Being African:
How Africans Experience the Diaspora

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About Africa No Filter

Africa No Filter exists because many stories about Africa still lazily revolve around the single story of poor leadership, poverty, corruption, disease, and conflict. These stories fail to portray the other more progressive side of Africa and collectively perpetuate the narrative that Africa is broken, dependent and lacks agency. The result? Harmful stereotypes that continue to paint a rigidly negative picture of the continent, despite the massive strides we are making. Our mission at Africa No Filter is to shift these stereotypes because they impact the way the world sees Africa and how Africa sees itself. Through research, grant-making, community building and advocacy, we support storytellers to help shift the stereotypical narratives about Africa one story at a time.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is difficult to establish the exact population of the African diaspora in the world. The definitions vary regarding the number of generations that constitute still being part of the diaspora, and also because national statistic bureaus differ in how they gather information about diasporas. However, according to the latest available figures on foreign-born Africans, there are more than 619,000 in France, 1.2 million in the UK and 2.1 million in the US. Given the many stereotypical narratives about Africa, we set out to investigate how these narratives were impacting on perceptions about Africa among diasporic youth, and on their identity and sense of belonging in France, UK and US. We were interested in how young African migrants experience the diaspora, how they define their being African and the bases of their belonging, and how they negotiate relationships with other Africans.

Using snowballing and purposive sampling of African youths in these countries, 30 male, female and non-binary 18–28-year-old Africans were selected from the USA, and then 20 from the UK and 20 from France. Our research targeted those who had either been born in the diaspora or had moved there when younger than five. All youths had few or no fixed memories about the African continent, and relied mainly on information imparted to them in their host countries.

We found that this group has a unique double heritage, resulting in their taking pride in African languages, food, music and history, while also strongly relating to the language and culture of their host country. Despite being exposed to many negative narratives about the continent in mainstream media, they were not overly influenced by the stereotypes. Instead, they relied on interpersonal relations and social media, and sometimes travel to the continent, to access knowledge about being African. Experiences of discrimination and recent racial reckonings in the host countries were also driving an increased interest in Africa.

This report, which focuses on an under-researched group, offers unique, first-hand accounts and analysis of conversations and interviews with young African diasporans, as part of a larger African diaspora community located across the world. We collected data through in-depth interviews, asking what they know about Africa, how they feel about Africa, how Africa is represented in the media, and their views/attitudes on markers of African identity.
KEY FINDINGS

Below is a summary of key findings from the report.

1 While young diasporans experience different types of discrimination in France, UK and USA – exoticisation in France, microaggressions in the UK, and surveillance and profiling in the US – the result is the same: a sense that they do not fully belong in the country where they live. They then retreat to their African identity but see it as something to be proud of, nourished, preserved and developed through visits and historical reimagination.

2 The ability to speak an African language was the most highly regarded marker of identity for young diasporans – even those who did not speak an African language wished that they could. For example, many Americans said that while most of them might not speak an African language, it is important to learn languages such as Swahili, Yoruba, Hausa, Xhosa, Shona, Igbo and others to challenge the Europeanisation of the black tongue that seeks to make Africans ‘fit’ in European societies.

3 Recent waves of racial reckoning in the US, UK and France, for example police murders of Black people, and the #BlackLivesMatter campaigns, have led to young diasporans learning more about their heritage and identity. They have, especially, turned to learning about African history, wearing African clothing and hairstyles, and using African names. Participants’ African identity was also reinforced at home by speaking and hearing African languages, eating African food, and listening to African music.

4 Young diasporans experience poor treatment in their host countries, are often marginalised and do not have equal access to government services and resources, compared to other racial groups. However, the nature of the treatment varies across countries: in the UK, Black people have similar experiences...
of microaggressions, whether they are Black British, Africans, African Americans, Caribbeans or Afro Latinos; in France, diasporans experience exoticisation; and in the US, they live in fear due to police and other racial violence in the country.

Diasporic youth typically have limited knowledge of Africa but a strong thirst for knowledge, and thus seek information about the continent from a wide range of sources including parents, relatives living in Africa and the diaspora, books and social media. Those participants who had travelled to the continent believed they had a greater knowledge than those who had only lived in the diaspora or moved to the diaspora at a young age, especially with respect to understanding the many diverse cultures across the continent.

Across the three countries, participants considered global news coverage of Africa to be biased, based in stereotypes, and mostly negative – focused on poverty and political violence – but their views about Africa, and their identity as Africans were not overly shaped by these stories because they were aware of the slant. For example, in the UK, most participants accessed news through BBC, ITV and Sky News, which they believed routinely misrepresented Africa. So, even though the participants paid attention to mainstream portrayals of Africa, they were not easily swayed by them. Nevertheless, they were concerned about the impact of such negative narratives on non-Africans.

Even positive stories about Africa are perceived to be mainly about individuals, for example, stories about African students winning competitions abroad; successful African inventors; African businessmen and women making money; and a Kenyan woman who takes plastic rubbish and waste and turns it into bricks for housing. This focus on individuals maintains a negative framing of Africa, allowing just a few pockets of positivity.
1 INTRODUCTION

The African diaspora is characterised by voluntary and involuntary dispersal of Africans globally, emergence of a cultural identity based on commonalities in experiences, and the psychological and physical return to Africa by those dispersed. The African Union (AU) specifically defines African diasporans as: “people of native African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union”. This means the AU welcomes African migrants, including the young African diasporans living in the Global North, so that they can fully ‘participate’ in the building of the African Union. The African diaspora, that is a community of persons of African descent living outside of the African continent, emerged mainly from historic movements, including slavery and colonialism. The African diaspora has a population estimated at 140 million, while Africa has a population of 1.3 billion.

An issue that remains under-researched is how young people are implicated by lived experiences in the African diaspora. By 2030 it is expected that young Africans will constitute 42% of global youth. Mainly because of rising rural poverty and limited opportunities for youths across the continent, they are increasingly migrating to towns, cities and beyond national boundaries. Scaling Fences, a 2019 UNDP report, discovered that African youths migrate mainly because of the need for good healthcare, decent jobs, governance and security, liberty and “the freedom to pursue opportunities for our families and ourselves”.

African youths at home and abroad have potential to shift the developmental trajectory of Africa by creating many new opportunities for development in Africa. Yet not enough research exists that examines the perspectives of African youths, especially those in the diaspora. Nevertheless, increasingly, researchers hear renewed calls to explore and analyse stories about Africa in the diaspora and how diasporic communities negotiate and construct their African identities within the broader context of biculturalism. Therefore, we sought to establish whether youths in the diaspora identified as African, and whether they thought they had a role to play in the future development of Africa. Modern technology allows global connections but simultaneously exposes people to biases in dominant information flows, leading us to seek to establish the impact of modern communication technologies on diasporic youths’ own narratives about the continent.

This research is unique in that it does not only pay attention to identity formation – topic of psychological import – but more specifically the role of media narratives about Africa in the identity formation of African diasporic youths. Therefore, this research provides unprecedented insights into young African diasporans in the USA, UK and France – all countries with large diasporic populations.
Storytelling and narrative-making influence how individuals construct their social realities and subsequently their self-definition and identity formation. Identity formation occurs as a young person forges and constructs self-identity from associated groups such as family, ethnicity, race, education, membership to organisations/associations and media consumption habits. Narratives about Africa at diasporic dinner tables, on social media and in songs, films, TV shows, charity messaging, and global news media such as CNN, BBC and TV5Monde, impact how young diasporans perceive, navigate and constantly negotiate their identities.

Most work on diasporic communities focuses on migrants’ links and connectivity to their homeland; however, more recent studies have looked at topics such as how the separation from the homeland often leads to an “intense search for and negotiation of identity” among diasporic communities, which implies the “multiplicity of identities”. Kibona notes that issues of identity among African diasporic communities include self-identification as well as identities imposed on African immigrants. The point is that migrants can be impacted by their new environment: while they retain a longing for the homeland they also get a sense of “home” from their host country. As noted by Weedon, “[d]iasporic communities often display multiple and hybrid identities that draw both on relatively fixed ideas of traditional and new hybrid identities and cultural forms – particularly among subsequent generations – that emerge from engagement with the culture and society in which the original migrants settled.”

Other scholars emphasise the influence of variables, including the role of the media. While there are emerging studies of African diasporas and the media and the latest communication technologies, many are still limited to what happens in online communities. Crucially, “an exclusive focus on media representations has denied agency to how those represented in mainstream media interpret, accept or challenge representations of themselves”. Also, apart from “the role of the Internet in linking up members of diasporic communities, the Internet should more importantly also be considered as a space in which different diasporic identities are articulated, imagined and contested”. It is important to note how African diasporans have to some extent “acquired grounds and new spaces in which to talk about how they wish to be represented”. It is in this context that this research follows Castells in observing “plurality of identities” fostered by social and cultural building blocks that can result in: (1) legitimising identity, which puts a distinct label and structure on identity; (2) resistance identity, a collective attempt to resist oppression, which results in the building of communities; and (3) project identity, wherein new identities are built to create a new position or label in society.
3 METHODOLOGY

In this research we interviewed 18–28-year-old African diasporans living France, UK and US, who had either been born in those countries or arrived there before they turned five. We chose these countries in the Global North because they not only have large diasporic populations of Africans but also are attractive destinations for many African parents with very young children. Young African diasporans are therefore more likely to be raised in the contexts of these popular destinations, with their advanced health services, education and job opportunities.

The sampling procedure we used was snowballing, through family networks, international students’ associations, Black Student Associations and festivals and fairs. After an initial vetting process of 100 individuals per country, we identified 30 participants from the USA, 20 from France and 20 from the UK. The sample included non-binary individuals, women and men. The participants were also partially self-selected, in that, due to the sense of vulnerability of young Africans diasporans, potential participants were at first suspicious of our motives and in some cases repeatedly asked why they had to be interviewed, and some cancelled their appointments.

Interviews were complemented by materials from archival data; news coverage; social media conversations; and stories and mentions about Africa in interpersonal, organisational and global diasporic platforms.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main ways in which young diasporans in the USA, UK and France learn about Africa?
2. How do first generation diasporans perceive and construct what it means to be African?
3. How are the narratives about Africa framed in global news and emerging digital entertainment platforms in the USA, UK and France?
4. How do recurring narratives about Africa in diasporic families and other interpersonal encounters influence diasporans’ attitudes towards Africa?
5. How do stereotypes of Africa such as disease, hunger and conflict-ridden narratives psychologically impact diasporans’ self-definition and view of Africa?
6. To what extent have African diasporic youths defined and sustained a viable sense of African identity?
7. How do African diasporic youths negotiate both the tensions and convergences between their mediated experiences of Africa (via media) and their lived experiences of being African in American and European metropoles?

Participants were also asked to rank their views on the markers of African identity on a scale of 1 to 10. Markers listed were African language, food, dress, accents, religions, music, films, history, hair, skin colour and names.

The interview transcripts of research participants were analysed using narrative analysis and thematic content analysis.

Due to the existence of the Birther Movement and birtherism™ conspiracy
theories in the USA, it was important that the goals of the project were clearly explained to each participant and appropriate ethical research guidelines were put in place. Carrying out a study about participants' place of birth and migration in America as connected to identity evoked the need to clearly address participants' concerns, and to state that this study was in no way meant to expose participants' legal status or subject them to any form of harm or expose them to proceedings from an immigration court. In all three countries in which research was undertaken, standard ethical considerations that apply to research on dealing with human subjects (such as consent and anonymity) were applied.
4 FINDINGS

The findings are laid out to cover the main themes of the research, i.e. (i) markers of African identity; (ii) sense of belonging; (iii) interpersonal relationships; (iv) mobility and the desire to travel to Africa; (v) knowledge about Africa; and (vi) global news coverage.

4.1 Markers of African identity

Across the participants in the three countries, speaking an African language, eating African food, and knowing African history were the most highly ranked markers (see Figure 1). The US stands out in its ranks, because participants also highly rated appearance – dress and hair – as markers of their identity.

While these markers were similar, participants were keen to emphasise that these attributes did not define their African identity. Participants also regarded the markers as interconnected, for example, your language, food and dress are related to your history and culture. The participants’ ranking of the markers of being African (African language, food, religion, music, films, history, hair, skin colour and names) was generative of dialogue that focuses on reclamation and re-existence. It also showed affirmation, resilience in the face of racial discrimination and yearning for reconnection with specific aspects of Africanness.

As Participant 8, a 24-year-old Ghanaian woman living in the UK, stated:

“Being African means coming from Africa and having African roots … It means you represent your culture and your traditions.”

The sentiment was echoed by others. For example, it was taken to be a rootedness in African culture that “can’t wash away, no matter how long you live in Britain” (UK Participant 17).

Further, participants believed that their understanding about themselves as African was related to family dynamics and what their parents taught them as being important. Recurring themes
about what it means to be African were family, community and culture. As US Participant 27, an 18-year-old Kenyan, explained:

"I believe it starts with the parents and what they choose to teach the kids and the environment of the home."

The above view was echoed by UK Participant 3, a 23-year-old man, when he said that being African is a "cultural signalling that comes from one's family, "saying things", or "doing things that give you an idea" of what it means to be an African. Similarly, for UK Participant 2, being African meant belonging or being part of a "bigger collective" than just immediate family. According to UK Participant 8, being African entitles you to "represent your culture and your traditions".

We discuss the markers in more detail below.

4.1.1 Knowing an African language

In all three countries, speaking an African language was the most highly regarded marker – even those who did not speak an African language wished that they could. For example, many Americans said that while most of them might not speak an African language, it is important to learn languages such as Swahili, Yoruba, Hausa, Xhosa, Shona, Igbo and others to challenge the Europeanisation of the black tongue that seeks to make Africans...
‘fit’ in European societies. A 21-year-old Nigerian man in the US said of his native language: "I am familiar with it. I don’t know how to speak it but just knowing it is a good thing."

Many of the US participants expressed frustration that they could not understand the languages their African relatives spoke and visa versa and said this created a disconnect between them. They also said that while an African accent also conveyed that one belonged to Africa, many were keen to lose their accent so they fitted better into American society and were not so noticeable.

British participants were more likely to have a sense of pride in speaking an African language, as they believed language is a repository of African values, customs, culture and history. For example, a 22-year-old Nigerian woman expressed pride in being able to speak both her parents' native languages, and another said it was a mark of distinction "to speak your mother tongue ... freely and everywhere you go" (UK Participant 12).

4.1.2 Knowing African history
The second most selected marker of participants' "Africanness" was their history – not necessarily historic events, but participants' own history. As explained by UK Participant 1, a 23-year-old Zimbabwean man:

"I’ll say, any history is quite important … let’s say the history of your name, history of where you are from … the country history … I think it is very important to know things that happened in the past."

Participants also indicated that to them being African meant that they came from greatness, despite beliefs to the contrary that were driven by what the media put out about Africa or Africans. Participants referred to Africa as the home of early civilizations in the past and of numerous technological innovations in the present. As US Participant 2, a 21-year-old Nigerian explained:

"I read some of the history of our people’s accomplishments, my ancestors’ accomplishments, and even the people that I was named after. I was named after a group of people in North Africa who contributed to the current civilization as we know it today."
The sentiment was echoed by UK Participant 3, a 20-year-old man of Nigerian and Sierra Leonean descent. He thought that

“Africa’s issues are rooted in history, very recent history. And if we don’t look at our history, we can’t really progress as a continent.”

Music was also seen as part of African history and culture, or as an instrument that shares or uncovers African values or customs. The connection to Africa through traditional music was tied up in history, but also extended to modern music such as Burna Boy and Wizkid, which many of their western friends also enjoyed. This meant that music supported participants’ ability to be rooted in a dual identity, and to feel more accepted and involved in their host countries.

### 4.1.3 Eating African food

African food was similarly seen as integral to their identity, helping them to understand African culture. US Participant 25, a 23-year-old Nigerian, had even started a YouTube cooking show based around food. US Participant 21, a 26-year-old Ghanainan woman, said that her family ran an African food store in Detroit, Michigan, where they sold African food, fabrics and jewellery.

### 4.1.4 African appearance

US participants were much more likely than those from France and UK to identify markers related to appearance as creating a strong identity as African, i.e. they rated hair and dress as significant. As explained by US Participant 27, an 18-year-old Kenyan:

“Being an African to me first starts off by the way I look. I believe I look like an African and also my name is African and that’s just what I go by.”

Many young African diasporans living in America identified the need for African accessories such as bracelets, brooches, earrings, backpack pins and even shirts for soccer teams such as Black Stars or Bafana Bafana. As US Participant 2, a 21-year-old Nigerian, explained:

“Out of everything else that African culture represents, I feel like clothes are your first form of expression outside of what you speak and how you think. I think clothes are a very
strong representation of who you are as a person and you communicate by what you wear. Our language is in our clothing."

4.2 Belonging
Despite feeling that they were African and that they expressed African identity in various ways, many of the participants had ambiguous feelings about whether they belonged in Africa or in their host country. This ambiguity was particularly stark among the French participants, three quarters of whom did not speak an African language and had never visited any countries in the continent. While they said they identified as French because France is where they were born, they also said they felt they did not fully belong in the ‘host’ country. Instead, their lived and mediated experiences made it clear to them that their race/colour did not entitle them to full citizenship. Asked whether she considered herself African, French Participant 4, a 19-year-old woman with Burkinabe parents, said:

“Not at all [I don’t consider myself African], but I also don’t fully feel like I belong to France. I don’t really have a sense of belonging to one specific territory actually.”

French Participant 8 had a clearer sense of belonging, stating:

“I feel more Congolese than I feel French. If you ask me, I wouldn’t say that I’m French first, my base is Congolese, I feel 80% Congolese and 20% French, to be honest.”

By contrast, UK participants’ sense of belonging to Africa was based on time spent in Africa and having African lived experience. According to UK Participant 3, belonging was grounded in markers of “African ways of life”. For UK participant 17, being in Britain was “being in a western country which is not really home”, but “when you go back to where you’re from [Africa], then it’s a real connection over the place”. Belonging to Africa was also about staying in touch with family and friends who still lived there, and this was enhanced by digital communications, as UK participant 12, a 22-year-old Nigerian woman, explained:

“It’s now all through their phone, and calls and messages. So just having that sense of belonging … where it all began (roots).”

However, some UK participants did not feel as connected to Africa. For example,
UK Participant 1, a 23-year-old male of Zimbabwean origin, who lives in London, said the multiculturalism of the city meant more to him than anything else. Out of London, Africanness was less defined because of fewer Africans living in other parts of the UK.

Like British participants, US participants also mainly felt a sense of belonging to Africa, with 26 out of 30 saying they considered themselves African, and only 3 saying they considered themselves American. However, some participants took time to think about the question, and did not have a definite answer as to whether they belonged to Africa. Those who had visited the African continent or who had close relatives in Africa were more likely to feel a sense of belonging. Several participants said that their parents had a stronger sense of belonging to Africa than they did, but they were connecting more to being African as they got older, even if it was a fleeting sense of belonging. For example, US Participant 10, a 21-year-old of Nigerian descent said:

”My parents were born in Nigeria and lived most of their lives there. All their family members are still in Nigeria and even though my parents have not been back to Nigeria, we still have a sense of belonging to Nigeria through video calls with family members they are very close to, and we attend an online church in Nigeria.”

Having a sense of belonging to Africa gave participants and their families a sense of identity and knowledge about their heritage and cultural roots. They further indicated that a sense of belonging to Africa facilitated resilience to racial discrimination as well as cultural creativity and inspiration. This was illustrated by participants talking about their knowledge of slavery and colonialism and how Africa is still rising, despite the historical atrocities. However, some felt that their lived experiences from the Global North rendered them as mere spectators to Africa.

Others were even more conflicted about where they belonged. For instance, US Participant 14, an 18-year-old from a Liberian background, explained that his parents moved to the US together, but later divorced and his mother remarried a Jamaican man. He and his siblings were mainly raised with Caribbean culture, so identified more as Caribbean than African:

”I know I was born in Liberia, Africa, but my parents moved here when I was 7 months old and I have not been back since. I therefore do not identify as African but instead an American of African origin.”

Other participants indicated that due to growing up in the US, they identified as American, and identified with some aspects of American culture, but did not see the need to adopt all aspects of American culture. They felt they belonged in the US because America is a nation of immigrants, so as immigrants they had a sense of belonging – even though discrimination made it harder for them to achieve a complete sense of belonging. Some of the discrimination was based on negative western ideas about Africa. For example, US Participant 7, a 20-year-old of Rwandan origin, described an experience with someone with ‘white saviour syndrome’:

”My American roommate asked if we can have a drive to collect shoe donations from other college students and ship them to my village in Africa for Christmas. I asked her that we can start by donating clothes and blankets to homeless people in Philadelphia this Christmas.”

Apart from microaggressions like these, participants also commented on their experience of being under constant surveillance and how being profiled for
being Black makes them feel othered in the places they occupy. As US Participant 28, a 20-year-old man from Zambia, said:

“As a Black man in America, anytime I get pulled over by a cop I imagine that I am about to be another statistic, another number among the Black men who have fallen to police brutality. Just like that my life can end in that moment.”

Racism also affected the sense of belonging of diasporans living in France, where racism mainly manifested subliminally through exoticisation. For example, French participants described problematic ‘compliments’ about their skin colour, hair style and accent, as well as questions like “Why do you speak French so well?” According to French Participant 8:

“As a Black woman I have received a lot of strange little comments. It's as if we're extra-terrestrials almost, like aliens or something. They act like Black women are something out of this world. For example, the questions asking about whether our hair is real or not.”

Although the experience of alienation, especially in public spaces, was shared by all the participants, it appears those who were born in Africa and moved to France bore most of the brunt. French Participant 9, a man who moved from DRC to France at the age of five, noted:

“I prefer to make a distinction between Africans born here in France and Africans born in Africa. The treatment is bad in both cases but it's even worse for immigrants because of stereotypes and cliches. As if people have images of Africans as being beasts and somehow stupid. The moment you tell people you are African it's like they immediately think you're incapable and you're immediately underestimated. If you do something intelligent, you get told that you're intelligent for an African.”
Although the experience of being discriminated against was felt by both men and women participants, women shared most anecdotes. French Participant 11 noted:

"I was talking to my friend from Gabon recently who is in my course [at university] and she said that in class she often feels like we have to overcompensate in class as Black women, we have a certain pressure on us that makes us feel like we have to show that we are clever and we think. We have to show that we aren't just immigrants, and we have a place here too."

The UK participants' sense of belonging and identity was also shaped by racism and discrimination, however, it was more overt and aggressive in the UK compared to France. Some talked about institutional racism, profiling and discrimination. UK Participant 4, a woman working in the health service sector, said Africans "get bullied for it [being African], or get people teasing you about it". Those who had lived in the UK for longer had experienced more discrimination and marginalisation, as it accumulated over time. Participants said they had to develop coping strategies and resilience in the face of racial discrimination and marginalisation. UK Participant 1, a 23-year-old male Londoner, originally from Zimbabwe, characterised growing up as an African in the UK as not something to be proud about. For him in high school and at college, there "weren't too many things that I could really bring up to say that made me proud about being African". However, for UK Participant 5 the situation was slowly "changing", as African musical talent was achieving global recognition – such as Burna Boy, Amapiano – and being embraced as a global phenomenon. This was changing how British people perceived Africa and Africans.

4.3 Interpersonal relationships
Across the three countries, participants indicated that they had more Black friends – and of these more were African or of African descent – than those from other groups. For British diasporans this was a way of gaining a stronger sense of belonging from those with similar backgrounds and experiences. Many said they had experienced exclusion at school as teenagers, and this drove them towards other Africans. US diasporans said they had African friends but also maintained a wide network of African acquaintances that were not friends; most of these friends and acquaintances were either part of family networks or people they met at college.
With regard to intimate relationships, French participants were less concerned with the race or background of their partners, as they regard shared values as more important. Nevertheless, French Participant 8 said that although they were open to non-African relationships, “the person has to understand and respect that there is a difference, otherwise I have to explain constantly, and I don’t want to explain my struggles or have them dismissed”. Of the UK participants, many more preferred relationships with Africans as they wanted to benefit from cultural proximity. For example, UK Participant 1, a 23-year-old male originally from Zimbabwe, said:

“I’ll make sure … my future wife is African. Just to make sure that the culture is there. You know, I think once you get into marriage, if the culture is quite different or far apart, then you can make quite a lot of things in life difficult, even just raising kids or just being able to combine the two families together.”

While, like the French participants, the US participants were happy to date Africans or non-Africans, some said they would only date Africans who grew up in the US. UK Participant 8 said:

“The first time I went to Ghana, I felt at peace … not because Ghana is a peaceful country, but it’s the fact that you’re surrounded by people exactly like you. People that do understand you, you don’t feel like a stranger.”

US participants who had travelled to Africa were similarly positive about their trip and said it had changed how they viewed the continent, after having a negative bias. For example, US Participant 9, a 21-year-old Kenyan, said:

“I have been to visit my family and I have been to other areas around Kenya, so living in the west does not primarily influence my view of Africa.”

In particular, US participants who had travelled to Africa highlighted the richness and diversity of culture they had experienced, and how they now felt more connected to their African identity. For example, US participant 23, a 27-year-old South African, said:

“Both my parents are from South Africa. I have been to South Africa four times and I do consider myself as South African.”

Similarly, US participant 27, an 18-year-old Kenyan woman, said:

“I would describe myself as an East African woman from Kenya. I know my culture and it’s something which I definitely want to continue learning as I get older.”

The participants indicated a desire to travel to Africa because their experience of growing up in the US had been that of being a minority and whenever they went to Africa, they were no longer a minority. “I really love every time I get to travel there. I love travelling to Africa because I feel like I belong there (Participant 27, Kenya/USA, 18).”

4.4 Mobility and the desire to travel to Africa

Participants in all three countries considered travel to Africa important since they saw it as a way to better understand African cultures, customs and lifestyles. French participants saw it as a kind of ontological duty one had to perform in their lifetime as an assertion of one’s identity. UK participants felt that travel to Africa would activate and nourish their African identity, and also be therapeutic in connecting with their ‘roots’. Those who had travelled back – typically for family holidays – said it was an important opportunity to witness Africa first hand, to have reunions with families, and live “life outside of just a Western bubble a bit” (UK Participant 5).
However, many US participants said that costs of travelling to Africa were prohibitive; others said it would take a lot of saving to be able to afford to travel. Some also said they would not be able to visit Africa until they had acquired their Green Card.

4.5 Knowledge of Africa

More UK participants felt they had knowledge about Africa, whereas French participants did not. US participants said they were more knowledgeable about some areas of Africa than others.

French participants said they deliberately chose to follow prominent Africans (artists, businesspeople, sportspeople) on social media or to read works by African authors, in order to glean ‘on the ground’ and alternative news about the continent. French Participant 12, a 22-year-old from Mauritius, said:

“I mostly go out of my way to consume African stuff, like reading African authors or listening to African music, which I guess even non-Africans do. Being close to African things isn’t hard for me because I like it, so I actively seek it out.”

UK participants were innovative about how they acquired knowledge about the continent and said they used many sources: personal relations, media, and educational and cultural institutions. They indicated that they had a thirst for knowledge about Africa, and actively sought out information. For example, UK Participant 8 said:

“My parents influenced my knowledge, the church, reading books about Africa, listening to people on YouTube, social media, family, friends, researching on the internet, and first-hand experiences through going back to Ghana.”

Participants from UK used social interaction to build knowledge of Africa. Conversations with family and parents were tailored towards building this knowledge. Some participants also stressed that their knowledge of Africa was aided by their experiences in Africa before they migrated to the UK, while others pointed out that visits to the continent helped in shaping their understanding of Africa through connections with people.

They also said that recent racially motivated political incidents had led to them find more information about the continent. For example, UK Participant 2 said:

“After George Floyd, in the last couple of years, maybe the past decade, I think there’s been a real focus on teaching more about Africa as a whole, instead of just presenting...”
images and shows on TV. So maybe the past three, four years, due to all the Black Lives Matter things, I think a lot more information about Africa.

Compared to the UK, US participants were more likely to feel they had limited knowledge about Africa, especially in that their knowledge was localised, based on their or their parents’ country of origin. Several of them also pointed out that Africa is a huge continent and therefore it would be difficult to have a thorough knowledge. As explained by US Participant 9, an 18-year-old Kenyan:

“Specifically, one thing from my family is we don’t like to say we say we are from Africa. We say we are from Kenya because people will try to lump it all together.”

Another Kenyan participant, aged 22, concurred and explained:

“Africans are very different as there is a difference between Kenyans and Nigerians, Ghanaians, all very different people. To me it means to respect the different cultures and each country has its own history, particularly unique, and how they developed in light of the different colonisation of the historical indigenous peoples there (US Participant 18).”

4.6 Global news coverage of Africa

Across the three countries, participants considered global news coverage of Africa to be biased, based in stereotypes, and mostly negative. However, participants said their views about Africa and their identity as Africans were not overly shaped by these stories because they were aware of the slant. Nevertheless, they were concerned about the impact of such negative narratives on non-Africans.

In the UK, most participants accessed news through BBC, ITV and Sky News, which they believed routinely misrepresented Africa. For example, UK Participant 13 said:

“The media always tell a story of poor governance in Nigeria, and other African countries in general. I don’t think that’s an Africa problem alone because everyone around the world complains about their government. But I think with Africa, the media always talks about things like...”
corruption, lack of infrastructure, and the governments not working in the interests of the people.

UK Participant 1 expressed a similar view:

“I don’t think the way they represent Africa is fair! I don’t feel the way in which they showcase stories or topics provide an overall conclusion of what Africa is like or what Africa has to offer. I guess they only showcase the bad things, or the things that paint Africa in a bad light … I feel like the good places that are out there in Africa don’t really get the light shone on them.”

US participants tended to get their news from CNN, Al Jazeera and BBC, and said the broadcast news contradicted what they learned from family members and social media accounts they follow.

They were concerned that Africa was normally portrayed in terms of poverty and violence, but coverage of the same issues in the US were either ignored or did not lead to overall negative narratives about the country (e.g. poverty and homelessness in many US cities, and gun violence and crime). Because of this bias, most of the participants turned to Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube for news about the continent. Many US participants also felt that digital media was making it easier to find more accurate representations of Africa, as it was possible to get perspectives directly from Africans. US Participant 22, an 18-year-old Kenyan, explained:

“I have cousins who I follow on social media and sometimes in their Instagram story or Facebook story I will see little news post that they share or in our WhatsApp group people will share things and that’s mostly what I consume.”

French participants also looked beyond the global media for news about Africa; several said that they deliberately avoided mainstream media coverage and indicated that they followed African influencers and celebrities, as they did not regard the dominant stories depicting misery, famine, poverty and war in Africa as a true reflection of the continent as a whole. As French Participant 15 explained after a friend posted something on Instagram about the film Madagascar in which there “were only animals and no real human beings”, which was a clear misrepresentation.

They went on to say:

“In the media we are represented catastrophically as a whole … Media representation makes it hard to be proud to be African, if I’m to be honest.”

However, participants in the three countries identified some positive stories. In the UK, participants said that positive stories tended to focus on individuals, which did not change the overall pervasive negative narrative. As explained by UK Participant 3:

“The positive things come down to individuals, for example African students winning competitions abroad, successful African inventors, African business men and women making money, doing some kind of invention, like the story about a Kenyan woman who’s taking all of the plastic rubbish and plastic waste that’s not been disposed of properly, and turning them into bricks for housing.”

UK Participant 5, a 22-year-old Ghanaian man, explained that views about Africa were changing because:

“People from the diaspora, especially people from America, are starting to explore Africa a lot more. Ghana has opened that up by inviting celebrities, such as Steve Harvey, Kendrick Lamar, Ludacris … a lot of them have come back in the last couple of years.”
UK participants felt that Africans were becoming visible and acknowledged, especially in the cultural space. In the past few years, the global music arena was seen to have benefited from Afrobeats, allowing the young British Africans to talk about a process of “reclaiming” some form of “respect”. It gave them hope that Nigerian and Ghanaian artists are increasingly recognised in the global music industry with not just Africans enjoying it, but a worldwide audience. The success of the African artists gave them the feeling that “we’re winning”, as evidenced by international awards.

US participants were also positive about African musicians receiving attention, such as Burna Boy, Diamond Platnumz, Wizkid and Davido. For example, US Participant 27, an 18-year-old Kenyan, said:

“Most of the music I listen to is African. The things I look at and post are African. So people who do follow me, very much know I am African.”

Apart from music, US participants said they read African authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chinua Achebe, but in terms of television series, they mainly watched TV shows that focused on Black characters who were not specifically African, such as the HBO series Insecure, Harlem on Amazon Prime, Hulu’s Reasonable, The Black Hamptons on BET+, and HBO’s Rap Shit.

Compared to the UK and US participants who saw positive pictures of Africa emerging from artistic production, French participants said that positive stories were mainly about African sports stars. However, French Participant 18 noted that positive sports coverage can be ephemeral and self-serving. With respect to the French soccer team, in which there are many African players, he explained:

“If the French team wins, it’s celebrated … But if it loses, sometimes it gets blamed on players of African origin in the French team.”
Speaking or knowing an African language, learning about African history and current affairs, eating African food, wearing African clothes and hairstyles, and enjoying the cultural and sporting achievements of the continent are the key ways young African diasporans identify with the continent. This becomes important because our research shows that diasporic youth participants in all three countries (UK, US and France) feel they don’t entirely belong in or identify with the countries in which they live.

A key driver for this is the discrimination they experience, which shows up differently in each country – exoticisation in France, microaggressions in the UK, and surveillance and profiling in the US. The result is the same: a sense that they do not fully belong in the country where they live. Many participants said that their awareness of their marginality solidified after witnessing racist events that made global news, such as the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter (BLM), and the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent BLM riots. Racism meant that they were both vigilant and survivalist in their outlook and strategy.

This led them to retreat to their African identity, seeing it as something to be proud of, nourished, preserved and developed through visits and historical reimagination. However, participants also didn’t completely identify with Africa, although they had a strong sense of their African identity – related to language, history, food and appearance.

In participants’ early years, African identity was sustained by parental upbringing, family and wider networks. However, many participants only became fully aware of their African identity as they moved into their teen years. The growing awareness was linked to both negative and positive factors. For example, positive factors that helped solidify their African identity included African clubs and social parties, which were places and spaces of bonding with other Black friends.
While many participants indicated they were not knowledgeable about Africa – or only knowledgeable about specific countries on the continent – they nevertheless sought out diverse opportunities to learn more, whether it be through travel to Africa, conversations with African family and friends, connecting with other Africans on social media (including family), listening to African music, watching African films, and reading African books. The participants clearly drew inspiration from parents, siblings and family members in the diaspora. Participants whose parents shared information about Africa and taught them about their African roots and to speak an African language were more likely to identify as African. The existence of community networks was also significant in creating a sense of belonging among them. Further, family ties, friendships and dating choices were largely with fellow Black people.

Participants strongly underscored that they avoided mainstream global media as a source of information and knowledge about the continent, arguing that it was heavily biased and negative. Negative narratives they had noticed were about poverty, political violence and corruption. Instead of being shaped by these negative narratives, they paid attention to the news shared by Africans (family, influencers and celebrities), as they viewed these sources as more accurate.

Social media is the latest frontier in the fight for challenging the stereotypical images about Africans and redefining identities. Participants described social media as a source of stereotypes and negatives. For example, TikTok is riddled with jokes where African accents are the butt of the joke. But they also said social media was also a platform for showcasing the best of Africa. They were proud of high achievers from Africa, such as Burna Boy, Tems and Wizkid. While global media coverage has been historically biased against Africans, social media offers spaces where diasporic communities can contest those hegemonic biased stories, challenge the stereotypical images and reconstruct their own identities. Representation on social media interfaces with negotiating space in the host countries, where diasporic communities feel they belong.
5.1 Policy recommendations

Out of this report, we have identified some key recommendations and potential policy for host countries and African countries to consider:

- **Look beyond remittances:** African governments should take initiative to tap into and engage diasporic communities and leverage their strengths for Africa's benefit, beyond overseas remittances. Africans in the diaspora represent a source of much-needed expertise and skills that can be transferred to businesses and workers in their home countries. African governments have an opportunity to create conditions for Africans in the diaspora to contribute to the socio-economic development of their countries. African governments can also explore tourism specifically targeted towards Africans in the diaspora, such as the Year of Return, Ghana 2019.

- **Support African languages:** Introduce African languages as an option in schools and universities in the host countries – similar to language options such as Spanish, French and Arabic. This strategy would lead to a greater understanding of the many diverse cultures on the continent and offer cultural exchange opportunities.

- **Depict the African continent accurately:** Pop culture is a tool of influence, and the creative industry plays a significant role in framing how the world interacts with Africans from the continent and the diaspora. Film executives should work to expand their understanding of the continent to ensure accurate depictions, devoid of harmful stereotypes. This includes simple but important aspects such as accents, names and cultures.

- **Provide data driven insights:** Africans in the diaspora play a significant role in linking their two countries, including integrating new waves of immigrants, acting as channels for knowledge and commercial exchanges, and investing and creating opportunities in both their countries. It is therefore imperative that funding opportunities are availed towards a deliberate interrogation of the impact of Africans in the diaspora and the opportunities for engagement available.
6 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

6.1 How African are Africans in the diaspora? Identity and belonging among young Africans in the USA, UK and France.

6.1.1 Background
The research investigated issues about identity and belonging among young diasporic Africans aged 18–28 who were born in Africa and moved to the USA, UK or France when they were under five years. In our study, we identified this generation as having a unique double heritage, which has implications for their sense of identity. Using snowballing and purposive sampling of African youths in these countries, we set out to select 30 male and female young Africans in each of the three selected countries. We were interested in how they perceived their African identity and belonging, given their relocation to so-called advanced Western countries.

The research was interested in how they were ‘African’, their relationships with other Africans, what they knew and felt about Africa and African issues represented in the media, and the impact of their views/attitudes on their actions and lifestyles. We were keen to investigate the extent to which the young African participants in these “advanced” Western countries considered themselves Africans in attitude and identity. The research was interested in discovering the extent to which people travel back, both physically and mentally, to these African countries. It was interested in determining attitudes to friendships, marriage and working relationships with Africans, including from other parts of the continent. Young Africans hear positive and negative stories about Africa and the research investigated the impact it had on their perception of themselves and the continent.

6.1.2 Personal questions
i. How old are you?
ii. What is your education level?
iii. When did you leave Africa?
iv. Have you been back to Africa? Yes/No.
v. Do you consider yourself African? Yes/No.
v. Do you have a desire to travel to Africa? Yes/No.
vi. Why?
vii. Given your stay in the West, what does being African mean to you?
viii. What does belonging to Africa mean to you and your family?

6.1.3 What do you know about Africa?

i. How much do you know about Africa?
ii. How do you describe yourself?
iii. How do you know what you know about Africa?
iv. On a scale of 1 to 10, to what extent are these markers of being African important to you:
   - African language
   - African food
   - African dress
   - African accent
   - Religion
   - Music
   - Films
   - History
   - Hair
   - Colour of skin
   - Names/Surnames

vi. In your view, how do Westerners relate to these markers?

vii. Where and how do you get stories/news about Africa?

viii. Do you mainly hear positive/negative stories?

ix. What are the most common
negative stories they hear?

x. What are the most common
positive stories?

xi. How does media representation of
Africa make you feel about
the continent?

6.1.4 Which media do you consume
and why?

i. How does your identity as African
influence the way you consume
different creative media (e.g.
books, films, images, music, live
performance, social media)?

ii. To what extent does being African
influence your attitude to creative
work and choice of consumption
of western/international creative
work?

iii. To what extent do you invest time
and resources in different African
creative mediums?

6.1.5 Travel to Africa, family and social
context

i. To what extent does your family,
religion and social network
influence your African identity?

ii. Has digital media influenced the
representation of Africa? Yes/No.

iii. Does living in advanced Western
countries influence your identity
as an African? Yes/No.

iv. Do you consider yourself to be
African? Yes/No.

v. Do you believe being African is
positive? Yes/No.

vi. To what extent do you feel you
belong to the country you grew
up in?

• To a Great Extent
• Moderately
• Somewhat
• Not at All

vii. Explain why you say to that
extent?

viii. Do you have African friends?
Yes/No.

ix. Would you date an African?
Yes/No.

x. Would you marry a non-African?
Yes/No.

xi. Are people from Africa living in
the West still African? Yes/No.

xii. How do you perceive the
treatment of Africans in your
country? Good/Bad.
ENDNOTES


2 The researchers set out to get a sample of 30 participants from France and 30 from the UK, but due to logistical challenges on the ground, including non-availability of some of the respondents during a school term, we ended up having 20 representative and usable interviews from each country, which yielded a very rich data set.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.


16 Birtherism: The belief in or endorsement of any of various discredited claims that, since former US president Barack Obama was not born in one of the 48 contiguous states of the US, he is not a natural-born U.S. citizen and therefore not constitutionally eligible to be president of the United States.