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THE NEXUS BETWEEN SOFT SKILLS AND YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY: AN APPRAISAL OF GENDER DISPARITIES IN SKILLS AQUISITION AMONG NIGERIAN YOUTHS IN NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study explored the relationship between soft skills and youth employability in the 21st century with a focus on gender disparities in skills acquisition and employment outcome. The alarming rapid increase in unemployment rate in Nigeria, a disturbing increase in female unemployment rate in comparison with the male counterpart and poor drive for self-employment in the country prompted the study. The population of the study comprised 33,980 final year university undergraduates in 2021/2022 academic session in seven federal universities in north-central Nigeria. A sample of 1,093 students was drawn from the population using a proportional stratified sampling technique. A 43-items Employability Readiness Scale for University Undergraduates (ERSUU), which measured the level of possession of soft skills (communication skills, information and communication technology skills, analytical skills, team spirit skills, lifelong learning skills, creativity skills and entrepreneurial skills) was developed and validated by the researcher and was used for data collection. The data collected were analyzed with the used of t test analysis to explore the soft skills possessed by final year undergraduate students and to established gender disparities in terms of skills acquisition among Nigerian youths. It was found that there was significant difference in level information and communication technology (ICT) skills possessed by Nigerian youths in term of gender. The study

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recommended that universities should be intentional in the teaching and assessment of ICT skills in all aspects of the curriculum, as this would readily acquit Nigerian youths with technology skills and ensure their smooth transition from the classroom to the 21st century global economy where proficiency in ICT skills is one of the basic requirements for engagement by most employers of labour. Also, finance should be made easily accessible to young female entrepreneurs who intend to be self-employed; this would reduce unemployment rate in Nigeria.

Introduction

Soft skills are generally referred to as employability skills or work readiness skills. They are defined as key, core, life and essential skills as well as the competencies, necessary skills, and transferable skills that make individuals more apt to get a job or be successfully self-employed in the modern workplace. These skills are highly desired by most employers of labour and also form the basic skills needed by individuals who intend to be gainfully self-employed in the modern global economy. In the same vein, employability is a psychosocial construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster adaptive cognition and behaviour which affect and enhance the individual-work interface. An individual's employability extends beyond knowledge and skills to include individual attributes and characteristics that make individuals valued assets to both prospective and current employers (Ibrahim, 2022).

Employers, universities and professional bodies have posited that nations all over the world should develop young professionals who are highly skilled and ready to face the challenges of increased competition in the labour market (Adewale, 2013). It was expected that apart from the basic academic knowledge (hard skills), youths in spite of their gender who are products from universities should possess additional personal qualities and competencies (soft skills) that will facilitate the most successful and speedy transition from higher education to the workplace and also to enhance their self-employment capacity. Thus, soft skills are considered as essential qualifications for employment in the modern economy and have become necessary for employment success at all levels within the business environment.

There are different soft skills identified in literatures and these include communication skills, analytical power skills, team spirit skills, creativity skills, entrepreneurial skills, lifelong learning skills and information and communication technology skills among others (Zubaidah, 2016). Communication skills comprise effective listening, speaking, reading and writing skills that enable an individual to establish and maintain both personal

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and professional relations successfully. Analytical skills involve the ability to collect and analyze information, solve problems and make meaningful decisions. The Information and communication technology (ICT) skills entail individuals' ability to use the computer system and internet facilities to perform tasks, collect and analyze data, proffer solutions to problems and integrate technology skills in the work place. Lifelong learning skills on the other hand, involve the ability and passion for continuous, voluntary and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. The creativity skills focus on the individuals' ability to turn new and imaginative ideas into reality, and to solve problem with relevance and novelty. Furthermore, team spirit skills dwell on one's ability to work with a group of people to achieve shared goal or outcome in an effective way. Entrepreneurial skills entail ability to identify business opportunity, develop business proposal and raise capital to finance a project and provide leadership for a business venture. Hence, the possession of these soft skills in good measure determines the employability readiness of youths in a modern economy.

The desire of every young adult is to secure employment opportunity with a government department or better still in an established private organization after graduation from the university. However, the reality is that with the geometric increase in population growth in Nigeria without a commensurate increase in the provision job opportunities by the government and the private sector, a viable alternative has become self-employment. Self-employment is concerned with the way in which people create and implement new ideas and methods to produce goods and services. Self-employed means that someone earns money by working for themselves instead of for another person or company (Law, 2021). In other words, the terms self-employed, entrepreneur, business owner identify anyone who creates his/her own earnings in the form of a business, contract or freelance activity. Furthermore, self-employed person is someone who has a job or perform activity alone or with a small group of people, with or without paid employees (International Labour Office, 2021).

However, one of the major concerns of stakeholders in the education sector the world over is the employability readiness of youths in the nation's tertiary institutions. This is because some stakeholders in the economy are dissatisfied with the level of preparedness of graduates entering into the world of work because there seems to be a mismatch between the skills possessed by the youths graduating from our tertiary institutions and the skills which are highly desired by employers of labour (Ibrahim, 2022). The modern workplace requires young adults who have versatile information and communication technology (ICT) skills, good communication skills and sound creative abilities among

others, which are lacking in many of the young graduates turned-out into the economy. There is also deficiency in essential personal qualities such as analytical skills and entrepreneurial skills needed for self-employment in the modern world of work thereby leading to low numbers of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in the economy that could absorb many youths who are unable to secure employment with any government establishment and these have contributed to increase in unemployment rate in Nigeria.

There is an increasing high rate of unemployment among Nigerian youths and this could be due to large number of graduates' turned-out from different universities across the country coupled with limited number of available job spaces to absorb them. The high rate of unemployment in Nigeria cut across all occupations, even though at different levels. In the same vein, many graduates who were in employment in Nigeria's economy are underutilized in term of their skills, time and educational qualifications. The problem is that there is too much emphasis on hard skills and certificates in the Nigerian education system. Thus, this make many Nigerian youths to lack adequate soft skills such as effective communication skills, team-spirit skills, analytical skills, ICT skills, creativity skills and entrepreneurial skills among others that could make them meet up with demands of modern global economy and be the delight of employer after graduation or better still to take chances and undertake risks of self-employment.

The Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2021) reported that there was consistent rise in unemployment rate among young people of between ages 15-35 years in Nigeria. The NBS further stated that the age group between 15-24 years accounted for 68.7% of the total unemployed in the third quarter of 2018. The unemployment rate in Nigeria rose from 6.4% in the fourth quarter of 2014 to 16.6% in the third quarter of 2017. In addition, it rose from 21.8% in the first quarter of 2018 to 27.1% in second quarter of 2020 and further rose to 33.3% in the fourth quarter of 2020. This trend of unemployment rate reported by the NBS is presented in Appendix 1. Similarly, Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdele (KPMG, 2023) in independent international economic organization reported that Nigeria unemployment rate rose to 37.7% at the fourth quarter of 2022 and projected that the rate will rise to 40.6% by the end of 2023 and 43.9% by year 2024. This is presented in Appendix 2.

Furthermore, the NBS (2018) stated that more females than males were unemployed and cut across different professions as well as different socio-economic groups in the country. For instance, during the third quarter of 2018, 26.6% of females within the labour force were unemployed. This was 6.3% points higher than the unemployment rate for males

(20.3%), and 3.5% points higher than the total labour force unemployment rate. All the levels of government and Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) have made efforts to reduce the rate of unemployment in Nigeria through the introduction of skills acquisition training programmes. The National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was established to compile the list of job seekers across the nation and place them appropriately on the jobs that matches their skills. Economic programmes introduced by the Federal Government in time past include National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP), Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YOUWIN), Subsidy Reinvestment Programme (SURE-P), N-Power among others. The States and Local Government Areas versions of economic programmes include the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) and Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS) respectively. Different NGOs across the nation had at different times organized skills acquisition programmes and as well gave grants to individuals and groups to reduce unemployment rate in the country.

For instance, the President Olusegun Obasanjo's tenure (1999 to 2007) established the NAPEP in 2001 to reduce absolute poverty by training youths in vocational skills, trades, and to create employment in the country. Through the programme many youths were gainfully employed particularly in the automobile sector whereby many were given tricycle popularly called KEKE NAPEP for transport business on loan. Also, the President Goodluck Jonathan tenure (2010 to 2015) introduced the YOUWIN programme in 2011. It was a national business-plan competition run by the Nigerian government to encourage enterprise; help grow small businesses, create jobs and empower the Nigerian youths. It was recorded that many were gainfully self-employed and employment opportunities were offered to many young graduates in search of job. In addition, the President Muhammadu Buhari's tenure (2015-2023) introduced an employment generation programme tagged N-Power in 2016. In the first phase, the N-Power volunteer corps involved a massive deployment of 500,000 trained graduates and this has assisted in ameliorating the inadequacies in our public services in education, health and civic education.

Also, the Federal Government through the National Universities Commission (NUC) have made efforts to equip youths with soft skills in the course of their schooling (Olorundare & Kayode, 2014). This led to the introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Entrepreneurial courses across the universities in Nigeria including the ones in north-central Nigeria as measures to inculcate soft skills, to promote self-

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employment drives among Nigerian youths and to reduce the rate of unemployment in the country. At the state level, the different state governments established various forms of employment-creating programmes. The most prominent one is the Osun Youth Empowerment Scheme (OYES) established by Osun State Government in 2010. The scheme provided a series of employment opportunities for participants as traffic controllers, sanitation and environmental officials, security personnel among others.

The study was hinged on the theory of Key to Employability Model developed by Pool and Sewell in 2007. The theory posits that employability is a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to choose and secure occupations they can excel in and be successful in life. The theory focuses on different facets that allow young people to adapt to the demands of the new world of work and better prospects for career success and satisfaction. Thus, the theory emphasizes that, in addition to the acquisition of basic academic skills taught in the classroom; individual youth should possess other soft skills such as good communication skills, analytical skills, entrepreneurial skills, lifelong learning skills, creativity skills, and information and communication technology skills which are the focal points of this study.

Literatures were reviewed on the connection between soft skills and youth employability. For instance, Aluko (2014) carried out a study on gender influence on potential graduates' perceptions of the importance of employability skills in south-west region of Nigeria. The study focused on gender influence on graduates' perceptions of the importance of employability skill development, and the important skills that were needed when applying for entry-level graduate jobs. Two universities were randomly selected in southwest Nigeria, which include one federal university (University of Ibadan) and one state university (Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye) respectively. A 360 structured items scales were administered and interviews were conducted on 40 final year students from six purposively selected faculties. Findings of the study indicated that the undergraduates valued analytical and critical thinking skills the most and this was not influenced by their gender. The study recommended that universities should equip undergraduates with soft skills that will enable them to maximize their potential for a successful career. In the same vein, Ekpoh (2015) carried out a study on assessing students' soft skills in universities in south-south Nigeria. The study developed and validated an instrument titled Employability Skills Questionnaire (ESQ). The study adopted survey research design, and assessed university students' perspective on employability skills for work placement. The sample of the study comprised 400 students drawn from a population of all final year students in universities in south-south region of Nigeria. Results obtained indicated that

the university curriculum in its present form is inadequate to enhance students' employability skills in Nigeria. Results also indicated that the level of acquisition of employability competence of students were significantly low in terms of possession of team work skills, planning skills, information and communication technology skills, problem solving skills, analytical skills, leadership skills, critical thinking, and initiative skills. The study recommended that universities should regularly update their curriculum to meet the demands of the labour market. Also, students should be placed on industrial attachment for a significant duration of at least one semester through practicum or internship to enhance their acquisition of work-related skills.

The increasing high rate of unemployment among Nigerian youths, the poor drive for self-employment and by extension the statistical data by NBS which found that more females than males are unemployed in Nigeria prompted the study. Hence, the study was carried out to appraise the soft skills possessed by undergraduate students in terms of gender in universities across north-central Nigeria. One research hypothesis was formulated to guide the study. The hypothesis stated thus: the soft skills mean scores of university undergraduates in north-central Nigeria will not differ significantly due to the students' gender.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey research design. The survey design is the type of research design in which data were collected from a representative sample of a population using a research instrument such as a measurement scale (Cohen et al., 2018). The design provided the means through which information on facts, opinions, attitudes and attributes of individuals on educational events; objectives and societal problems were collected with the use of a scale. The population of the study comprised all the 33,980 final year undergraduate students in 2021/2022 academic session in all seven federal universities in north-central Nigeria. This is because these groups of students are youths and were in the last lap of their study at the university level; and it is expected that they have been exposed to and have acquired the necessary soft skills needed for self-employment or to secure and retain a job in the labour market in line with the demand of the modern global economy.

Three federal universities were sampled from the seven federal universities in the region. The three universities that constituted the sample of the study were University of Jos, University of Ilorin and University of Abuja. These are conventional universities and they offer broad range of courses and have more faculties than others in the region; those

either are specialized institutions with limited range of courses or are newly established institutions. The sampled universities offer all courses including the ones offered in the specialized universities in the region. A sample of 1,093 undergraduate final year students were selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula for determining sample size and the criteria for sample size for empirical studies.

Table 1 shows the sample distribution of the students from the selected universities in the zone. The criteria specified that the sample size for a research population within the range of 4,000 to 4,499 elements is 351, a research population of 8,000 to 8,999 elements is 367 while the sample size for population in the range of 10,000 to 11,999 elements is 375 using 95% degree of confidence.

Table 1: Distribution of Sample of the study

S/N	University	Sampled Faculties	Sample Size		
			Male	Female	Sub-Total
1.	University of Jos	Arts	38	34	72
		Agriculture	05	04	09
		Education	65	57	122
		Engineering	06	05	11
		Social Sciences	30	26	56
		Natural Sci	51	46	97
		Total	195	172	367
2.	University of Ilorin	Agriculture	40	36	76
		Environmental Sci.	08	06	14
		Engineering	28	26	54
		Social Science	33	30	63
		Medical Sciences	24	22	46
		Life Sciences	34	31	65
		Physical Sciences	30	27	57
		Total	197	178	375
3.	University of Abuja	Arts	32	29	61
		Education	44	40	84
		Engineering	20	19	39
		Mgt Sciences	46	43	89
		Sciences	40	38	78
		Total	182	169	351
		Grand Total	574	519	1,093

Multistage sampling technique combined with the purposive and the proportional stratified sampling techniques were used for the selection of sample for the study. Multistage sampling technique involves drawing a sample from a population using smaller and smaller groups (units) at each stage. It is often used to collect data from a large,

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geographically spread group of people in national or regional surveys. Multi stage sampling often involves a combination of two or more other sampling techniques such as cluster, stratified, purposive and simple random sampling techniques and others (Bhandari, 2021). The purposive and proportional stratified sampling techniques were used for the selection of the sample from the population at different stages of sample selection for this study. The instrument for data collection was "Employability Readiness Scale for University Undergraduates (ERSUU) in north-central, Nigeria" developed by the researcher. The data collected for the study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software version 22 was used for the statistical analysis.

RESULTS

The soft skills mean scores of university undergraduates in north-central Nigeria will not differ significantly due to the students' gender.

Table 2: t-test Analysis of Soft Skills of Undergraduate Students due to Gender

Soft Skills	Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t value	p value (Sig 2)
1. Creativity, Analytical and Lifelong learning skills	Male	574	60.75	8.44	1092	-0.36	0.71
	Female	519	60.92	6.87	1090	-0.37	0.71
2. Entrepreneurial and Team Spirit skills	Male	574	44.46	6.14	1091	-0.67	0.49
	Female	519	44.70	5.08	1089	-0.69	0.48
3. Info and Com Tech Skills	Male	574	15.04	2.99	1091	11.06	0.00*
	Female	519	13.03	3.00	1033	11.05	0.00*
4. Effective communication Skills	Male	574	16.89	2.43	1091	1.18	0.23
	Female	519	16.71	2.46	1031	1.18	0.23
Grand total for all skills	Male	574	136.87	17.17	1091	1.71	0.08
	Female	519	135.22	14.19	1089	1.75	0.08

*$p<0.05$

Table 2 contain the summary of the t-test analysis carried out to determine if gender of undergraduate students in north-central Nigeria has any effect on the soft skills they possessed. The results on the table shows that there is significant difference ($p<0.05$) in the level of soft skills possessed by undergraduate final year students in terms of information and communication technological skills (0.00). This simply means that the level of soft skills possessed by final year university undergraduates in north-central

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Nigeria in this skill differ due to the students' gender. On the other hand, results also shows that there is no significant difference (p>0.05) in the soft skills possessed by undergraduate final students in terms of creativity, analytical and lifelong learnings skills (0.71), entrepreneurial and team spirit skills (0.49), and effective communication skills (0.23). Thus, this signifies that gender of the students does not significantly affect the development of creativity, analytical and lifelong learnings skills, entrepreneurial and team spirit skills and effective communication skills. The grand total for soft skills (0.08) showed that there is no significant difference (p>0.05) in the level of soft skills possessed by undergraduate final year students in federal universities in north-central Nigeria in terms of their gender. Hence, the hypothesis was retained.

DISCUSSION

Results on Table 2 shows that there is disparity in the information and communication technological skills possessed by undergraduate students in terms of gender. This therefore could be one of the major factors responsible for a higher rate of unemployment among Nigerian female youths in comparison with their male counterparts in the labour market as noted by the NBS. This finding corroborated with the work of Ekpoh (2015) and Doyle (2019). Ekpoh (2015) found that undergraduate students across different universities in Nigeria possessed different level of soft skills. According to Doyle (2019) in many labour markets across the globe, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) related occupations represent an important slice of economic activity in today's technologically oriented economy, and this has made youths with strong proficient ICT skills to fare better in the job market than their technology challenged counterparts. Doyle concluded by stating that proficiency in information and communication technological skills influences hiring for virtually all jobs, and not just technology-centered positions in the global modern economy.

On the other hand, results on table 2 also show that there no significant difference in the soft skills possessed by final year undergraduate students in federal universities in north-central Nigeria in terms of their gender in creativity, analytical and lifelong learnings skills, entrepreneurial, team and effective communication skills. These findings corroborated with the work of Aluko (2014) on the soft skills possessed by undergraduate students. Aluko (2014) found that there was no significant difference in the soft skills possessed by undergraduate students in terms of gender. This means that the possession of these soft skills is not the function of the gender of the students.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study it was concluded that there is disparity in the level of soft skills possessed by young Nigerians in term of their gender especially for information and communication technological skills. This disparity could be responsible for the higher

rate of unemployed females compared to their male counterparts as reported by the Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Therefore, it was recommended that universities should be intentional in the teaching and assessment of soft skills especially Information and communication technology skills in all aspects of the curriculum; this is because there is a continuous advancement in technology and Nigeria youths including the female gender should not lag behind in the acquisition and integration of ICT skills in their chosen careers. Deficiency in ICT skills would render basic academic knowledge in any area of human endeavour obsolete in the coming years. Broadly, soft skills are the basic requirements for self-employment as well as the most desired requirements by employers of labour in the modern work place. The possession of these skills would place all youths at the same level of employability readiness and would reduce unemployment rate in Nigeria. Furthermore, it was recommended that easy access to funding should be made available especially to young female entrepreneurs who demonstrates entrepreneurial, analytical and creativity skills with strong passion for self-employment as this would help to bridge the disparities that exist in term of employment status between the male and female young Nigerians.

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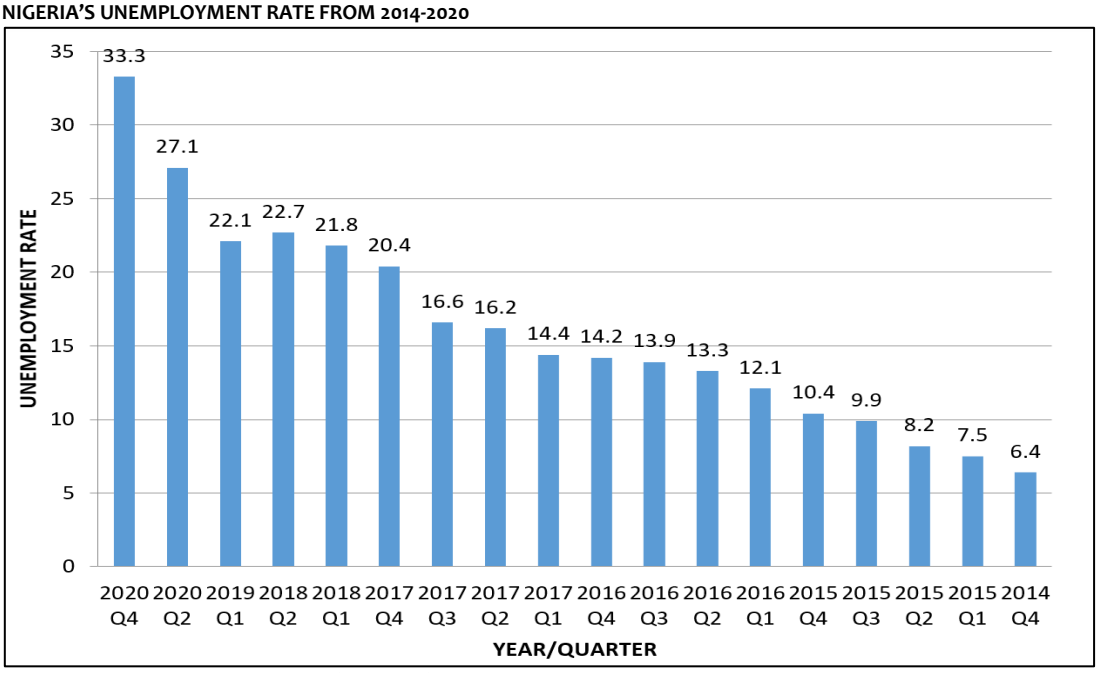
APPENDIX 1
NIGERIA'S UNEMPLOYMENT RATE FROM 2014-2020



Source: Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2021)

APPENDIX 2
Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdele (KPMG) Global Unemployment Rate Forecasts 2022-2024

	2022	2023	2024
World	5.2	5.2	5.4
U.S.	3.6	3.6	4.3
Canada	5.3	5.8	6.1
Argentina	6.9	6.9	6.9
Brazil	9.4	9	8.8
Chile	7.7	7.9	7.6
Mexico	3.4	3.6	3.8
Colombia	1 1.1	11.7	12.6
Peru	7.6	7.5	7.4
Germany	3	3.1	2.8
Austria	4.8	4.9	4.6
France	7.3	7.3	7.5
Italy	8.1	8.2	8.7
Netherlands	3.5	3.8	4
Spain	12.9	13.2	13.4

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Ireland	4.5	4.5	4.5
Eurozone	6.7	6.8	7.1
Norway	3.3	3.6	3.7
Sweden	7.5	8.3	8.5
Switzerland	2.1	2.4	2.3
UK	3.7	4.1	4.6
Poland	2.9	5.5	5.5
Turkey	10.7	10.3	10
China	5.6	5.3	5.2
Japan	2.6	2.4	2.4
India	7.5	6	5.4
Indonesia	5.5	5.3	5.2
Malaysia	4.5	4.3	4.2
Philippines	5.7	5.4	5.1
Singapore	2.1	2.1	2.1
South Korea	3.1	3.4	3.5
Saudi Arabia	5.8	5.8	5.8
Nigeria	**37.7**	**40.6**	**43.9**
South Africa	32.7	34	34.9

Source: National statistical agencies, KPMG analysis

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