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Influence of Age and Self-Esteem on Participation and Satisfaction in Ecotourism Activities Among Visitors to Protected Areas in Cross River State, Nigeria.

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Abstract
This study investigated the influence of age and self-esteem on participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State, Nigeria. Guided by two null hypotheses, the study examined whether age and self-esteem significantly relate to tourists' engagement in and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences. A correlational research design was employed to explore the relationships between the independent variables (age and self-esteem) and the dependent variables (participation and satisfaction). The study was conducted in two prominent ecotourism sites—Cross River National Park and Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary. Using a simple random sampling technique, data were collected from 168 tourists aged 18 and above through structured questionnaires. Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, while participation and satisfaction were measured via Likert-type items capturing tourists' engagement in ecotourism activities and their perceptions of service quality and overall experience. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation coefficient. Results indicated that both age and self-esteem were significantly related to tourists' participation in and satisfaction with ecotourism activities. Older individuals and those with higher self-esteem were more likely to engage in ecotourism activities and report greater satisfaction. Based on these findings, both null hypotheses were rejected. The study highlights the importance of demographic and psychological factors in shaping ecotourism experiences and suggests that ecotourism planning should consider age and self-esteem dynamics to enhance visitor satisfaction and engagement.
Keywords: ecotourism, age, self-esteem, participation, visitor satisfaction, protected areas, Cross River State, Nigeria.

Introduction and background
Ecotourism, a form of responsible travel that emphasizes environmental conservation and local community development, has gained prominence as a sustainable tourism practice, especially in biodiverse regions like Cross River State, Nigeria. Defined as "tourism that involves visiting natural areas with the purpose of enjoying and conserving the environment" (Honey, 2008, p. 25), ecotourism offers opportunities for environmental education, sustainable livelihoods, and cultural exchange. While much of the focus in ecotourism research has been on its

environmental and economic impacts (Buckley, 2012), there remains a significant gap in understanding how psychological and demographic factors influence visitors' participation and satisfaction. Specifically, factors such as age and self-esteem may play pivotal roles in determining how individuals engage with ecotourism experiences and the extent to which they find these experiences fulfilling (Gössling, 2019).

Age, as a demographic variable, influences travel preferences and behaviors. Older tourists may prefer less physically demanding activities, while younger individuals are more likely to engage in adventure and physical activities (Schneider, 2014). Additionally, self-esteem, which relates to how individuals perceive their worth, has been shown to affect satisfaction with experiences (Diener, 2000). However, the relationship between these factors and ecotourism engagement in protected areas remains underexplored. This study aims to investigate how age and self-esteem influence participation in and satisfaction with ecotourism activities in Cross River State, Nigeria, specifically within its protected areas.

Cross River State, located in southeastern Nigeria, is recognized for its rich biodiversity, including the Cross River National Park, Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary, and other ecotourism destinations. These protected areas are key to preserving Nigeria's unique flora and fauna, while simultaneously offering opportunities for sustainable tourism (Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation [NTDC], 2017). Ecotourism in the region not only contributes to conservation efforts but also supports local communities through employment, cultural exchange, and revenue generation (IUCN, 2016). Despite the growing popularity of ecotourism, there is limited research examining how personal factors like age and self-esteem impact visitor participation and overall satisfaction.

Age influences how tourists perceive and engage with ecotourism. Older tourists may prefer activities such as bird watching or cultural experiences, while younger tourists are more likely to engage in physically demanding activities such as hiking or wildlife tracking (Williams & Baláž, 2015). Self-esteem, on the other hand, has been found to significantly influence how individuals evaluate their travel experiences. High self-esteem can enhance satisfaction, as individuals are more likely to derive enjoyment from activities that align with their self-concept (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Despite these insights from broader tourism and psychology literature, limited studies have focused specifically on the role of age and self-esteem in ecotourism contexts.

This research seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the relationships between age, self-esteem, and ecotourism engagement in Cross River State. By examining how these factors influence participation and satisfaction, this study will provide valuable insights for ecotourism stakeholders in the region, enabling them to design more tailored and effective ecotourism programs that appeal to diverse visitor groups.

Statement of the Problem

Ecotourism has emerged as a vital strategy for promoting environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and sustainable economic development, particularly in biodiversity-rich areas like Cross River State, Nigeria. Despite the growing recognition of its potential, participation in ecotourism activities and visitor satisfaction remain uneven and poorly understood. Previous studies have focused largely on environmental and economic impacts, with limited attention to how individual factors such as age and self-esteem influence ecotourism engagement and experiences. Understanding these psychological and demographic dimensions is crucial, as they may affect not only tourists' decisions to participate in ecotourism but also their satisfaction and likelihood of repeat visits. The lack of empirical evidence on how age and self-esteem relate to participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities presents a gap in knowledge that this study seeks to address. Without such understanding, ecotourism initiatives may fail to connect meaningfully with diverse visitor groups, thereby undermining their sustainability and effectiveness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between age and self-esteem as psychological and demographic factors, and their influence on participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to determine whether age and self-esteem significantly relate to the level of engagement in and satisfaction derived from ecotourism experiences. By exploring these relationships, the study seeks to provide insights that can inform targeted ecotourism strategies, enhance visitor experiences, and promote sustainable tourism development in the region.

Research hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

1. Age has no significant relationship with participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State.
2. Self-esteem does not significantly relate with participation and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State.

Literature review

1. Age and Tourists' Participation and Satisfaction in Ecotourism Activities

The relationship between age and tourists' participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities has garnered significant attention in tourism research, with age being an important demographic factor influencing travel behavior. Several studies have highlighted how age influences participation in and satisfaction with ecotourism activities.

In general, older tourists tend to prefer ecotourism experiences that are less physically demanding and more culturally oriented. Singh and Krakover (2015); Kim, H., Cheng and O'Leary (2007) found that older tourists are more likely to engage in activities such as bird watching, visiting museums, and cultural exhibitions. These activities are perceived as relaxing and less strenuous compared to more physically demanding ecotourism options, such as hiking or wildlife trekking. Furthermore, older tourists often seek experiences that align with their interest in preserving the environment and learning about natural and cultural heritage (Han, Yu, & Kim, 2018). In contrast, younger tourists are more inclined to engage in adventure-oriented activities such as trekking, wildlife safaris, and scuba diving, which require a higher level of physical exertion (Angessa Lemma, Yeshitela & Endrias, 2022).

Age also plays a crucial role in determining tourists' overall satisfaction with their ecotourism experiences. According to Sharpley (2022); Patterson and Pegg (2013) younger tourists tend to prioritize excitement and adventure, leading to higher satisfaction levels when these expectations are met. In contrast, older tourists derive greater satisfaction from experiences that are tranquil, enriching, and educational (Schneider & Treisch, 2019; Hwang & Lee, 2019). The satisfaction of older tourists is also influenced by factors such as accessibility, the availability of comfortable accommodations, and the presence of knowledgeable tour guides (Schneider and Treisch, 2019). These findings suggest that ecotourism destinations may need to tailor their offerings based on age groups to enhance participation and satisfaction across diverse visitor profiles.

Moreover, studies have shown that age affects visitors' willingness to pay for ecotourism activities. Older tourists are generally more willing to invest in activities that offer educational value and opportunities for relaxation, while younger tourists are more likely to pay for thrilling and adventurous activities (Patterson & Pegg, 2013). These patterns indicate that understanding age-based preferences is vital for designing ecotourism programs that appeal to diverse age groups, ensuring satisfaction and fostering repeat visits.

2. Self-Esteem and Tourists' Participation and Satisfaction with Ecotourism Experiences
Self-esteem, which refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth and self-acceptance, plays a significant role in shaping tourists' participation in and satisfaction with ecotourism activities. High self-esteem has been associated with increased engagement in activities that align with individuals' self-concept, while low self-esteem may limit participation and satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

In the context of ecotourism, self-esteem influences the way visitors perceive their experiences and their level of satisfaction with them. According to Buckley (2012), tourists with high self-esteem are more likely to seek ecotourism experiences that offer a sense of accomplishment, personal growth, and a deeper connection with nature. These tourists tend to participate more actively in conservation-related activities, such as volunteering in community-based ecotourism projects or engaging in environmental education programs. Conversely, tourists with lower self-esteem may prefer less challenging experiences and may not fully engage in ecotourism activities that require them to step outside their comfort zones (Diener, 2000).
Furthermore, self-esteem affects satisfaction in ecotourism experiences. Tourists with higher self-esteem tend to have more positive evaluations of their experiences because they are more likely to perceive the activities as meaningful and rewarding. High self-esteem also enhances the likelihood of tourists feeling competent and capable in their interactions with the environment and local communities, thus contributing to a more fulfilling experience (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, individuals with lower self-esteem may feel less confident in their ability to navigate challenging ecotourism activities, leading to lower satisfaction levels. For example, tourists with lower self-esteem may feel excluded from group activities or disconnected from nature, which could affect their overall enjoyment of the experience (Diener, 2000).

A study by Hwang & Lee (2018) further supports this notion by demonstrating that self-esteem positively correlates with tourists' perceptions of the quality of ecotourism experiences. Tourists with higher self-esteem reported greater satisfaction with the educational and cultural aspects of ecotourism, whereas those with lower self-esteem were less likely to enjoy these dimensions. The study concluded that self-esteem influences how tourists interpret their ecotourism experiences, with higher self-esteem leading to a more positive and enriching experience.

Self-esteem also plays a critical role in shaping tourists' intentions to participate in ecotourism. People with higher self-esteem are more likely to participate in activities that they perceive as meaningful and that align with their values, such as sustainable tourism practices (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Conversely, tourists with lower self-esteem may be less inclined to engage in

activities that require a sense of autonomy or contribute to environmental conservation, which are often central to ecotourism (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Both age and self-esteem have significant effects on tourists' participation and satisfaction with ecotourism activities. Age influences the type of activities tourists prefer, with older individuals gravitating toward less physically demanding activities and younger individuals seeking adventure-based experiences. Similarly, self-esteem affects tourists' engagement with ecotourism activities and their overall satisfaction. Higher self-esteem enhances tourists' engagement and satisfaction, particularly in activities that offer personal growth and environmental education. Understanding the roles of these factors can help ecotourism operators design more tailored and effective programs that cater to diverse visitor groups, ensuring that they meet the varied needs and preferences of tourists.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design, utilizing a correlational research approach to examine the relationships between age, self-esteem, and tourists' participation and satisfaction with ecotourism activities in protected areas of Cross River State, Nigeria. This design is appropriate for exploring the extent to which the independent variables (age and self-esteem) influence the dependent variables (participation and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences).

Study Area

The study was conducted in the protected ecotourism areas of Cross River State, Nigeria, specifically focusing on the Cross River National Park and the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary. These areas are known for their rich biodiversity and are frequently visited by both local and international tourists seeking ecotourism experiences.

Population and Sample Size

The target population for this study consisted of tourists visiting protected areas in Cross River State, Nigeria, during the study period. The study focused on individuals aged 18 years and above, as this age range is more likely to engage in ecotourism activities. A sample size of 168 tourists was selected for the study using simple random sampling. This sample size is based on statistical power calculations, ensuring sufficient power to detect significant relationships between the variables under study. The sample was drawn from tourists visiting the selected

ecotourism sites during the peak tourist season, which typically spans from November to March.

Sampling Technique

A simple random sampling technique was used to select the participants from the population of tourists. This involved randomly selecting tourists who visited the designated protected areas during the study period. Tourists were approached at entry points or visitor centers within the ecotourism sites, and those who meet the inclusion criteria (aged 18 and above) were invited to participate in the study.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria: Tourists aged 18 years and above, Tourists who have participated in ecotourism activities in the selected protected areas during the study period and Tourists who are willing to provide informed consent and complete the survey.

Exclusion Criteria: Tourists under the age of 18, Tourists who have not participated in any ecotourism activities during their visit and Tourists who refuse to participate or provide incomplete data.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire designed to capture information on the following: Demographic information (age, gender, education level, etc.) Self-esteem: Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), a widely used instrument for assessing global self-esteem. The scale consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree" (Rosenberg, 1965). **Participation in Ecotourism Activities**: Participants were asked about their involvement in various ecotourism activities during their visit (e.g., hiking, wildlife viewing, cultural experiences) using a Likert scale.

Satisfaction with Ecotourism Experiences: Satisfaction was measured using a Likert scale, where participants rated their satisfaction with various aspects of their ecotourism experience, such as the quality of activities, information provided, interaction with local communities, and overall experience. The questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of tourists (N = 20) prior to the main data collection to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity. Adjustments were made based on the feedback received during the pre-test.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (such as frequency distributions, percentages, and means) to summarize demographic characteristics and levels of participation and

satisfaction. To test the research hypotheses, correlational analysis was performed using Pearson's correlation coefficient to examine the relationships between: Age and participation in ecotourism activities, Self-esteem and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences. The level of significance for all statistical tests will be set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant ethics committee of the research institution. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation will be entirely voluntary. Informed consent were obtained from each participant before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by ensuring that no personal identifiers are included in the final report. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Limitations of the Study

Sample Bias: The sample will be drawn from tourists visiting protected areas in Cross River State, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other ecotourism destinations.
Response Bias: As the study relies on self-reported data, there is the potential for response bias, especially regarding satisfaction and self-esteem measures. To mitigate this, the questionnaire will be designed to ensure clarity and minimize leading questions.

Presentation of results

H_{o1}

The first hypothesis stated that age has no significant relationship with participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State. To test this, a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted.

Results, as presented in Table 1, revealed a calculated correlation coefficient (r) of .322**,** with a p-value of .000**,** which **is** less than the significance level of .05. This indicates a statistically significant positive relationship between age and participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors ($r = .322$, $p < .05$, $N = 168$). The mean age of respondents was 24.24 years ($SD = 5.445$), while the mean score for participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities was 13.15 ($SD = 2.439$).

Based on these findings, the null hypothesis is rejected**.** This implies that age is significantly associated with the level of participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities in protected

areas in Cross River State. In other words, as age increases, there is a tendency for higher participation and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences among visitors.

Table 1: Pearson product moment correlation analysis of the relationship between age and participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State (N=168).

Variables	Mean	SD	Cal-r	Sign
Age	24.24	5.445		
			.322	.000
Participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities		13.15	2.439	

*P< 0.05; df = 166.

Ho_2

The second hypothesis stated that self-esteem does not significantly relate with participation and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State. To test this, a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted.

The results presented in Table 2 show a calculated correlation coefficient (r) of .533, with a p-value of .000**,** which i**s** less than the significance level of .05**.** This result indicates a statistically significant and moderately strong positive relationship between self-esteem and participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors ($r = .533$, $p < .05$, $N = 168$). The mean self-esteem score of participants was 10.97 (SD = 1.54), while the mean score for participation and satisfaction was 13.15 (SD = 2.439).

Based on this outcome, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that visitors' levels of self-esteem are significantly related to their participation in and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences. In other words, individuals with higher self-esteem tend to report greater engagement in and higher satisfaction with ecotourism activities in protected areas.

Table 2: Pearson product moment correlation analysis of the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance (N=168).

Variables	Mean	SD	Cal-r	Sign
Self-esteem	10.97		1.54	
			.533**	.000
Participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities		13.15	2.439	

*P< 0.05; df = 166

Discussion of Findings

The result of the first hypothesis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between age and participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State ($r = .322$, $p < .05$). This implies that as age increases, visitors are more likely to participate in and report satisfaction with ecotourism experiences. The rejection of the null hypothesis indicates that age is indeed an important demographic factor influencing tourists' engagement with ecotourism offerings.

This finding is consistent with existing empirical literature. Several studies have demonstrated that older tourists are more inclined toward ecotourism experiences that emphasize education, conservation, and cultural enrichment, rather than physical exertion or thrill-seeking (Singh & Krakover, 2015; Kim, Cheng, & O'Leary, 2007). These individuals often prioritize calm and reflective activities such as bird watching, guided nature walks, and visits to cultural heritage sites, which aligns with the observed increase in satisfaction among older age groups.

Moreover, Han, Yu, and Kim (2018) emphasize that older tourists frequently seek experiences that allow them to connect with nature and cultural traditions, fostering a deeper sense of purpose and environmental stewardship. This connection likely contributes to higher satisfaction levels, as older tourists find these experiences meaningful and fulfilling.

In contrast, younger tourists tend to pursue high-adrenaline ecotourism activities such as trekking, diving, or wildlife safaris (Angessa Lemma, Yeshitela, & Endrias, 2022). While these experiences are appealing to younger age groups, they may not provide the same level of satisfaction across all demographics due to differences in physical ability, risk tolerance, and personal interest.

Further support for the relationship between age and satisfaction comes from Sharpley (2022) and Patterson and Pegg (2013), who found that older tourists derive greater satisfaction from tranquil and educational experiences. Factors such as the presence of knowledgeable guides, accessibility, and comfort significantly enhance satisfaction among this group (Schneider & Treisch, 2019; Hwang & Lee, 2019).

Overall, the result aligns with the reviewed literature, confirming that age is a significant predictor of both participation and satisfaction in ecotourism contexts. These findings underscore the importance of segmenting ecotourism services by age group and tailoring

offerings to match tourists' preferences and expectations to enhance the overall ecotourism experience.

H_{o2}

The second hypothesis proposed that self-esteem does not significantly relate with participation and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State. However, the findings of this study indicate otherwise. A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis revealed a moderately strong positive correlation between self-esteem and participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities ($r = .533$, $p < .05$). This statistically significant result demonstrates that individuals with higher self-esteem are more likely to actively participate in ecotourism and report greater satisfaction with their experiences. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected.

This result is strongly supported by existing empirical literature. According to Buckley (2012**)**, tourists with high self-esteem often pursue ecotourism activities that provide opportunities for personal growth, self-actualization, and meaningful engagement with nature. These individuals are not only more willing to participate in activities such as conservation volunteering and community interactions, but they also derive greater fulfillment from such engagements.

Similarly, Diener (2000) and Ryan and Deci (2000) assert that self-esteem influences how individuals perceive and respond to experiential opportunities. Tourists with higher self-esteem tend to evaluate their ecotourism experiences more positively**,** often because they approach challenges with a sense of competence and confidence. This can enhance feelings of achievement and satisfaction, especially in environments that promote environmental education, cultural exchange, and physical activity—key features of ecotourism.

The positive correlation observed in this study also aligns with findings by Hwang and Lee (2018), who reported that tourists with higher self-esteem had significantly more positive perceptions of the educational and cultural aspects of ecotourism experiences. These tourists were more likely to report enjoyment, learning, and engagement with local culture and natural settings, compared to those with lower self-esteem.

Moreover, Deci and Ryan (2002) emphasize the role of intrinsic motivation and self-determination—both of which are closely linked to self-esteem—in driving participation in meaningful activities such as ecotourism. Tourists with higher self-esteem are more likely to seek out and appreciate experiences that align with their values, including sustainability, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship.

In contrast, individuals with lower self-esteem may be less likely to engage fully in such activities due to feelings of inadequacy or discomfort in unfamiliar settings. They may also be less confident in social or physically demanding ecotourism situations, leading to reduced participation and lower satisfaction (Diener, 2000).

Taken together, the findings of this study not only confirm **a** significant positive relationship between self-esteem and ecotourism participation and satisfaction**,** but also reinforce the importance of considering psychological factors such as self-esteem in the design and marketing of ecotourism programs.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between age and self-esteem as independent variables, and participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities among visitors to protected areas in Cross River State, Nigeria. Using Pearson product-moment correlation analysis on a sample of 168 participants, findings revealed statistically significant positive relationships between both age and self-esteem with participation and satisfaction in ecotourism activities.

Specifically, older visitors were found to engage more meaningfully and derive greater satisfaction from ecotourism experiences. Likewise, individuals with higher levels of self-esteem reported more active participation and greater fulfillment from these activities. These results suggest that both demographic and psychosocial factors play important roles in shaping tourists' experiences and levels of engagement in ecotourism.

The findings contribute to existing literature by reinforcing the importance of understanding individual differences in tourism behavior. They also underscore the need for tourism lanners and managers to take these variables into account when designing ecotourism products and programs, particularly in culturally and ecologically sensitive regions like Cross River State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop age-sensitive ecotourism packages: Tour operators and park managers should design diverse ecotourism experiences tailored to different age groups. While younger tourists may be drawn to adventurous and physically demanding activities, older tourists may prefer educational, cultural, and nature-based experiences that require less physical exertion.
2. Promote self-esteem enhancing activities: Tourism providers should incorporate experiences that foster confidence and personal growth, such as guided nature walks,

environmental education, cultural exchange programs, and opportunities for reflection and self-expression. This could improve satisfaction, particularly among visitors with varying levels of self-esteem.

3. Train guides in psychological and demographic awareness: Ecotourism personnel, including tour guides and facilitators, should be trained to recognize and adapt to the psychological and demographic characteristics of tourists. This can enhance the personalization of services and promote positive experiences across diverse visitor groups.

4. Engage in targeted marketing strategies: Ecotourism destinations should segment their marketing efforts to appeal to different age and psychological profiles. Highlighting features that align with self-esteem needs (e.g., connection with nature, learning opportunities, and meaningful engagement) may increase participation rates.

5.

6. Support further research: More studies should be conducted to explore how other psychological variables—such as motivation, personality traits, or perceived self-efficacy—affect ecotourism behavior. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies could offer deeper insights into the long-term impact of these factors on sustainable tourism.

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