

Theatre, Transmediality, and Social Media: Countering Japa Syndrome Narratives in Nigeria

Oghenemudiaga Praise AKPUGHE, Ph.D

Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin, Benin City,
Nigeria

Abstract

The exodus of Nigerian professionals and youth, popularly termed “Japa Syndrome,” has emerged as a critical socio-economic and cultural phenomenon. While this trend is primarily driven by structural factors such as unemployment, insecurity, and poor governance, its cultural amplification through social media has intensified aspirations for mobility. This paper critically examines whether theatre, reconfigured through transmedial adaptation, can offer counter narratives capable of challenging this migration imaginary. Drawing on migration theories (push pull, aspirations capabilities, human capital), Jenkins’s theory of spreadable media, and platform governance scholarship, the study undertakes a critical discourse analysis of selected YouTube videos, including aspirational and cautionary narratives, alongside digital theatre interventions. Findings reveal that aspirational videos dominate algorithmic visibility due to their affective appeal and participatory logic, while counter narratives struggle for traction. The paper argues that symbolic interventions alone cannot neutralize the structural drivers of Japa Syndrome but can create reflexive spaces that prompt critical engagement. It concludes with recommendations for integrating cultural strategies with structural reforms, enhancing platform literacy for theatre practitioners, and institutionalizing creative economy support to achieve sustainable impact.

Keywords: Japa Syndrome, social media, migration, theatre, transmediality, spreadable media

1. Introduction

“Japa Syndrome,” derived from the Yoruba verb *japa* (meaning “to escape”), has become an iconic phrase within Nigeria’s sociocultural discourse. It captures the large scale departure of citizens to foreign destinations in pursuit of economic security, improved living standards, and personal fulfillment. Although migration has long been part of human mobility patterns, the intensity and character of Nigeria’s current wave reflect systemic failures in governance, persistent insecurity, and deepening global inequalities (Adeyanju et al., 2024). Recent studies underscore that migration intentions among Nigerian youth rank among the highest globally, with nearly 74% of young Nigerians expressing a desire to relocate permanently (Okunade & Awosusi, 2023). This aspiration has translated into significant outflows of skilled professionals, especially in health, education, and information technology sectors. The Nigerian Medical Association (2023) reports that more than 15,000 doctors have migrated to Europe, North America, and the Middle East since 2019, reducing the doctor to patient ratio to less than 1:4,000 against the World Health Organization’s recommendation of 1:600 (WHO, 2022).

The implications of this phenomenon are profound. Beyond human capital depletion and weakened institutional capacity, the Japa Syndrome has reconfigured Nigeria’s cultural economy. Migration has become a symbolic marker of success, valorised in popular discourse and celebrated on social media platforms. Videos depicting Nigerians thriving abroad circulate widely on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, shaping collective aspirations. These digital narratives often present curated realities, luxury lifestyles, financial independence, and cultural prestige, while occluding the hardships of integration and vulnerability to exploitative labor regimes (Polson & Adusei, 2022). This discursive imbalance perpetuates what scholars call a “migration desire economy,” where affective appeals trump rational assessments of risk (Jenkins, 2020).

Against this backdrop, theatre, historically a civic and critical medium in Nigeria, faces the challenge of asserting relevance in

the digital age. The remediation of theatre into online spaces through transmedial strategies offers opportunities to contest dominant imaginaries of migration by mobilizing affective storytelling, participatory engagement, and symbolic critique. Yet, questions persist: Can theatre interventions compete within algorithm driven ecosystems dominated by influencer culture? Can symbolic narratives meaningfully shape aspirations without reinforcing paternalistic controls? Addressing these questions is urgent, given that cultural responses to migration cannot be detached from ethical considerations and the structural realities that drive mobility.

This paper argues that while theatre and transmedial interventions hold potential for shaping discourse, their impact is circumscribed by algorithmic governance, economic inequalities, and global labor hierarchies. The study adopts a critical discourse approach, analyzing selected YouTube videos, both aspirational and cautionary, alongside digital theatre performances designed to interrogate migration fantasies. By situating this analysis within migration theories, participatory media frameworks, and the ethics of cultural persuasion, the paper offers a multidimensional critique of the limits and possibilities of theatre in mitigating Japa Syndrome.

2. Literature Review

This section situates Japa Syndrome within academic debates on migration, digital media, and theatre, drawing from migration theories, participatory culture, and platform governance to frame the analysis.

Migration theories provide essential frameworks for understanding the socioeconomic forces underlying Japa Syndrome. The push pull model offers a classical starting point, framing mobility as a response to negative conditions at home and attractive conditions abroad. Push factors in Nigeria include economic stagnation, high unemployment rates (33.3% in 2020), and pervasive insecurity, which compel individuals to seek better conditions abroad (Adeyanju et al., 2024). Conversely, pull

factors, such as higher wages, quality healthcare, and stable governance in destination countries, exert a strong attraction. However, De Haas (2021) critiques the determinism of this model, proposing the aspirations capabilities framework, which foregrounds migration as a relational process shaped by symbolic and material conditions. According to this perspective, mobility is not merely reactive but aspirational. Nigerians pursue migration for status enhancement and cultural capital as much as for economic relief. This aligns with observations that social prestige associated with living abroad intensifies migration aspirations even in the absence of structural capability, often leading to irregular pathways (Polson & Adusei, 2022).

The human capital theory provides a complementary lens, underscoring the developmental costs of mass emigration. Skilled labor migration constitutes a “perverse subsidy” from the Global South to the Global North (Stark, 2022). Nigeria’s health sector exemplifies this dynamic. Okunade and Awosusi (2023) document how aggressive recruitment policies by the United Kingdom have depleted Nigeria’s medical workforce, exacerbating service delivery gaps. This attrition undermines Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well being), revealing the systemic contradiction between individual mobility gains and collective welfare losses.

Digital platforms operate as potent engines for shaping the migration discourse. On YouTube and TikTok, influencers curate aspirational narratives that amplify the desirability of emigration. These “curated utopias,” as Polson and Adusei (2022) describe them, deploy visual excess, luxury cars, designer outfits, urban skylines, to construct migration as a linear trajectory to success. Jenkins’s (2020) concept of spreadable media illuminates this process: rather than passive consumption, audiences actively circulate and remix content, embedding it within a participatory economy of desire. Empirical studies affirm the persuasive power of such narratives. **Innovations for Poverty Action (2023)** reports that factual interventions detailing the risks of irregular migration have negligible impact on behavioral intentions. The

study concludes that “aspirational content significantly outcompetes informational messaging because it resonates with the affective registers of hope and mobility.” This dynamic underscores the structural complicity of platform algorithms, which prioritize content optimized for engagement over epistemic accuracy (Gillespie, 2018).

Theatre in Nigeria boasts a storied legacy as an instrument of social critique, from anti colonial dramaturgy to post independence development communication (Barber, 2020). The migration of theatre into digital environments via **transmediality**, the extension of stories across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and interactive livestreams, signals both continuity and rupture. On one hand, transmedial affordances enable participatory engagement, fostering cocreative practices where audiences shape interpretive trajectories (Okagbue, 2022). On the other hand, these affordances are delimited by algorithmic logics that reward virality over reflexivity (Gillespie, 2018). This tension raises critical questions about cultural power in platformised contexts. While theatre interventions aspire to disrupt migration fantasies through metaphorical storytelling and ethical appeals, their circulation remains precarious in ecosystems calibrated for influencer culture. Consequently, symbolic interventions risk marginality unless integrated with strategic optimization and infrastructural support.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach rooted in critical discourse analysis, focusing on six YouTube videos that exemplify dominant and resistant narratives of Japa Syndrome. The videos were purposively sampled based on thematic relevance, engagement metrics, and representational diversity. The analyzed videos, including *Life abroad: The untold truth* (YouTube, 2022), *How I made it in Canada without papers* (YouTube, 2023), and two cautionary narratives, *The harsh reality of Japa life* (YouTube, 2023) and *Why I returned to Nigeria after five years abroad* (YouTube, 2024), provide a comparative perspective. Additionally, the study includes two digital theatre performances, *Stage*

against Japa (YouTube, 2023) and *Broken dreams: A digital performance* (YouTube, 2024).

Content analysis focused on semiotic strategies (visual aesthetics, narrative tone), affective appeals (hope, fear, resilience), and participatory affordances (comments, hashtags, remixes). Engagement metrics (views, likes, comments) were recorded to contextualize algorithmic visibility. Ethical considerations included respecting intellectual property and contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2019). The analysis was also informed by a critical reading of a report by Innovations for Poverty Action (2023) on the impact of informational interventions, which served to triangulate the study's findings on the limits of persuasive content.

4. Discussion and Critical Analysis

The analysis of the selected YouTube videos, triangulated with established academic research, reveals a complex dynamic between cultural production, media platforms, and migration aspirations. The findings confirm that while digital media offers a powerful vehicle for cultural expression, its efficacy as a tool for social change is constrained by structural and algorithmic forces.

Aspirational videos such as *Life abroad: The untold truth* and *How I made it in Canada without papers* exemplify Jenkins's logic of spreadability. These videos mobilize affective hooks, opulent backdrops, motivational rhetoric, and testimonial intimacy, to invite audience participation. As Jenkins (2020) observes, "circulation in a participatory culture depends less on gatekeepers and more on what audiences find worth sharing." This participatory architecture transforms migration into a desirable commodity, fueling what may be termed a digital economy of aspiration.

Conversely, cautionary videos such as *The harsh reality of Japa life* deploy testimonial realism to puncture migration myths. While these narratives foreground themes of isolation and legal precarity, their algorithmic reach is modest compared to aspirational content. This asymmetry corroborates Gillespie's

(2018) thesis that platform governance privileges engagement optimization over epistemic value, relegating critical discourse to the margins. This shows that the symbolic potency of aspirational narratives can easily override informational deterrents.

Digital performances like *Stage against Japa* and *Broken dreams* seek to reconfigure migration discourse through symbolic dramatization. Metaphors such as chained suitcases and fragmented passports function as semiotic critiques of mobility fantasies. Yet, these interventions exhibit limited algorithmic traction, revealing structural barriers to cultural dissent in attention economies dominated by influencer logics. The deployment of theatre for behavioral persuasion surfaces ethical tensions. Invoking Nissenbaum's (2019) framework of informational integrity, the question arises: does affective deterrence constitute a paternalistic encroachment on autonomy, particularly when viable alternatives remain absent? Moreover, the aesthetic mimicry of Western production tropes in some digital theatre experiments risks reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle, inadvertently valorizing Western modernity as the aspirational ideal.

5. Recommendations

To achieve a sustainable impact, narrative interventions must be embedded within a broader, multi scalar strategy that includes:

Integrate Cultural and Structural Interventions: Narrative critique must operate alongside socioeconomic reforms targeting unemployment, insecurity, and governance deficits. Symbolic interventions alone cannot neutralize systemic drivers of migration.

Platform Literacy for Practitioners: Theatre artists require strategic competencies in search engine optimization, thumbnail optimization, and analytics without sacrificing artistic integrity. Practitioners must understand and work with, not against, platform algorithms to ensure their work is visible.

Participatory Co creation: Involve migrant returnees and diaspora members in content development to enhance authenticity and mitigate paternalism. This approach ensures the interventions are an open conversation rather than a one way lecture.

Diversify Narrative Templates: Shift emphasis from deterrence to aspirational local imaginaries, valorizing entrepreneurship and cultural innovation. This involves creating stories that show a path to success within Nigeria.

Institutional Support: Embed transmedial theatre within creative economy frameworks to ensure financial sustainability and impact assessment. This can involve public private partnerships, grants, and other forms of funding to ensure cultural projects can continue over time.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cultural interventions, while symbolically potent, cannot substitute for structural remedies in mitigating Japa Syndrome. The aspirational logics of migration, amplified through participatory media and algorithmic architectures, outpace the discursive reach of critical narratives. Theatre's digital turn, despite its civic lineage, contends with infrastructural asymmetries that circumscribe its transformative potential. The path forward lies in forging alliances between aesthetic innovation, platform governance, and policy reforms that reconcile narrative agency with material justice.

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THE GRIOT: International Journal of the West African Association for 156
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