as individuals conform to gain acceptance or approval from their social network (Power and Phillips-Wren, 2011).

Beyond providing access to news and information, social media facilitates the formation of 'media-rich' and resilient social groups through constant interaction and monitoring of activities that are found within the traditional face-to-face communities, which has become relevant in migration decision-making (Ihejirika and Kratalic, 2020:52) and will be discussed further in the next section.

2.3.1. Social Media and Migration Decision-making

Previous studies argue that social media facilitates migration by influencing the plan and decision to move (Komito, 2011). Social media serves as a tool for seeking information and keeping in touch with family and friends, thus easing the process of migration. According to Dekker and Engbersen (2014), beyond being tools for communication, social media perform four essential functions in facilitating international migration: 1) enhancing migrants' ties with family and friends; 2) facilitating communication with weak ties relevant to organizing migration; 3) establishing new networks of latent ties; and 4) providing valuable and unofficial 'insider knowledge' on migration.

In a similar vein, scholars such as Aricat (2015), Park et al., (2014), and Komito (2011) in their various studies on social media and migration found social media to significantly improve the ability of migrants to stay in touch with their families and close friends, build extensive personal networks, and engage in discussions regarding their home countries through transnational organizations. Information and communication are essential resources to migrants as they would prefer to move to where they have existing contact or access to detailed information. Social media platforms not only offer opportunities to establish and maintain these networks but also serve as valuable sources for gaining essential information and engaging in an exchange of social capital within migration networks, presenting new prospects for individual migrants (Akapko and Bokpin, 2021; Ihejirika and Krtalic, 2020:51). Through these social media platforms, migrants gain information about opportunities and living conditions at the destination country. This ease of access to information helps to lower the costs and risks of migration, encouraging and motivating people to move (Hidayati, 2020).

Hidayati's (2017) study on social media's role in the migration decision-making of Indonesian students highlights how platforms like Facebook play a crucial role in aiding students' migration and school selection decisions. By connecting with educational institutions and peers in the target country through Facebook, students were able to gather relevant information and gain valuable insights into their prospective educational journey. Similarly, social media has been found to play an important role in the migration decision-making process of highly skilled Indonesian migrants in the Middle East (Hidayati, 2020). These migrants relied on social media platforms to gather essential information about the destination country, including cultural aspects, job opportunities, and living conditions. Additionally, social media allowed them to establish connections with friends and colleagues already residing in the destination country, providing them with a valuable network of support and guidance.

Furthermore, social media enables political participation among immigrants, enabling them to stay updated on political developments in their home countries even while away for a long time (Aricat, 2015). Additionally, in the integration and settlement stage of migration, social media proves instrumental. Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) argue in their study on 'social media use and adaptation of Chinese Students in the US' that social support received through social networks plays a crucial role in alleviating acculturative stressors faced by international students, such as anxiety, depression, and identity confusion. Social media also makes it easier for new immigrants to find information that aids their settlement, such as housing services, jobs, health, or education, that they might not have access to otherwise (Ihejirika and Krtalic, 2020:53).

Given the significant impact of social media on the migration process as highlighted in the literature, this study seeks to explore whether social media similarly influences return decisions among highly skilled migrants of Nigerian origin. The investigation delves into theories of social networks and support embedded in social media, recognizing migrants' ability to leverage their networks to access valuable information and resources crucial in shaping decisions about their return.

2.4. Theoretical Framework: Social Networks and Social Support

The study adopts the social network theory which emphasizes the importance of social connections, or social networks, in shaping various aspects of individuals' lives, including their behaviours, attitudes, opportunities, and decision-making processes. According to the social network theory, individuals are embedded in social networks that consist of ties or relationships with others. These ties can be formal or informal, strong, or weak, such as family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, or online connections (Faist, 1997; Granovetter, 1973)). These social networks provide individuals access to resources, information, social capital, and support, which can influence their decisions and actions.

A fundamental assumption of this theory is that social networks serve as the foundation for all migration processes. The migrant network is a collection of "interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in both origin and destination countries through kinship, friendship, and shared community" (Massey et al., 1998). This network is often formed by people who have similar ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, or who are part of the diaspora. These networks play a critical role in fostering interactions that enable migration by making it less expensive and safer to move while simultaneously enhancing the anticipated benefits derived from migration (Gusakov, 2021; Hidayati, 2020).

Furthermore, information, in addition to existing opportunity structures, has a significant impact on the migration decision-making process. The presence of social ties enables migrants to connect with both fellow migrants and locals in their destination country who have various forms of capital - human, financial, and political (Faist, 1997). They also enable prospective returnees to mobilize resources and access information about their home country before returning (Cassarino, 2004:265).

Embedded within the concept of social networks is the theory of social support. This theory emphasizes the crucial role of interactive communication within social networks in improving individuals' psychological well-being. Social support is viewed as a coping mechanism against migration stress and can be received in tangible or intangible forms such as emotional, instrumental, or informational assistance (Chib et al., 2013:21), companionship, and socializing (Ryan et al., 2008:274). These diverse forms of support may be provided to migrants from various individuals and networks at different times, cutting across national boundaries.

Emotional support provides distressed migrants encouragement, comfort, affinity, and acceptance. This support often comes from close relatives, partners, or even friends who live outside of their immediate environment through regular telecommunications (Chib et al., 2013:21; Ryan et al., 2008:274) or social media platforms. It is particularly important as migration can destabilize migrants'

existing relationships. Thus, transnational connections with people "back home" can continue to offer valuable support to migrants even after migration (Ryan et al., 2008:274). Instrumental support on the other hand entails practical and economic assistance that aids migrants in adjusting to life in their host country. This support could range from help with employment to securing housing, often sourced through both 'strong ties' (close relationships) and 'weak ties' (transient acquaintances), possessing the requisite knowledge and expertise (Granovetter, 2002 in Ryan et al., 2008:657).

Furthermore, the informational component of support serves to address uncertainties and assist individuals in navigating challenges (Chib et al., 2013:21). This kind of support involves practical assistance, like guiding someone on how and where to get their permit renewed or suggesting the best places to shop for groceries. On another note, companionship and socializing encompass the provision of social activities and connections that help migrants develop a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation. These forms of social support play a crucial role in improving the psychological well-being of individuals, particularly migrants who may face unique challenges and stressors.

In summary, the literature suggests that social media provides migrants with a platform to build and sustain social networks, granting them access to valuable social capital and support. Moreover, it plays a significant role in shaping migrants' normative beliefs, as the creation of echo chambers and the prevalence of confirmation bias within social media platforms contribute to the reinforcement of existing beliefs, fostering both informational and normative conformity. These factors, combined with migrants' aspirations and capacities, exert a substantial influence on the process of migration decision-making. The diagram below visually represents the insights derived from the literature review.

Figure 1: Visualization of the Theoretical Framework
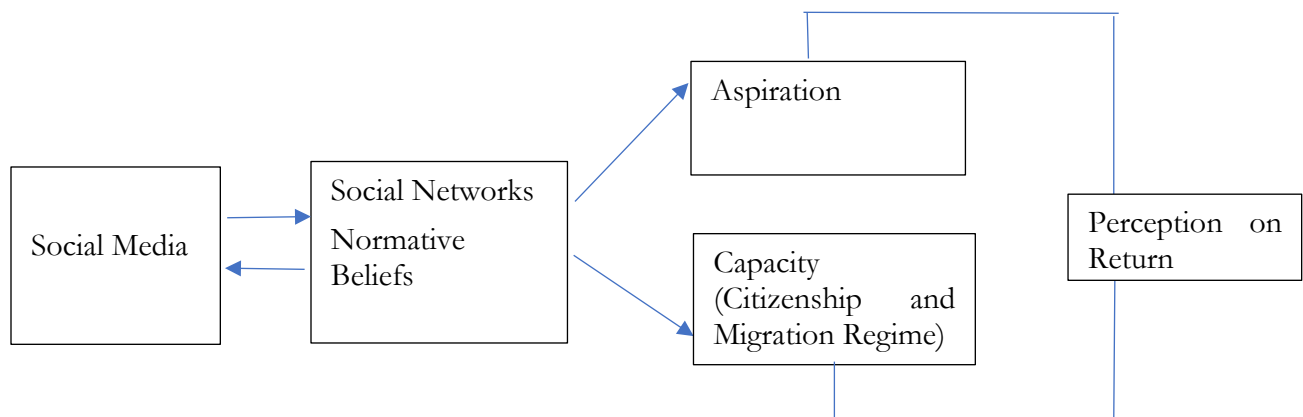
Chapter 3: Methodology and Method

3.0. Introduction

This chapter presents the framework and approach that was utilized to achieve the aims of this research. It provides a summary of the methodological processes undergone in the collection of data for analysis, as well as the limitations of this methodological process.

3.1. Research Design Approach

Qualitative research methodology is used in this study because it allows for a more in-depth understanding of people's behaviour, motivation, beliefs, and experiences; it also provides the researcher with access to more useful forms of data, which are often more significant for those being studied (Hennink et al., 2020; Silverman, 2011). Qualitative methodology is deemed appropriate when the aim is to gain an understanding of complex contexts, settings, interrelationships, and dynamics that cannot be fully explored by quantitative approaches, relying solely on random sampling or the calculation of means and modes of impact (Njie and Asimiran, 2014). Given the research objectives of investigating the perceptions of highly skilled Nigerian migrants regarding returning to their home country and the influence of social media on these perceptions, qualitative approach is considered appropriate for this study. The procedure facilitates the examination of complex social occurrences, the discovery of concealed meanings, and the documentation of the subtleties of human experiences.

3.2. Data Collection and Sampling Technique

This study utilised semi-structured interviews as the research method. Thus, this thesis draws from twelve (12) semi-structured interviews with highly skilled Nigerian Migrants living in the Netherlands as against fifteen that were earlier intended. This is due to the difficulty of getting more people to participate as well as the "saturation factor" which meant that no more new ideas were being presented. Semi-structured interview was deemed appropriate as it facilitates the use of incisive, open-ended questions and permits everyone to express their ideas independently and in their terms (Adams, 2015). It provides a deeper exploration of individual experiences and perceptions since it is feasible to elicit and clarify participants' responses (ibid).

The participants were selected and recruited through a purposive sampling technique from the researcher's network, church community, and Nigeria Youths in the Netherlands (NYN) WhatsApp group. Given the focus on highly skilled Nigerian migrants, this sampling method ensures the selection of individuals who are within this group and who can provide nuanced and detailed insights into the research topic (King et al., 2019:57). The participants were chosen on the following criteria: five people who migrated on the basis of employment, five people who came to pursue a master's degree and subsequently secured a job after their studies, and two people who are currently pursuing their master's. This selection approach ensured that diverse perspectives were obtained.

Participants were asked about their lives in Nigeria prior to migration, how and why they decided to migrate, their views about returning home, if and how they use social media, and what they feel about information they see on social media regarding migration and the state of things at home. The responses garnered from these questions offered valuable reflections and views about return migration and social media, forming the basis of analysis for this study.

Most of the interviews took place online via Microsoft Team; only one took place at the participant's home. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and was recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Before the interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants while also assuring them confidentiality and anonymity. The transcripts were then coded with ATLAS.ti software, allowing key themes to be identified and meaningful insights to be extracted from the dataset. It is important to note that this study did not involve social media analysis but analysis of participants' views and experiences of social media with regard to return migration decision-making.

3.3 Ethical Consideration

As this study is centered on people's opinions and views, obtaining approval from human participants was crucial. According to Fleming and Zegwaard (2018), consent from participants is important to ensure confidentiality and voluntary participation in research. In line with this, participants were properly briefed on the purpose of the research, their rights, and the use of the information they provide. Verbal consent to record the interview was obtained from the participants before the conversation began, with a clear explanation that the purpose of the interview was solely for this study. The data collected was stored properly and only accessible to the institution bound by the privacy rights and data protection agreements of the EUR. Furthermore, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms in the data analysis.

3.4. Positionality

As a Nigerian and a highly skilled migrant residing in the Netherlands and researching the experiences of highly skilled migrants in the Netherlands, I would describe my positionality as that of an insider and 'assigned insider' – a situation where the participants also perceive the researcher as one of their own (Irgil, 2020:1221). This is reflected in the way the research participants perceived my positionality in the data-gathering stage of this research. For instance, the use of phrases like 'as you know', and 'you are a Nigerian, you know how it is'. As an insider, I find myself uniquely positioned to explore the intricate dynamics of the perceptions held by my compatriots. Being an immigrant allows me to draw upon personal experiences and social relations, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges and aspirations of highly skilled Nigerian migrants. As Yakushko et al., (2011) pointed out, being an insider helps with easier access, faster trust-building, relatability, and smoother communication between the researcher and the interviewees.

However, I also understand that my position might come with biases that might unintentionally influence the perspective of this research. Despite these perceived biases, I recognize

my training as a researcher as useful in ensuring I manage my subjectivity and remain objective. The expected professional ethics in research have been followed, along with the critical supervision of the application.

3.5. Limitations & Challenges

This study was fraught with some limitations and challenges that deserve acknowledgment. First, the small sample size of 12 participants is a limiting factor because it may not be possible to generalize the study findings to the broader immigrant population, particularly when attempting to extrapolate these results to highly skilled Nigerian migrants in different countries or to diverse immigrant groups. It is important to exercise caution when extending these findings beyond the specific context of highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands to avoid a loss of credibility and potential distortion. Secondly, despite my belonging to Nigeria in the Netherlands WhatsApp group, getting participants proved more difficult than anticipated. Surprisingly, only four people out of a group of over 400 people expressed interest, even after soliciting for participation repeatedly. As a result, the study utilized the researcher's personal network, friends of friends, and the church community to recruit more participants, which may have introduced a selection bias and impacted the study. Also, given the period of the study (summertime) and the availability of the research participants, scheduling an interview appointment was difficult, hence why most of the participants opted for online interviews as being the most convenient for them. This, however, has very little influence on the content or quality of the data obtained as the video feature of Microsoft Teams facilitated an effective virtual video interaction, preserving the depth of the conversation.

Chapter 4: Perceptions of Return Migration

4.0. Introduction

This chapter delves into one of the main objectives of the study: understanding the perspectives of highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands towards returning to Nigeria. To accomplish this goal, I begin by exploring their experiences in Nigeria, the driving forces behind their migration, their initial expectations, and their current thoughts on the idea of returning home. The chapter unfolds in four sections, each shedding light on a specific aspect of my inquiry.

4.1: Participants' Characteristics

The participants in this study consisted of seven males and five females aged between 20-60 years. Six out of the twelve participants are married and reside with their spouses and children in the Netherlands, and only one of the participants is a single mom of two kids. Ten of the participants have obtained a master's degree and are gainfully employed while two were enrolled in a master's program. Among the two students, one was nearing completion at the time of this study while the other had one more year of study. Participants migrated to the Netherlands at various times between 2006 and 2022, reflecting a diverse range of migration experiences and timelines. It is important to note that three participants moved from the UK to the Netherlands and two had returned to Nigeria at some point and re-migrated to the Netherlands. On average, participants had spent approximately 5.6 years in the Netherlands at the time of this study with the least duration of stay being 11 months. All participants had family, friends, and relatives living in Nigeria.

4.2: The Multidimensional Nature of Migration Motives

The motivation and decision for migration among highly skilled Nigerian migrants were professional reasons (employment, education, career prospects, and upskilling), economic reasons (better quality of life, higher earnings), and personal reasons (family, desire to gain international experience). These motivations are in line with the 'push-pull' theory (Lee, 1966), in which migration decisions hinge on evaluating perceived advantages compared to current circumstances. The push factors are related to reasons such as employment and education while better quality of life, higher earnings, family, and desire to gain international experience serve as pull factors in the destination country. Many respondents in my study emphasized work and the aspiration to enhance their skills as primary drivers for their migration. It is observed from their narratives that nearly all participants, except for one, had good jobs and were doing well in Nigeria. However, at a certain point in their life course, they felt the urge to advance in their career. For instance, Kim, a single young man in his thirties explained his motivation this way:

"I don't just want to be a Nigerian lawyer, I wanted to be more in the global space. I wanted more adventure. I wanted to be a part of global conversations and that was why I made the move".

Consequently, international migration is considered a stage at the globe to achieve his career goal. This view is seen to be held by several other participants with career ambitions. Kayode, a husband and father in his forties who wanted to increase his competitive advantage and thereby become more desirable to international organizations, similarly stated:

"The motivation was to study master's abroad and set myself up to work with an International company. You know, maybe after my master's, get employment in an international organization. That was the motivation. And I think in Nigeria, yeah, your chances are less, let's put it that way".

Migration through school, particularly the pursuit of master's degrees, was considered a viable pathway for both upskilling and gaining international experience. It is believed that foreign qualifications will set them up for greater opportunities back home or secure them a footing in the international labour market. These factors were also complemented by the desire for an improved standard of living, including higher income and better quality of life.

Furthermore, amidst career advancement and economic reasons, two participants cited reuniting with family and joining a partner as the primary motivation for their migration. Osas, a student in her late twenties whose boyfriend back in Nigeria moved to the Netherlands for work decided to apply for a master's program in the Netherlands primarily to unite with her boyfriend and bridge the distance in their relationship. Although pursuing a master's degree had always been a long-term goal for her, the quickening of this decision was influenced by her desire to maintain a close relationship with her partner. In this same vein, Pa Jay, a husband and father in his sixties who initially migrated on work assignment and subsequently returned to Nigeria upon its completion re-migrated to the Netherlands so as to be with his family who had settled here during his initial migration. He stated that:

"The first motivation was my family. It was my family because at the end of my cross-posting assignment, I returned to Nigeria in 2007 to continue working but my family remained here in the Netherlands. So, it was difficult for me to combine living in Nigeria and also living with my family in the Netherlands."

The above sentiments suggest that migration decisions are not always about calculations of cost and benefit. Sometimes, personal factors such as a desire to be with a loved one or rejoin with family could be a drive for migration. These findings correlate with previous studies that highlight career prospects, financial considerations, and personal experiences as key reasons for the migration of highly skilled migrants (see Kõu and Bailey 2013; Meijering and van Hoven 2003). Additionally, the findings demonstrate that migration decisions are complex and dynamic, involving a multi-stage and multidimensional process, influenced by migrants' long-term life goals and can have significant consequences for themselves and others who are affected by their decisions and actions (Niraula and Triandafyllidou, 2022:15).

4.3: From Temporal Dreams to Permanent Plan

Half of the participants in this study indicated that they intended to return after their studies or work assignment abroad while the other half stated they left Nigeria with the intention to settle in the Netherlands. The initial return intention prior to migration plays a significant role in migrants' decision to stay or return as suggested by Dustmann's (2001) model. Those who intend to stay are more likely to acquire the skills and knowledge that are specific to the host country and less applicable in their home country, strengthening their initial intention to remain abroad. The reverse is the case for those with prior intention to return.

In the case of my study participants, there was a slight difference between those who migrated before 2010 and those who migrated after 2015 when it came to their initial intention prior to migration. Based on the responses, those who migrated before 2010 considered their migration temporal, that is, their initial intention was to return after their study or at the completion of their work assignment abroad (for those who migrated for work). Migration at the time was considered a privilege to boost their professional profile and gain international work experience. One of the participants pointed out that it was common knowledge among their peers at the time to go abroad for studies and come back to work for big oil companies like Shell and ExxonMobil. The reason behind this conviction is based on the perception that these multinational oil companies place high regard on individuals with a foreign degree, which boosts their chances of being employed in these organizations. Another important factor is the state of the Nigerian economy at the time which exuded widespread hope of continuous improvement and development of the country. This experience was similarly shared by Mr. Chima, a husband and father in his early forties who studied and worked in the UK before moving to the Netherlands in 2020:

> "In my days when I moved, it was seen as a privileged thing you know? You just get an opportunity for exposure, that was my primary purpose of taking on, we call it an international run, like an expatriate role. But now, over the years I think people now leave because they're looking for generally a better life".

However, a different perspective is shared among those who migrated after 2015. A majority of them indicated that they left without any plan of returning to Nigeria which seems to be mainly driven by the economic downturn and increasing security issues in Nigeria. They had planned to complete their studies, secure a job, and settle in the Netherlands. They considered their migration as somewhat permanent, and return was envisioned as a retirement necessity upon the actualization of all their dreams. Victor, a single man in his thirties shared the following thoughts during our conversation:

> "My thoughts and mindset about return, when I was in Nigeria, was, I saw return as a necessity that can happen at the right time […] I told myself if I'm moving abroad, I would like to stay at least more than 10 years or 15 years to gather grounds. What I mean by gather grounds is to be able to achieve my goals and be financially buoyant and at the same time be able to establish some sort of streams of income back home, build structures, and when I come back home or when I return, it would be more like to retire and not to continue working again […] That's the way I perceived return, return for me is synonymous with the achievement of goals or retirement".

Both the former and latter responses points to NELM theory, which views return as the outcome of the successful achievement of migration goals or "targets" (Cassarino, 2004). However, for the former, the completion of their studies or assignment abroad marks the end of the migration journey, prompting a return to the home country. Whereas the latter sees migration as a means to accumulate human capital and resources, with a return expected only after sufficient human capital has been gained abroad.

Regardless of the circumstances in Nigeria, not everybody intended to stay in the Netherlands. Out of 8 participants who arrived after 2015, two participants indicated that prior to migration, they intended to return to Nigeria. The motivations for return in this case are driven by their motivation for migration. For example, Mr. Michael, a husband, and father in his fifties migrated to the Netherlands on a 7-year work contract. At the end of his contract, he is expected to return to his home country. Aware that his stay is contingent on this time frame, he had the intention to return. This was also the case with Kiki, a wife and mother in her thirties whose motivation to migrate was basically to upskill and then return. She stated:

> "So, the plan wasn't to move. The plan was to go upskill and go back home but after my master's, I got exposed to some opportunities […]. I began to get consultancy offers […], I also got an offer to undertake a PhD. And I thought this an opportunity for me to, you know, learn more about what I do. And yeah, that was where I decided to take up the PhD and the position side by side".

Motivation for migration is recognized in the literature as a major determinant of return intention (Gungor and Tansel, 2011). However, what was interesting to note was that none of those who had the initial intention to return returned or had plans to return soon. This observation confirms the widely recognized pattern in which many migrants intend to return to their origin country but usually, end up settling in the host country (Carling and Petersen, 2014: 14).

4.4: Dominant Views and Perspectives on Return

Return is considered unfeasible.

In terms of current perceptions of return, many of the participants indicated they do not intend to permanently return to Nigeria in the foreseeable future, including those who initially had intentions to return prior to migrating. This implies that the fraction of those who have no plan to return doubled after experience abroad. This resonates with what Gungor and Tansel (2011:13) refer to as "the inertial effect of length of residence", where returning becomes challenging once individuals get used to living conditions abroad. This feeling was expressed by Mr. Chima whose motivation for migrating was to gain international exposure. He stated:

> "Because I have worked so long abroad, I got used to living and working abroad. I felt like I was gonna face a lot of challenges trying to integrate myself into the Naija system[6]".

As much as a permanent return is not currently in view for most of these participants, they make regular visits to Nigeria. The primary motivation behind these visits includes checking on their families (most importantly "aged parents"), friends as well as investments they have managed to set up. Furthermore, these trips serve as an opportunity for knowledge exchange through activities such as speaking at seminars and conferences, teaching and mentoring sessions. For some, these visits are multiple times a year, while for others, they are once in a few years. These regular visits are seen as a practical alternative to permanent return, a choice that is currently considered unfeasible (King and Kuschminder, 2022:6), as the two statements below indicate:

> "I go to Nigeria at least once a year and I don't just go for family reunions. I also go to speak, teach, mentor, and have physical meetings with people where I can also communicate my experiences in a more relaxed atmosphere […]so I always go back to Nigeria, and I will always keep going back to Nigeria. But then this is going to be my base for the longest time" (Kim, a single male in his 30s)

> "I would say not in the immediate. Yeah, I visit Nigeria two to three times a year, you know? I still have things going on there, business investments, but to return with the family? No, not at the moment." (Kayode, a husband and father in his 40s).

However, upon further inquiry of the specific conditions that will encourage them to return permanently, if any, many of the participants indicated that they would consider returning to settle in Nigeria if the socio-economic, political, and security situation in Nigeria improves for the best. Push factors such as economic and wage differentials are the most frequently cited causes of the loss of highly skilled workers in developing countries (Akçapar, 2009; Güngör, 2004). Similarly, this study found that the economic and political instability as well as the increasing rate of insecurity in the home country were some of the reasons for non-return decisions among highly skilled Nigerian migrants. This is not surprising given that the unemployment rate moved from 27.1% in 2018 to 33.3% in Q4 of 2020 with projections for 2023 expected to hit as high as 41%, as reported by the National Bureau of Statistics. As Nigeria is a heavily import-dependent nation, the ongoing depreciation of the Naira and its immediate impact on the cost of living for the general populace has become increasingly overwhelming. The increasing economic decline is of great concern to these immigrants because they feel that returning to this current economic situation would have many consequences, including a decline in their financial stability, and they are afraid of the risk that it presents. Gift, a single lady in her mid-twenties who moved to the Netherlands in 2020, exemplified these sentiments. She stated:

> "Of course, the economy because how my life was in 2020 before I left isn't how my life is right now. Before I left, I relied heavily on my family for support. I had a job, but to some extent, I still depended on them, expecting assistance, especially financially. But now

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[6] Naija is colloquial term used informally among citizens to refer to Nigeria. Naija system simply means the way things are done in Nigeria.

I see myself more like I've gained so much independence that if I go back to Nigeria, it will just be lost".

Additionally, the increasing insecurity situation weighed heavily on their mind as their worries about cases of kidnapping, 'unknown gunmen', Boko haram, and police brutality created a sense of anxiety and uncertainty about their safety should they decide to return to Nigeria. These security issues have not only affected their decision to return but also have influenced the notion of visiting. Some of the participants recounted how they now exercise extreme caution when visiting Nigeria, often receiving advice from their families to keep their visits discreet. One of the participants, Kiki, demonstrated the depth of this fear by recounting a personal experience. She described how the kidnapping of two of her uncles, which resulted in the death of one, makes it scary to return home. In her narrative, she said:

> "I think I had family members call me to say oh, especially when my uncle was kidnapped, everyone was like…and I was planning to go to Nigeria at the time with my son, you know, and they were like, no, you need to leave him back in the Netherlands. It was all protocols, you know? I basically did a security drill. As you're coming back home, don't tell anybody you're coming home, don't post any pictures, turn off your location, blah blah blah blah. Oh my God, it was just a lot, you know? So, all of that was also scary".

This concern was also expressed by Pa Jay, who felt sad about how bad the situation had become. He stated that:

> "The security situation is so much that the government seems to have lost touch. The Boko Haram, the bandits, everything, I read it, where people are kidnapped and killed at will in every part of the nation. Even when I think about going to Nigeria now, I have to be very, very careful. So, it's sad that Nigeria has degenerated to this level and it's affecting people who are here who would like to return to Nigeria but cannot because of the security situation".

Furthermore, while reflecting on these factors and the conditions for possible return, two participants mentioned that they would be open to returning if they were called upon to serve the nation in a professional or official capacity based on their experiences and qualifications. They regard this invitation as a chance to effect change and have a constructive influence that will position the nation in the proper direction. This belief is founded on the notion that individuals can enhance the efficacy and far-reaching influence of positive change by assuming the roles of policymakers or leaders, thereby enabling them to replicate their experiences. This sentiment was shared by Victor, who said:

> "If I get a call to serve my country, if I'm called upon, let's take for instance, even though I don't know if anybody knows me…If I get a call from my governor or something or from the president or maybe any of the senators representing… and say Victor, we need you in this capacity to serve, then I'll return home because I know there's a call to serve".

The above statement suggests a strong attachment to the home country, rooted in a profound patriotism that transcends physical distance. They represent those Cerase (1974) identified as 'change makers' —returnees who aim to use the skills and experiences acquired abroad to make differences in

their origin countries. Moreover, the perspective of return as unfeasible points to the structuralist view on return which argues that the decision to return to one's home country does not only lie in economic factors but also in the broader social and institutional factors in the origin country (Cassarino, 2004).

Return as a Viable Option against Illegal Stay

The legal status of living abroad is also stated by a few of the highly skilled participants as one of the strong conditions to return if unattained or if their permit has expired. They mentioned that they would rather return despite the challenges and consequences this might come with rather than become illegal migrants or homeless. According to the participants, many of their friends and acquaintances who returned did so not out of choice but due to their inability to maintain their legal status, primarily because they could not secure a job that would sponsor their stay. Additionally, some returned after completing their work contract, particularly those who initially came to the Netherlands through Shell's cross-posting arrangement. Notably, those in this category often return without their families, aiming to preserve the possibility of returning to the Netherlands, a unique option that other immigrants did not have.

> "Most of the people that I hear that went back to Nigeria are people that came, for example, an assignment from Shell and after four years they went back. But they decided to keep their families here because they are not sure if they want to settle down completely in Nigeria and they keep shuttling back to the Netherlands and going back to Nigeria with hope that maybe they will find a job and then stay back in the Netherlands". (Nomzy, male, in his 40s).

The above pointers confirm that migration decision is a function of both aspiration and capabilities (Czaika and Vothknecht, 2014 in Niraula and Triandafyllidou, 2022: 6). While the desire for these migrants is to stay, the outcome depends on their capacity to realize their desire which in this case is legal status, however when this is unattainable, their aspiration finds expression in alternative pathways such as return or onward migration.

This aspiration is further expressed in their strong desire to attain unrestricted mobility in the form of a second passport or permanent residency. They feel that securing a permanent residency or passport would afford them the ability to move back and forth between the host and origin country without restrictions. This is substituted in their parlance with the phrase "global citizenship", which they described as the ability to freely choose where to live without any restrictions. They expressed dissatisfaction with the limitations of their Nigerian passport and the hassle of securing a visa. Nene, a master's student, and single lady in her late twenties, recounted how she missed out on opportunities while still living in Nigeria because of visa challenges. She expressed her disappointment learning that the Dutch government does not allow dual citizenship. However, she considered getting permanent residence as a viable option as it would allow her to travel in and out of the country at will:

> "My main motivation, to be honest, was actually getting a second passport and that led me to realize later on that the Netherlands doesn't allow dual citizenship. So, on the other

hand, I was also considering OK, PR wouldn't be bad. I can always come in and go out at will […] I've had my share of passport and visa issues, you know. While I was in Nigeria, I think I missed out on a few opportunities because of visa".

In a similar vein, some participants like Ken consider it as having options. He elaborated, stating:

"So, for me, it's not about moving back, it's about having options. That's how I see it. If I wanna be in Nigeria for three months, I can be in Nigeria for three months without being scared of, oh, if I don't go back… You know, just having options. So, coming here was to become a global citizen, that was my major goal. A global citizen is the kind of person who can decide that there's an opportunity in the US today and all he just has to do is pack your bag and buy the most affordable flight you can get on. In Nigeria, you have to first go and get your visa. If they give you, then you can travel. If they don't give you, sorry".

This observation bears similarities with the experiences of highly skilled Turkish immigrants in the US. They believed that it would be irrational to return to Turkey without first securing the "Green Card" which serves as a backup plan that will allow them to return to the US should the expectations not go as planned (see Senyurekli and Menjı́var, 2012).

To Return is to Retire

Another perspective shared by some participants is that consideration for permanent return will only be entertained when they are aged or as a form of retirement. This set of participants mentioned that the incentive for this will be the fact that they have lived a full life, actualizing all their dreams and aspirations, and can now return home to live out their days in peace and around family. Pa Jay echoes this sentiment expressing it thus:

"When I'm retired and tired, I will return to Nigeria then, that will probably become, just like what I heard the Russian president say, "that will become a time of burial".

His views above resonate with the findings of Carling and Pettersen (2014) who assert that after concluding their working life abroad, immigrants prefer to return, aiming to spend their old age in their homeland.

Familial Concerns and Career-related Opportunities

For many of these immigrants, familial concerns and career goals among other factors were reasons behind this perspective. Of those who expressed concern about families, many indicated that they do not plan to return because of their children. The presence of children significantly affects decision-making, as parents consider their children's well-being in the migration process (Adams 2004:475 in Achenbach and Achenbach 2017:35). They worried that returning to Nigeria might affect the stability and well-being of the children. Additionally, they expressed concern about the difference in the educational system between the two countries and emphasized that the Netherlands offers their children the best educational opportunities. This concern was succinctly exemplified by Mr. Nomzy, a husband and father in his forties who said:

"I don't think we will want to move back because we still have children growing up that are born here. So, this is where their own culture and our interests are mainly in the children. We want to see them grow and then if they have established their own routes here, we will only try to help them, especially the educational system here is different from the educational system in Nigeria as well".

Similarly, Ms. Amara, a single mom of two who expressed her willingness to consider relocating to the US if a promising opportunity arises, shared her hesitation due to her children who are still undergoing their secondary education. She articulated her intention as follows:

"My plan is to stay here to raise my children here, for them to go to school here, the secondary school, the university, to build a life here if they want to, but I'm also open to opportunities outside of the Netherlands if I get a really good job in the US. I'm very, very open to that, but because of my children, they're still in secondary school. I wouldn't want to uproot them at this stage, so for the next, at least five to six years, I'm living in the Netherlands."

It can be deduced from the above response that highly skilled Nigerian migrants do contemplate the possibility of onward migration instead of return. However, the decision is contingent upon family consideration, particularly when children are part of the equation.

In addition to familial concerns are career-related and professional reasons. Some participants felt that the nature of their jobs and their field of expertise are currently not replicable in the Nigerian context. While they contemplate the possibility of returning to Nigeria someday, they worry that they might not find a befitting job or professional opportunities in Nigeria that are available to them abroad. For example, Mr Chima elaborated on this, this way:

"One of the reasons why I decided not to even go back to Nigeria after I left my last job was that the kind of course I was studying for my master's doesn't even have where I could get employed in Nigeria. It was like a kind of cutting-edge course where you know, there's little or no chance to get employed in Nigeria except I go back and start doing something else. So that was one of the reasons I'm like going back to Nigeria wasn't an option".

Furthermore, employment considerations emerge as a significant factor among participants who initially migrated for educational purposes. Many of them came with the intention of staying back after their studies with a view to securing a job that would allow them to settle and gain international experience. This pattern is consistent with Akcapar's (2009) study on the non-return decisions of Turkish students in the United States, which demonstrates how globalization of higher education serves as a catalyst for skilled international migration. It also highlights how difficult it is becoming to distinguish between temporal and permanent residency with the spike in the transitioning nature of this type of migration. However, it is important to note that the transition into the workforce has not been without difficulties for some of the participants in this study. For instance, Nene candidly shared her experience:

"I am hoping that when I graduate, I will be able to secure a job that would allow me to stay back, but that hasn't been kind of easy because of the language barrier. So, most vacancies that I'm actually qualified for or have the skills for, most times have this caveat that you must know how to speak Dutch".

From the above statement, it is evident that language barrier and visa sponsorship are challenges faced by highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the Netherlands, but most people have to bear with the difficulty if they intend to make the best of the experience or alternatively, according to Nene, one of the female participants, consider *"going to another country that is English speaking and is not going to be asking for language translation"*. Relocating to an English-speaking country is considered a viable option than returning to Nigeria, especially for those considering upward mobility, as their uncertainty about the employment prospects in Nigeria plays a confirmatory role in their decision.

4.5. Conclusion

The findings discussed in this chapter have outlined the various perspectives of return held by highly skilled Nigerian migrants. Currently, many perceive return as infeasible due to the challenging economic and security situation in the home country. However, others view it as a practical alternative to illegal stay and even as a potential retirement plan. Meanwhile, the analysis also showed a preference for return visits and onward migration over permanent return. Notably, among other factors, concern for children's education, career goals, and aspiration to obtain a permanent legal stay are the reasons for the non-return decision among highly skilled Nigerian migrants. As corroborated by Senyurekli and Menjívar (2012), return decisions are complex, involving an interplay of competing considerations.

Chapter 5: The Role of Social Media on (Non) Return Decision

5.0: Introduction

Beyond being a communication channel, social media transforms migrant networks and aids migration. From helping migrants maintain ties with family and friends and to form weak and latent ties relevant to organizing migration to providing valuable and unofficial knowledge on migration, social media plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, and expectations and ultimately influencing migration decisions (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). Within this context, this chapter explores the research questions: How do highly skilled Nigerian migrants use social media and how does social media shape their (non) return desires/beliefs?

5.1: Social Media Preferences and Usage in Migration Process

This section discusses the social media preferences of highly skilled Nigerian migrants and how they use them during the migration process. It is important to note that these findings are not based on social media or network analysis but on individual views and experiences. The data is analyzed based on the theoretical and conceptual review of the functions of social media and the role of social networks discussed in Chapter 2, providing a more theoretical insight.

In terms of the social media platforms highly skilled migrants mostly engage with, WhatsApp emerged as the most used platform. It is widely used for personal and group communication, for connecting with family, friends, and other immigrants in Nigeria and the Netherlands, respectively, on several issues such as daily life, job opportunities, housing, and social integration. This could be due to its interconnectedness, instantaneity, and media-rich nature which creates a "feeling of intimacy and proximity when communicating with others living thousands of miles away" (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014), thus distinguishing it from other platforms. In other words, WhatsApp helps them develop and maintain strong social ties with their networks, allowing for constant communication and support throughout the migration process.
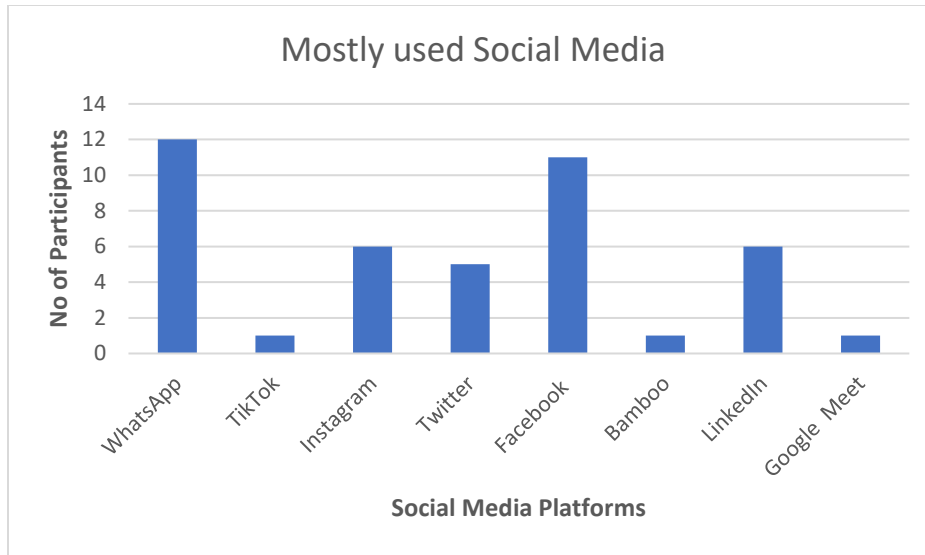
Figure 2: Mostly used social media platforms among highly skilled Nigerian migrants

Furthermore, the majority of the participants (11) stated that they utilize Facebook as an additional platform to communicate with acquaintances and former classmates. Instagram (6) is seen as a platform for entertainment and photo sharing. Furthermore, they gain insights into the way of life and culture in the Netherlands, as well as monitor current events and trends in both Nigeria and the Netherlands via Twitter (5). LinkedIn (6) is the platform most frequently utilized for job searching and expanding professional networks, whereas TikTok (1), Bamboo (1), and Google Meet (1) are the least utilized. These platforms help them tap into their loosely bound networks which, similar to the case of highly skilled Indonesian migrants (Hidayati, 2020), serve as valuable sources of information on migration and living conditions in the destination country.

Use of Social Media during Migration

Regarding how social media is used in the migration process, the responses reveal that in the transition stage, highly skilled Nigerian migrants find other internet-based platforms such as Google and official schools'/organizations' websites more useful than social media for assistance and information about migrating to the Netherlands. This is because, unlike other destinations such as the UK and Canada which are most attractive to Nigerian immigrants, information about migration to the Netherlands is not mostly available on social media. This sentiment was shared by Osas, a single lady in her late twenties:

> "I don't think I really got as much information as I would have wanted from YouTube because not a lot of people here are on YouTube like they are in other countries where everyone like, oh! come and school in the US and UK or something like that. So, I did a lot of Googling and personal research".

Information and communication are essential resources to migrants as they would prefer to move to where they already have connections or access to detailed information (Hidayati, 2020). While there is little to no content on migrating to the Netherlands on social media platforms like there is for other developed countries, some participants stated that they relied on friends and people who already reside in the Netherlands for useful information. These conversations are mostly done via WhatsApp and LinkedIn. This implies that certain social media are more useful to migrant in decision-making than the others and social networks are very instrumental in this process. In essence, social media offers the platform to tap into and harness these social networks to which they are weakly tied. This underscores the significant role of migrant networks in facilitating migration, with social media acting as both strong and weak tie (Granovetter, 1973) linking "migrants and non-migrants based on kinship, friendship, or shared community origin" (Massey et al., 1998). It makes it easier for migrants to connect with their destination country. (Hidayati, 2020).

Furthermore, the analysis also showed that social media is valuable to highly skilled Nigerian migrants in the settling stage. They use social media to connect with family and friends back home and to meet and maintain ties with other immigrants in the destination country. Social media helps them to cushion the anxieties and stress of migration and helps them access information on how to navigate and integrate into their host country through various online social media groups. As Komito (2011) asserts, social media enables 'media-rich' and resilient social groups to develop, fostered by a shared commitment and common identity, a characteristic associated with the face-to-face community. Many of the participants emphasized the crucial role of these online social media groups in assisting their transition and adjustment to life in a new country after migration. They attested that these virtual communities enable them access to information and resources, and to have a sense of belongingness.

> "Community is very important in a place where one is not fully integrated yet. There's so much you wouldn't know by yourself. There are some things you're trying to figure out that somebody else has already figured out and done, and dusted, so rather than trying to start all over from scratch, you can always leverage other people's experiences and that gives you a lot more speed and a lot more confidence" (Kim, single male in his 30s, living in the Netherlands since 2020)

The above response exemplifies how networks established through social media act as a support system, providing assistance to migrants as they navigate and adapt to life in their host country. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates the significant role of social media in minimizing the likelihood of migrants returning to their home country by offering essential support and facilitating a smoother integration process. This finding corroborates a previous study indicating that the social support received through social networks is instrumental in reducing the impact of acculturative stressors and leads to better adaptation (Forbush and Foucault-Welles, 2016).

5.2: Social Media Influence on (non) Return Decision

The analysis reveals that social media influence on highly skilled Nigerian migrants' return decision-making differs. For some, it reaffirms their initial intentions of non-return while for others who had intentions to return, it served as a change catalyst to those intentions. How social media shapes the non-return decision of highly skilled Nigerian migrants is outlined below.

Transnational ties through social media

Maintenance of social ties with family and friends across diverse geographical borders has become a thing of ease with the advent of new communication technologies such as social media (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). Technology has enabled distant family members and friends to virtually communicate and attend events such as birthdays, weddings, and more. It eliminates isolation and the necessity to make in-person journeys back home by providing up-to-date information on family and friend affairs that can be accessed with the touch of a button. A considerable number of the respondents affirm that they maintain connections with family and friends at home whom they would hardly see, through social media. According to Kim, a male in his late thirties, living in the Netherlands since 2020,

> "The idea of returning to settle isn't rational to me. I'm on WhatsApp groups with all my colleagues in Nigeria and we have very close communication every now and then, and even if I'm in Nigeria, we may not see that often in terms of physical meetings, but because of the digital space, we're able to leverage on each other's competencies across the globe".

In addition to connections and communications, corroborated by Tan et al., (2018 cited in Muller 2023:39), the participants of this study also stress that they often partake in various transnational activities such as remittances, small businesses, homeland politics, religious activities, and media and commodity consumption. The media content such as comedy skits, movies, programs, etc., they consume on social media makes them feel part of 'home' even while away. Some participants also highlighted how they are made aware of different opportunities for investment back home through several social media groups they belong to.

> "I see content on investing in Nigeria, they don't discuss returning to Nigeria. They tell you about investments, what you can invest your money in". (Pa Jay, male in his 60s, in the Netherlands since 2015).

Social media, serving as a facilitator for these transnational engagements, becomes a conduit through which individuals benefit from their social networks. These engagements as emphasized by Komito (2011) not only ease the emotional and social costs associated with migration but also reduce the threshold of the decision to migrate. Madianou (2012) agrees, arguing that evolving practices of maintaining cross-border connections have far-reaching effects on the overall migration experience, including decisions about settlement and return (Madianou, 2012 in Dekker and Engbersen, 2014).

Echo-chamber Effect and Social Network

Similar to previous studies on echo chambers (Modgil et al., 2021), social media brings to the fore the deteriorating situation in the home country, through constant news fillers and discussions around weakening currency, kidnappings, high unemployment rate, electoral fraud, etc., thus influencing the decision to return. This continual exposure either reinforces existing beliefs and perceptions about returning or, conversely, undermines the initial intention to return. For instance, most of the participants confirmed that the information they often see on social media discourages them from considering the idea of returning. Michael, a husband and father in his fifties, for example, poignantly states:

> "When you talk of this banditry issue, herdsmen issues, and so on, you know, you look at what you see from social media, you will not think of going back. How people are being massacred, and how the economic resources of people have been wasted; in fact, it is horrible. So, a lot of content there, that is out, especially on Facebook would discourage you".

Kim, while reflecting on social media's influence on his decision to return, noted that:

> "My initial decision before I moved, I didn't consult social media, but every now and then when I go back on social media it either re-affirms my decision to stay where I am or reduces the options of considering moving back".

Furthermore, some participants find reassurance in the testimonies shared by their peers abroad, especially when making comparisons between their lives before migration and their current circumstances. Victor, a single male in his thirties, explains:

> "I see several contents from Nigerians who are abroad, where they share the tales of how much they earn in their current country of sojourn and also how they try to make comparison with how it was for them when they were in Nigeria and when I glance through those content, I see more reason for me to stay where I am, to work hard and to make a difference for my family, for myself".

However, beyond the news and information they see online, the situation at home is sometimes relayed by friends and family members, dissuading them from considering a return. Some participants shared instances where they received discouraging messages rather than encouragement to go back. This sentiment was captured by Nene, who stated:

> "Whenever I chat with people back home, their statements is don't come back, don't come back, don't come back. So, I have no one telling me to come back. On the other hand, too, I don't see any realistic content telling me to go back. Though most people tell me their challenges, they don't tell me they are leaving".

The above statement suggests that though migrants might be going through a tough time in the host country, they are encouraged to stay by their social networks as the situation may be comparatively better than in the origin country. It also highlights that migration decisions are not solely influenced by family but may extend to the broader social network, including friends and members of one's community (Adams 2004:475 in Achenbach and Achenbach 2017:35).

'Unofficial' Information on Migration

One of the key benefits of social networks is access to resources, capital, and social support. This support could be informational, instrumental, or emotional (Chib et al., 2013:21). Social media, serving as a platform where these ties and networks are formed, functions as an open source of information. As noted by Dekker and Engbersen (2014), social media not only makes information available publicly, but it also provides a rich source of confidential and unofficial insider knowledge on migration. In the same vein, analysis of data in this study observed that migrant networks within social media offer valuable information that are very instrumental to return decision-making. Nene, a master's student, and a single lady in her late twenties who planned to return after her studies in August because of issues of accommodation and inability to secure a job describes how advice she got from the WhatsApp group of "Nigerian Youths in the Netherlands" (NYN), which she belongs to, altered her intention to return.

> "I had someone chat me up and give me like a very useful, insightful information. That was even what informed my decision to return before my visa ends because initially, I was planning to return next year, maybe in February with the orientation year visa. So, when I had a chat with someone I met on NYN, they highlighted the fact that I needed to avoid having a gap between my current visa and the orientation year visa and so someone else spoke to me about freelancing and gave me some tips and strategies and that also changed my decision to consider coming back in October".

Gift, a single lady in her mid-twenties who moved to the Netherlands in 2020, affirmed Nene's viewpoint, and further shed light on the conversations within the Nigerian community WhatsApp group regarding returning.

> "It's actually the opposite. Staying back here…I've never come across such conversations. Like, people even give you reasons why you need to stay back or give you backhand ways of staying back here".

These insights underscore the value of information shared within these social networks in aiding immigrants' integration and settlement, as well as their return decision-making. They may not necessarily be 'backhand' information as in the case of irregular migrants but often constitute "(un)official information" not readily available to the public unless one has specific experience or does some personal research or inquiries.

5.3: Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings presented in this chapter reveal the critical role that social media plays in shaping the return migration decisions of highly skilled Nigerian migrants, with WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn emerging as the most used platforms. These channels serve not only as bridges to connect with family and friends across borders but also as crucial tools for obtaining information on migration, integration, and settlement. They also serve as a means for establishing and nurturing social ties with fellow migrants in the host country. Social media serves as a conduit for transnational engagement which reduces the stress of migration and the need to return. Through these digital avenues, migrants gain exposure to the situations prevailing in their home country, facilitated

by information gleaned from their networks and social media interactions. This exposure, in turn, exerts a profound influence on their decision-making process regarding return migration. Social media provides migrants access to unofficial information on migration which is instrumental in return decision-making. These findings are consistent with what has been found in past studies, highlighting the use of social media to keep, improve, and create ties with family, friends, and other migrants during migration (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014; Komito, 2011). They also resonate with Hidayati's (2020) observation that social media has become an increasingly popular source of information, influencing migrants' decisions to move and where to move.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine the perspectives of highly skilled Nigerian migrants towards returning to Nigeria and the role of social media in shaping these perceptions. Migration decision-making is a complex, non-linear process, including the decision to return to one's home country. This is because the decision to migrate is often a result of interconnected social factors within which migrants' lives are embedded. While existing studies have explored the motives for the return of migrants, this study focused on how highly skilled migrants perceive return. It did so by examining the considerations and steps that migrants go through in arriving at a decision to either return or stay and how social media plays a role. Drawing on a qualitative research approach, this study inductively analyzed the narratives of 12 highly skilled Nigerian migrants either working or studying in the Netherlands, examining their migration motives, views about return, usage of social media, and how it influences their (non-) return beliefs/desires. The study found that the decision and motivation for migration among highly skilled Nigerian migrants range from professional reasons (employment, education, career prospects, and upskilling), to economic reasons (better quality of life, higher earnings), as well as personal reasons (family, desire to gain international experience). The desire to upskill and gain international exposure was the most cited reason for migration among this group of immigrants.

In terms of their views on return, returning to Nigeria is not considered an immediate plan. Return is perceived as a retirement consideration upon the actualization of all their dreams. Although returning is not in their plan in the foreseeable future, these immigrants make regular trips to Nigeria, at least once every year to visit with family (especially aged parents) and friends as well as oversee the investments they have established there. These regular visits are seen as a practical alternative to permanent return, a choice that is currently considered infeasible due to the current economic, political, and security situation in Nigeria as well as concern about their children's education and their career goals, all of which are already deeply rooted in the Netherlands. Furthermore, return is perceived as a viable option against illegal stay.

With respect to the second objective of this thesis which is investigating the role of social media in shaping these perceptions, this study found that social media plays a significant role in the non-return decision of highly skilled Nigerian migrants. It is evident that the increased level of interconnectedness and ease of information sharing as well as the promptness that social media brings to the world influences several human decisions. These factors greatly contribute to and influence migrants' decision to remain such that keeping in touch with family, friends, and businesses across thousands of miles with just a WhatsApp video call, zoom conference call, etc., erodes the need or desire to travel thousands of miles to keep tabs on things. The ease with which information can be shared has an additional influence on migrants' return decisions. Unfavourable news regarding the economic, political, and security situation in their home country, as well as guidance on how to settle in the host country, are all accessible in real-time via various online channels.

In sum, the study aligns with existing research that recognizes the integral role of social media in migration decision-making processes (Ihejirika and Krtalic, 2020; Hidayati, 2020, 2017; Dekker and Engbersen, 2014; Komito, 2011). It argues that the perception of return is also shaped by migrants'

aspirations and capabilities, as well as the influence of social media. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn offer a means for building and sustaining social networks, providing access to valuable resources and support, ultimately reducing migrants' inclination to return. The prevalent norms established by social networks through WhatsApp groups also play a role in influencing migrants' return decisions. While this study explored highly skilled Nigerian migrants' perceptions of the role of social media in their position on (non) return to Nigeria, the methodology employed in this study does not present the discourses on social media on return migration among migrants. This, therefore, can be explored in further research by analyzing social media contents and diasporic social media pages. This way, one can further uncover the prevalent themes, attitudes, and information that influence migrants' perspectives on returning to their home country. This could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of online communities, shedding light on the role of peer influence, shared experiences, and the dissemination of relevant information in shaping migrants' perceptions.

Importantly, this research offers noteworthy insights with direct implications for policymaking. These insights are contingent upon whether the policy originates from the sending or receiving governments and the specific objectives it aims to achieve. In the case of Nigeria, if the primary aim revolves around retaining or enticing highly skilled emigrants to return, it, therefore, becomes imperative to address the pivotal issues that heavily influence the decisions of these migrants to not return home, notably the availability of economic and professional opportunities in the home country and the need to mitigate political instability leading to security concerns. This can be accomplished through the development and execution of enduring strategies that foster economic growth, improve the quality and availability of basic amenities, and establish a conducive environment, assuring these migrants that returning home would not negate the accomplishments they have gained during their time abroad.

On the other hand, if the host country, the Netherlands, aims to retain its highly skilled migrants, it may direct its attention towards push factors that influence these individuals' decisions, such as housing and accommodation concerns, the insufficiency of opportunities to maintain legal status, and the Dutch language as a prerequisite for securing suitable employment. They can provide more pathways and processes for these immigrants to navigate and sustain their legal standing which if precarious or unfavourable, encourages them to either return or seek better opportunities elsewhere. A favourable legal status for migrants ensures their safety and integration, granting them unrestricted rights and opportunities; this relieves any apprehension regarding the need for further or upward migration. Each policy action can exert an influence on the factors affecting immigrants' choices, potentially swaying them toward or away from returning to their home countries.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Research Interview Guide

<u>Introduction</u>

- **Greetings**
  - ❖ Brief Introduction of myself (My name and institution)
  - ❖ Explain the purpose of the study and why the respondent has been chosen to participate in the study.
  - ❖ Obtain either written or oral consent from the respondent to proceed with the interview and to record the conversation.

- **Confidentiality**
  - ❖ Assure the respondent of anonymity and that all information that will be provided will only be used for research purposes.
  - ❖ All information collected during this interview will be kept safe and destroyed at the completion of the set study.

<u>Interview Guide</u>

Section 1: Introduction

1. Can you please provide some background information about yourself, such as your educational background, profession, and how long you have been living in the Netherlands?
2. What was life like for you in Nigeria prior to your migration?
3. Can you tell me a little bit about your migration experience to the Netherlands? What are/were your motivation for migrating to the Netherlands?
4. What was your main source of information for arrival to the Netherlands?
5. Are you part of any association or organization here? Are these mainly for Nigerians or professionals, or something else like a church community? Can you tell when did you join this group and what was your motivation?
   a. What is life here in the Netherlands like? Have you met your migration goal?
   b. What's the plan for the future? Did you have plans to return?

Section 2: Perception towards returning to Nigeria.

6. When you were migrating to the Netherlands what were your thoughts or intention about returning to Nigeria?

7. Have your thoughts and intention toward returning to Nigeria changed over time? If yes, could you please explain what factors have influenced these changes?

8. What do you generally think or feel about returning to Nigeria? And why?

9. Have you had friends/acquaintances who have returned or considered returning? Why and how did they plan their return?

    a. Do their experiences upon return change your view towards returning home?

Section 3: Social media usage and Influence

10. What is your main source of information for returning to Nigeria?
11. Which social media platforms do you actively engage with and for what purposes?

12. Do you use social media to connect with other Nigerian migrants or friends and family in Nigeria? In what ways and how frequent is this compared to your usage for other purposes?

13. Have you come across any specific social media groups, communities, or pages that are relevant to Nigerian migrants or discussions about returning to Nigeria?

14. Have you ever encountered content on social media that either encourages or discourages you from considering returning to Nigeria? If yes, could you please provide specific examples?

15. Could you tell me about your thoughts on such social media content? In your view what kind of emotions and thoughts do social media news on return and/or experiences shared on social media arouse?

16. Do you think the information you obtain from social media plays any role in shaping your considerations on return or no return?

17. Are there other factors that you think play a more decisive role in your decision on return or no-return than social media and that we have not yet talked about?

18. Any final thoughts you would like to share on return from Netherlands to Nigeria in general?

Appendix 2: Profile of the participants

No.	Name	Gender	Brief Profile	Years in the NL
1.	Kim	M	in his 30s, single, master's degree, works with a travel management company, migrated to the NL in 2020.	3 years
2.	Osas	F	22 years old, single, master's student.	11months
3.	Gift	F	26 years old, single, employed, migrated to the NL in 2020.	3 years
4.	Kiki	F	in her late 30s, married, has a child, working and doing a PhD, migrated to the NL in 2019.	4 years
5.	Victor	M	30 years old, single, communication specialist, migrated to the NL in 2020.	3 years
6.	Nene	F	26 years old, single, master's student, migrated to the NL in 2022.	1 year
7.	Pa Jay	M	in his 60s, married with children, project manager, first moved to the NL in 2007 on shell cross-posting, returned to Nigeria in 2010, and remigrated to the NL in 2015.	8 years
8.	Michael	M	in his 50s, married with children, on a 7-year work contract with an international organization, migrated to the NL in 2016.	7 years
9.	Kayode	M	in his 40s, married with children, works with Shell Holland, moved to the NL from the UK in 2006.	17 years
10.	Amara	F	in her late 30s, single mom, has two children, works with an international company, migrated to the NL in 2018.	5 years
11.	Nomzy	M	in his 40s, married with children, employed, moved to the NL from the UK in 2008.	15 years
12.	Chima	M	in his 40s, married with three children, employed, moved to the NL from the UK in 2020.	3 years

Note: The names are pseudonyms.