

VISITORS' CHARACTERISTICS AND DESTINATION IMAGE: THE CASE OF NIGERIAN ZOOS

Omolola Oluwakemi AJAYI

University of Johannesburg, College of Business and Economics, School of Tourism and Hospitality, South Africa, e-mail: omololaajayioa@gmail.com

Tembi M. TICHAAWA*

University of Johannesburg, College of Business and Economics, School of Tourism and Hospitality, South Africa, e-mail: tembit@uj.ac.za

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Abstract: When compared to in situ conservation sites like national parks and game reserves in Nigeria, zoos are the most visited wildlife tourism destinations given their proximity to people and close interactions with wildlife. This study explored the characteristics of visitors and the image they possess about zoos. A total of 1529 visitors were sampled using a structured questionnaire in four prominent Nigerian zoos in the southwest zone. The results revealed that the majority of visitors were single, young and mid adult male and female Nigerians within the age range of 18 -37 years. The foremost image of visitors about a zoo is that of close wildlife experience, recreation and entertainment, however, conservation was least acknowledged. Only age was found to have a significant relationship with the destination image. The study concludes that zoo managers should continually employ various strategies in projecting the right image of zoos. The study extends current research on zoos by highlighting so far, the uninvestigated image of zoos in Nigeria and documenting practical implications.

Key words: Destination image, tourism, visitors, zoo, Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Zoos, the shortened and popular acronym for zoological gardens or parks, are institutions designated for *ex-situ* conservation of wild animals and exhibition for recreational, research and educational purposes (Alarape et al., 2015). Omonona and Ayodele (2011) described zoos as educationally planned oriented life animal displays, which is presented to visitors in the most aesthetically pleasing, interesting and naturalistic context. Visits to zoos and wildlife sanctuaries present an exceptional opportunity for large numbers of people to be engaged in conservation issues and to support wildlife (Smith et al., 2010; Eshun and Tichaawa, 2019, 2020; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2020) while also providing a recreational avenue. In most parts of Central and West Africa, such as Nigeria, zoos are the most visited wildlife tourism destinations given their proximity to people and close interactions with wildlife when compared to *in situ* conservation sites like national parks and game reserves (see Ajayi, 2015), thus contributing significantly to the nation's tourism industry.

Several studies have concluded that visitors' characteristics and destination image influence visitors' behaviour (see Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Bigne et al., 2001; March and Woodside, 2005; San Martín and del Bosque, 2008; Jun and Yan, 2015) and thus, important in destination marketing and overall tourism development. The decision of an individual to visit a particular destination is influenced by visitors' characteristics and the image put forth by destination marketers, and also that acquired from different sources and even previous experiences in such destinations (March and Woodside, 2005; Banyai, 2009), and is thus used in market segmentation. Visitors' characteristics include personal or socio-demographic attributes such as gender, age, marital status, income, education and religion; and travel characteristics such as number of visits, nature of visits, medium of awareness and travel company (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007; Tichaawa and Moyo, 2019). Image of a destination refers to the linkage between notions, views and attitudes concerning a specific place (Tasci and Gartner, 2007). Kotler and Gertner (2004) defined it as the sums of thoughts and feelings people hold about a place. With respect to zoos, it can be said that zoo image is the totality of beliefs, ideas and impressions that an individual (in this case, the visitors) has about the zoo. There are two elements of destination image which is the cognitive and affective elements. The earlier considers the image created in the mind of visitors as a result of the information available to them, while the latter emphasizes the image that is formed based on personal characteristics of the visitors (Beerli and Martin, 2004).

Destination image can be influenced by visitors' past experiences, marketing communications and non-promotional media such as films, novels and television shows (Banyai, 2009). The assessment of destination image can aid in the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of a destination and offers critical insights for management and development (Bigne et al., 2001). It helps managers to understand visitors' perspective as it relates to their understanding, use and connectivity to the place visited (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). This information can be used to provide avenues for increased satisfaction and loyalty and the design of promotional campaigns (Jenkins, 1999). Destination image can also be a predictor of visitors' readiness to recommend such place to others, as well as with intentions to revisit, that is, visitors' loyalty (Banyai, 2009). It can additionally influence the satisfaction (an individual's response after expectations is compared with actual experience) derived from the tourism experience (Chon, 1992; San Martín Gutiérrez, 2006).

While a number of studies have analysed zoos in Nigeria (see for example Adefalu et al., 2014; Adetola et al., 2016; Ajayi et al., 2017), there has been a dearth of research with regards to the visitors' characteristics and the image they hold about zoos, as well as the resultant effect on satisfaction and loyalty. In this study, we argue that urban eco-tourism attractions such as zoos, from inception, have been mirrored as entertainment and leisure avenues. More so, they are usually associated with learning about animals, thus leading to the assumption that people visit the attraction because of a concern about conservation and a need to increase knowledge (Jordaan and du Pleiss, 2014). Whether or not these visitors have such image about the zoo is unknown, especially with respect to zoos in Nigeria. Also, their characteristics are hardly explicitly studied. In another light, the cognitive element of destination image has received greater emphasis than the affective part in various studies (see for example Chi and Qu, 2008; Sun et al., 2013). It becomes expedient to assess who the visitors to Nigerian zoos are as well as to understand the

* Corresponding author

notions of these visitors about zoos that have made visiting them a popular activity *vis a vis* the rationale of operation of zoos. Also, the relationship between the affective elements which is centred on visitors' personal characteristics and destination image was assessed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zoos and visitors' characteristics

The establishment of zoos in a society is premised partly on the idea of bringing man close to wild animal species (Yager et al., 2015). Zoo keeping, as such, started in ancient times as animals were kept by royalty and feudal lords for sports (Omonona and Ayodele, 2011). The first animal collections for public amusement was set up in ancient Egypt and China (Fa et al., 2011), with the Egyptian dynasties dating over 4000 years back. The first zoological garden, with respect to a definite record, existed in the Chen Dynasty of about 1100 BC in China and was called 'The Intelligence Park'. Zoos have evolved from keeping animals in menageries, simply for public excitement and without due consideration for animal welfare, to conservation centres that features education, research, recreation and conservation. Various types of zoos now exist and they include, among others: *urban zoos*, which are typically located in urban areas, with a sizable number of animals, usually constrained within small but naturally inclined spaces; *open range zoos* with fewer species and sizable enclosures; *safari park or zoo parks* with animals kept in larger enclosures and less restrictive confinements; *petting zoos*, targeted at children especially containing friendly and docile animals; *animal theme parks*, a combination of amusement park and zoo; *aquariums* for housing fish and other marine life; *rescues and sanctuaries* for rehabilitating and release of animals, and *specialized zoos* concentrating on a specific group of animals (Stephanie, 2013; Ajayi, 2019).

Zoos attract over 600 million visitors globally (WAZA, 2016). It is largely acknowledged in the available literature (see Ajayi, 2019; Jordaan and du Pleiss, 2014; Knezevic et al., 2016) that, these visitors are diverse in age, education, marital status, income status, occupation, gender, cultural backgrounds, social orientation, motives and travel characteristics. Generally, the younger folks and educated visitors are more prominently recorded in various studies. There is no unanimous agreement on the gender of visitors in zoos. For example, Hun and Anuar (2014) reported more males in a Malaysia Zoo while Adetola and Adedire (2018) documented more females than males in two Nigerian zoos. Repeat visitations are also common in zoos as documented by Adetola et al. (2016), Ajayi et al. (2017), and Knezevic et al. (2016) in a Nigerian and Croatia zoo respectively. Couch (2013) on the other hand reported more first-time visitors in a Detroit zoo. Lots of people also visit zoos in order to share experiences with their families and friends (Ajayi et al., 2017; Knezevic et al., 2016; Lee, 2015) and, as such, are seen in the company of such in zoo premises. Zoo visitors have also been documented in several studies to be domestic visitors, and typically from the same city or close cities where the zoo is cited. From the foregoing, visitors in zoos in various countries share similar as well as contrasting characteristics, providing information on Nigerian zoo visitors is important.

Destination image

Destination image is the summation of thoughts and feelings people hold about a place (Kotler and Gertner, 2004; Hemmonsbey and Tichaawa, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Crompton's (1979: 18) definition is the most commonly cited in the available literature. He refers to it as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination". This is in relation to an individual, while other definitions imputed the group perspective, where images can be upheld by a set of people (Jenkins, 1999). The traveller's image of a destination is built not only on past experiences and marketing communications but also on non-promotional media (ie. films, novels, and television shows (Banyai, 2009). For the benefit of destinations, images should be distinct, attractive, straightforward and of utmost importance, convincing and realistic (Kotler and Gertner, 2004). Banyai (2009) noted that visitors' destination image is a composition of the notions sold by the marketing arm of the destination and of other factors such as previous visits - a notion also supported by San Martin and del Bosque (2008).

Chen and Tsai (2007) noted that a destination's assessment relies on perceived worth, significance and general fulfilment. MacInnis and Price (1987) opined that destinations exist during the three phases of consumption that can be adapted in the tourism consumption experience. Prior to the experience, an imagined consumption may take place. Image can increase the value an individual has for a destination and can enhance the satisfaction derived during the consumption. At the post-consumption phase, image may aid an individual's reliving of the experience through memories or souvenirs. Image can be said to, therefore, influence visitors' satisfaction and loyalty as noted by Banyai (2009). Selby and Morgan (1996) noted that understanding the different images that visitors and non-visitors have of a destination is invaluable, enabling the salient attributes of the naive image and the re-evaluated image to be incorporated into tourism marketing planning.

In zoo settings, image from the visitors' perspective has hardly been studied. Traditionally, the image put forth about zoos is that of entertainment and leisure, especially at inception. The incorporation of science and education emerged with the establishment of the Zoological Society of London (Turley, 1998). With an increase in concern for animal welfare and increasing threats to wild animals in their natural habitats, conservation was incorporated (WAZA, 2006). With this, the role of modern zoos now includes recreation, research, education and conservation, and most zoos promoted themselves as these, and project these images to the public. Carr and Cohen (2011: 187), through content and semiotic analysis, explored 54 zoos' websites in 8 countries and found that the zoos portrayed themselves more as entertainment centres, while the conservation theme, although included, were without content. The authors noted that, "with the various messages portrayed by zoos on their websites, it can make it hard to discern whether zoos are primarily places of entertainment or serious, viable wildlife conservation establishments". It therefore becomes important to appraise the image visitors have about zoos, as well as visitors' characteristics.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Four prominent zoos in south west Nigeria were assessed as shown in Figure 1. These include: the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden (UI Zoo); Federal University of Agriculture Zoological Park; Abeokuta (FUNAAB Zoo); Obafemi Awolowo Biological Garden (OAU Garden), and T.A. Afolayan Wildlife Park (TAAWP). All of these are located in federal institutions in the south west region of the country. The zoos were purposively selected based on their patronage and popularity in the region. UI Zoo was established in 1948 as a form of menagerie but later became a fully-fledged zoo in 1974. The zoo is located alongside the Department of Zoology in the University of Ibadan on a 10 acres land area and on latitude 7°26'N and longitude 3°53'E. FUNAAB Zoo was established in 2008 and founded in a conserved forest about 200m away from the main gate of the university on 153 acres of land at latitude N 07° 13' 17.5 and longitude E 003° 26' 49.2.

OAU Garden was established in 1968 and is located close to the Department of Zoology in the Faculty of Science, under which the management is domicile. It occupies 32 acres of land on latitude 07° 31' 27.4' N and longitude 004° 31' 26.9' E. TAAWP was established in 2012 and is situated in Federal University of Technology Akure, Wildlife Park along Akure – Ilesha road in the North-Western part of the University at longitude 05° 18' E and latitude 07° 17' N. It occupies 22 acres on land. The park is also referred to as FUTA Wildlife Park. The zoos serve as facilities for education, research and recreation. This study adopted a mixed method approach to obtaining information. The tools employed for primary sources of data collection were questionnaires, key-informant interviews and direct observations. The main tool used was the questionnaires which were structured to contain open and closed questions to address the emerged themes from the

objectives and were also used to obtain information from the visitors. The questionnaire questions were divided into three sections. The first section was designed to obtain information on the socio-demographic and travel characteristics of the visitors such as age, sex, marital status, education, monthly income, number of previous visits, travel company, purpose of visit and distance travelled to the zoo. The second section consisted of destination image questions, drafted by the researcher, and scored on a 3-point Likert type of agree (1), neutral (2) and disagree (3).

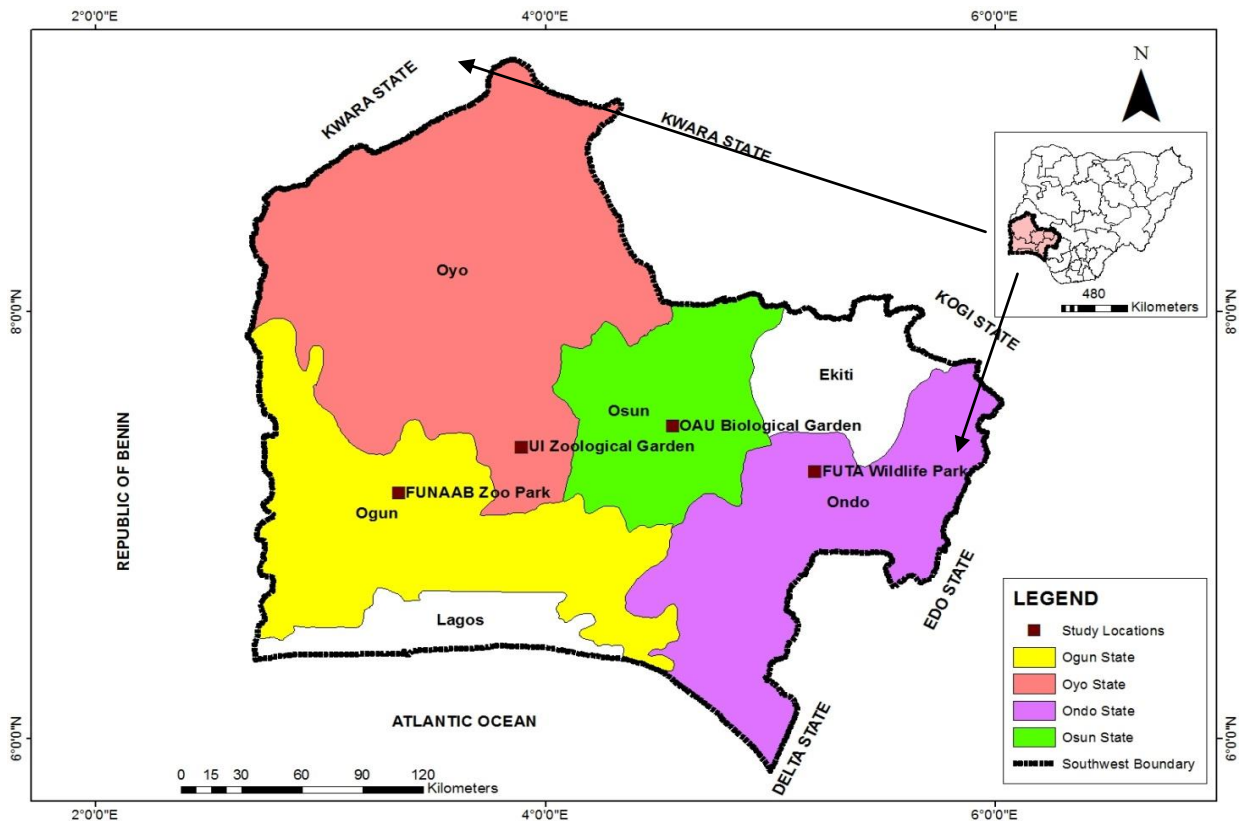


Figure 1. Map showing the study zoos locations in Southwest Nigeria (Source: Ajayi, 2019)

Visitors to the zoos were sampled using a combination of purposive (adult visitors of at least 18 years) and convenience sampling technique (based on willingness to participate in the survey). The study was spanned out over a period of six months from June to December 2018, to accommodate various types of visitors. The sample sizes of visitors in the zoos were determined using Yamane (1967) formula of sample size determination for a known population. In all, one thousand, five hundred and twenty nine copies of the questionnaire were administered in the zoos: 395, 379, 383 and 372 in UI Zoo, FUNAAB Zoo, OAU Zoo and FUTA Wildlife Park respectively. Visitors' population yearly in the zoos from which the sample sizes was estimated were 28440, 7380, 9180 and 5400 in UI Zoo, FUNAAB Zoo, OAU Zoo and FUTA Wildlife Park respectively. Key-Informant interviews were targeted at selected staff in the zoos and the directors, where available, to obtain information about the zoos, their history and purposes of establishment. Direct observations were also undertaken to collate information on the numbers of animals, visitors' characteristics, and the zoos' attributes. Further, using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20, the data obtained were subjected to Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentage, mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics, specifically One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Pearson Chi Square and Correlation at $\alpha_{0.05}$.

RESULTS

Socio-economic characteristics of visitors in selected zoos

The results of the socio-economic analysis of the respondents across the study zoos are presented in Table 1. There were slightly more male (52.3%) than female (47.7%) visitors in the zoos. Most visitors (86.7%) were single while only 13.3% were married. The visitors were largely young, and the percentages declined with higher age groups: 77.3% (18-27 years), 16.5% (28-37 years), 4.4% (38-47 years), 1.4% (48-57 years) and 0.4% (above 57 years). With respect to religion, Christians were largely represented (79.5%), followed by Muslims (18.4%) while Traditionalists (2.1%) had the least representation. The majority of the respondents had tertiary education, as represented by 79.0%, while 15.1%, 5.2% and 0.7% had secondary education, no formal and primary education respectively. Also, the respondents were largely Nigerians (95.2%) while the foreigners had a 4.8% representation. Further, majority of the respondents were students as represented by 71.9%. 18.2% were employed, 5.6% (self-employed), 4.1% (unemployed) and 0.2% were retired. Most of the respondents earned less than ₦50000 monthly (75.3%). This was followed by those that earned between ₦50000 and ₦99999 (15%). The least representation was ₦100000-149999 (4.4%), ₦150000-199999 (2.9%), ₦200000-249999 (0.9%), ₦250000-299999 (0.3%) and \geq ₦300000 (1.2%).

Travel details of visitors

The travel details of the respondents are presented in Table 2. Majority of the visitors (60.9%) were first time visitors, while 39.1% were returning visitors. With respect to the nature of travel, 49.6% were local travellers, 27.7% were intrastate travel visitors, 20.8% interstate travellers and the least (1.9%) international travellers. Also, most visitors (61.3%) stayed less than 3 hours while 38.7% stayed longer in the zoo. The travel company of visitors across the study zoos was family/friends (32.4%), school excursion (25.2%), spouse/partner (12.3%), study/research group (10.3%), tour group (8.2%), alone (7.8%) and the least – company, retreat group (1.8%). The transport medium most common was hired vehicles (40.7%), followed by respondents who came in private cars (28.6%) and via public transport (27.7%). Other means (3%) include walking and cycling.

Table 1. Socio-economic characteristics of respondents

Characters	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	800	52.3
	Female	729	47.7
Marital status	Single	1325	86.7
	Married	204	13.3
Age (years)	18-27	1182	77.3
	28-37	252	16.5
	38-47	67	4.4
	48-57	22	1.4
	>57	6	0.4
Religion	Christianity	1215	79.5
	Islam	281	18.4
	Traditional	16	1.0
	Others	17	1.1
Educational status	None	80	5.2
	Primary	10	0.7
	Secondary	231	15.1
	Tertiary	1208	79.0
Nationality	Nigerian	1454	95.1
	Non-Nigerian	75	4.9
Employment status	Students	1100	71.9
	Employed	278	18.2
	Self employed	85	5.6
	Unemployed	63	4.1
	Retired	3	0.2
Monthly income (₦)	<50000	1151	75.3
	50000-99999	230	15.0
	100000-149999	67	4.4
	150000-199999	45	2.9
	200000-249999	14	0.9
	250000-299999	4	0.3
	≥300000	18	1.2

Table 2. Travel details of visitors

Travel details	Response categories	Frequency	Percent
Type of visitor	First time visitor	931	60.9
	Repeat	598	39.1
Nature of visit	Local	759	49.6
	Intra-state	423	27.7
	Inter-state	318	20.8
	International	29	1.9
Length of stay	<3 hours	937	61.3
	>3 hours	562	38.7
Travel company	Alone	120	7.8
	Spouse/Partner	188	12.3
	Family/Friends	496	32.4
	Tour group	125	8.2
	Company retreat	27	1.8
	Study/Research group	158	10.3
	School excursion	386	25.2
	Others	29	1.9
Means of transport	Private vehicle	437	28.6
	Hired vehicle	623	40.7
	Public transport	423	27.7
	Others	46	3.0

Table 3. Medium of awareness about the zoos and preferred marketing medium

Response categories		Frequency	Percent
Medium of awareness	Brochure	134	8.8
	Family/Friends	798	52.2
	Radio/Television	73	4.8
	Internet	67	4.4
	Newspaper/Magazine	17	1.1
	School	388	25.4
	Others	52	3.4
Preferred medium	Television/Radio	635	41.6
	Travel websites/blogs	234	15.3
	E-mail	146	9.6
	Facebook/Twitter/Instagram	367	24.0
	Newspaper/Magazine	59	3.9
	Billboards	58	3.8
	Others	29	1.9

Medium of awareness about the zoos and preferred marketing medium

As illustrated in Table 3, over half (52.2%) came to the knowledge of the zoos through family/friends, 25.4% in school, brochure (8.8%), radio/television (4.8%), internet (4.4%), newspaper/magazine (1.1%) and other means (3.4%). The most preferred marketing medium by visitors across was by Radio/Television as indicated by 41.6%. This was followed by social media handles of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as represented by 24% and through travel websites/blogs (15.3%). Others include e-mail (9.6%), newspaper/magazine (3.9%),

billboards (3.8%) and other means (1.9%). The Chi Square test of association in determining how the age of respondents influenced their choice of a preferred marketing strategy (Table 4) revealed a significant association ($\chi^2 = 154.656$, $df = 24$, $p = 0.000$). The result of the Cross Tabulation revealed a great diversity in the responses of the visitors. For example, respondents of lower ages e.g. the 18-27 age group, indicated television/ radio as well as social media handles, travel websites and electronic mail as their preferred marketing strategies, as the age increases, the preference for the social media handles decreases.

Table 4. Cross Tabulation between visitors age and preferred marketing medium

	Television/Radio	Travel Websites/Blogs	E-Mail	Facebook/Twitter/Instagram	Newspaper/ Magazine	Billboards	Others
18 - 27 years	31.9	12.1	6.7	20.5	3.3	2.7	0.2
28 - 37 years	7.3	2.7	1.9	2.5	0.3	1.0	0.9
38 - 47 years	1.8	0.4	0.9	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.6
48 - 57 years	0.4	0.0	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.3
>58 years	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0

($\chi^2 = 154.656$, $df = 24$, $p = 0.000$)

Visitors Image of zoo

Visitors' image of zoological gardens across the study zoos is presented in Table 5. The factors of highest percentage agreement were 'a place to see wild animals' (92%), 'a place that provides a fun day out for the public' (88.3%), 'supports scientific research' (84.1%), 'educate the public about conservation issues' (83%), 'a source of generating income' (83.1%), 'zoos are important places for conserving wildlife' (82.9%), 'a place that offers opportunity to interact with wild animals' (78.5%), 'The zoo is a training ground for staff/conservationists' (73.4%) 'Zoos treat sick and injured animals' (73.2%), 'A place where people see wild animals without having to destroy their natural environment' (73.2%), and 'Zoos organize animal conservation campaigns' (72.1%). This was followed by the factors 'Zoos breed animals actively' (67.2%), and 'Zoos reintroduce wild animals into the wild' (60.3%). The factor of least percentage agreement was 'Zoos are venues for social functions such as birthday/ wedding party and conference' (26%). The categorization of the image of the visitors shows that majority (82.0%) had positive image of zoos while only 18.0% had negative image (Table 6).

Table 5. Visitors Image of Zoos

Factor ($\alpha = 0.741$)	A	N	D	M	SD	Order*
A place to see wild animals	92.0	6.6	1.4	1.10	0.34	1
Offer opportunity to interact with animals	78.5	16.2	5.2	1.27	0.55	7
Provides a fun day out for the public	88.3	10.5	1.2	1.13	0.37	2
Venue for social functions e.g. birthday party, conference	26.0	26.0	48.0	2.22	0.83	14
People see wild animals without destroying their natural habitat	70.4	20.9	8.7	1.38	0.64	12
Zoos are important places for conserving wildlife	82.9	16.5	0.5	1.18	0.39	3
Educate the public about conservation issues	83.0	15.7	1.3	1.18	0.42	3
Organize animal conservation campaigns	72.1	21.6	6.2	1.34	0.59	9
Breed animals actively	67.2	29.3	3.5	1.36	0.55	11
Reintroduce animals into the wild	60.3	29.2	10.5	1.50	0.68	13
Support scientific research	84.1	13.9	2.0	1.18	0.43	3
Treat sick and injured animals	73.2	19.2	7.7	1.35	0.62	10
Source of generating income	83.1	14.5	2.4	1.18	0.45	6
Training ground for keepers/staff/conservationists	73.4	20.5	6.1	1.33	0.59	8
Overall image score				1.34	0.23	

Where A= Agree, N= Neutral, D= Disagree *Rank order by descending mean in total sample

Table 6. Categorization of visitors' image of zoos

	Frequency	Percent
Positive image	1254	82.0
Negative image	275	18.0

Table 7. Test of difference in visitors' image of zoos across the destinations (Kruskal Wallis Test)

ZOO	N	Mean Rank
UI Zoo	395	745.56
OAU Garden	383	883.00
FUNAAB Zoo	379	663.81
TAAWP	372	767.25
Total	1529	

($\chi^2=108.553$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$)

Relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and destination image

This is outlined in Table 8. The gender, marital status, educational level, occupation, nationality and income of the visitors do not have any significant relationship with destination image at $p > 0.05$. However, visitors' age ($\chi^2=34.159$, $p = 0.001$) was found to have a significant relationship with destination image at $p < 0.05$.

Table 8. Relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and Destination Image

Socio-demographic characteristics	χ^2	df	P value
Gender	2.972	3	0.396
Marital status	4.015	3	0.260
Age	34.159	12	0.001*
Education	16.544	9	0.056
Occupation	13.508	12	0.333
Nationality	6.352	3	0.096
Income	18.841	18	0.402

(* = significant)

Test of difference in visitors' image of zoos across the destinations

Significant differences were found to exist in visitors' image across the zoos ($\chi^2 = 108.553$, $p = 0.000$) as shown in Table 7. FUNAAB Zoo visitors had a significantly higher and better image of zoos than visitors in FUTA Park and subsequently UI Zoo and OAU Zoo at $p < 0.05$.

Test of relationship between age and destination image

Using Kruskal Wallis test (Table 9), older visitors had a better image of zoos than the younger ones at $p < 0.05$ with the best recorded for visitors within the age range of 48-57 years.

Table 9. Test of relationship between age and destination image

Age	N	Mean Rank
18 - 27 Years	1182	773.03
28 - 37 Years	252	694.24
38 - 47 Years	67	832.89
48 - 57 Years	22	975.00
Above 58 Years	6	627.50
Total	1529	

($\chi^2 = 31.648$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.000$)

DISCUSSION

The descriptive analysis revealed that the sex percentage of respondents in the zoo gardens were almost equivalent. Such was also documented by Adetola et al. (2016) in UI Zoo. The findings give voice to the fact that while males may be more eager to travel than females (Arul et al., 2013; Alarape et al., 2015), females are not left out, and in some cases, may even be at par with their male counterparts. It was found that the zoos largely attract visitors who are not married. This is in line with Yager et al. (2015) and Adetola et al. (2016) but contradicts Knezevic et al. (2016) and Lee (2015). Arowosafe and Adebayo (2014) noted that single individuals have greater freedom and less financial outlay on travelling for tourism so they are likely higher in number than their married counterparts. Visitors were largely youths between 18-27 years of age. Further, the percentages were observed to decline with higher age groups. In a study conducted by Couch (2013) in Detroit and Potter Park Zoos in Michigan, United States of America, most visitors were between 20 and 39 years of age, and a decline with increasing age was also reported. Likewise, by Alarape et al. (2015) and Yager et al. (2015) in Markurdi Zoo, Knezevic et al. (2016) in Zagreb Zoo, and Adetola et al. (2016) in UI Zoo. Adefalu et al. (2014) described zoo visitors as youths, who are strong, full of energy, dynamic and lovers of adventure. With respect to the religion of the visitors, they were largely Christians. Other religions accounted for were Islam and Traditional religion. This corroborates Adetola et al. (2016). Visitors to the zoos were well educated as their highest educational attainment reflects tertiary education. This was also reported by Couch (2013). In the same vein, most visitors were students. This may be attributed to the fact that the zoos are located in universities, hence, a natural attraction to the inhabitants within the university environment. This corroborates the findings of Adetola and Oluleye (2014) in OAU Garden and UI Zoo, as well as Adetola et al. (2016) for UI Zoo visitors. Domestic tourism seems to be the order of the day in these zoos as the bulk of visitors to these zoos were Nigerians. This trend of domestic tourism was also reported by Alarape et al. (2015), Adetola et al. (2016), Knezevic et al. (2016) and Ajayi et al. (2017). This finding affirms the report of UNWTO (2013), Mbanefo (2014) and SANParks (2013) that the tourism market is mostly constituted by local visitors. The analysis of the monthly income of the visitors revealed that the majority earned less than ₦50000 monthly. All in all, the socio-economic report of this study is largely similar to that of Adefalu et al. (2014) in their survey of the socio-economic characteristics of visitors to UI Zoo, and that of Ajayi et al. (2017) on zoo tourism in Nigeria with Ogba Zoo as a case study, where majority of the respondents were young, Christian, Nigerian, educated and earning less than ₦50000 monthly.

Visitors to the zoos were mainly first-time visitors. This is not an unusual outcome, as variations in the frequency of visits have been reported for various zoos across the globe. A high first-time visitation, though not as prominent as repeat visitation, was reported by Couch (2013). Despite the prevalence of first-time visitation in the zoos, they are mostly likely able to invoke repeat visits as respondents are willing to recommend the zoos to others as well as visit in the future. With respect to the nature of travel, most visitors were local travellers from the city in which the zoos were located. This was followed by intrastate travel visitors and interstate travellers. International visitors were recorded as very low. The importance of domestic tourism in contributing the largest percentage of visitors, as well as a ready market for the tourism industry, is further emphasized by the findings of this study. The visitors to the zoos were largely day visitors and excursionist. This corroborates Ryan and Saward (2004) who noted that visiting zoos is a popular family-oriented leisure activity, usually involving a one-day visit. In total, about two-third of respondents across all the zoos stayed less than 3 hours while one third stayed longer. The Tourism Society (2016) referred to the earlier group as leisure day visitors and the latter as same day visitors. An important characteristic of these types of visitors is that they are residents of the local catchment areas. Ridgway et al. (2005) noted that the bulk of visitor groups visit zoos that are in the same city where they live. The predominant media of awareness to the zoos were through family and friends and from school. Yager et al. (2015) reported media of awareness through friends/relatives and parents in Markurdi Zoo, and this was also the case for Alarape et al. (2015). This study therefore affirms the importance of word of mouth as a voluntary and unpaid publicity media especially in the tourism industry. This is in line with Philemon (2015). It was observed during the period of study that visitors who had been to the zoo before bring along new visitors, especially family and friends, on subsequent visits. More so, McCabe (2000) noted that friends and relatives have been identified as organic image-formation agents and emphasized that this WOM information is one of the most reliable sources of information for destination selection with a high rate of repeat visitation. Also, the zoos are default places of excursion for schools across all levels (primary, secondary and tertiary). The fact that they are located in the universities also gives credit to the knowledge of the zoos from school.

In the same vein, the assessment of the travel company of the visitors revealed that they came in the company of family/friends, school excursion, spouse/partner, study/research group, tour group, alone and, the least - company retreat group. Most parents were observed to come with their children, especially on the weekends. This was also documented by Jordaan and du Pleiss (2014) in National Zoological Gardens, South Africa, and by Couch (2013) in Detroit and Potter Park Zoos. Weekdays attract school children in their hundreds, especially primary and secondary students who are led into the zoos by their teachers. While this affirms the earlier assertion that zoos are default sites for excursion, it also corroborates the Association of Zoos and Aquarium (2018) that zoo visitors mostly come in groups. This was also reported by Couch (2013), Alarape et al. (2015), Adetola et al. (2016), Knezevic et al. (2016) and Ajayi et al. (2017). Visitors across the zoos came mostly in hired vehicles, especially the excursionists. The most preferred marketing strategy by visitors is by Radio/Television. This was followed by social media handles of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and through travel websites/blogs. Knezevic et al. (2016) noted that age is a vital factor to consider with respect to marketing strategies. This association was recorded in this study as the age of respondents was found to influence the choice of a preferred marketing strategy. For example, respondents of lower ages, e.g. the 18-27 age group, indicated television/ radio as well as social media handles, travel websites and electronic mail as their preferred marketing strategies and as the age increased, the preference for the social media handles decreased. This finding echoes the findings of Connell (2004) and Knezevic et al. (2016).

The result of visitors' image of zoos, which is the totality of beliefs, ideas and impression an individual has about the zoo, revealed that visitors largely see zoos as a place to see wild animals. This is followed by the recreational perspective of zoos as a place that provides a fun day out for the public. The scientific research and educational purposes of zoos ranked in the third and fourth positions for image respectively. The fifth highest image visitors have of zoos is that they are a source of generating income. While the first impression of visitors refers generally to a basic characteristic of the zoo (a place to see animals), the second image of visitors was that of recreation and entertainment. This is in line with Carr and Cohen (2011) and Knezevic et al. (2016) who opined that visitors' image of zoos is that of entertainment rather than education, conservation and research. Visitors also see zoos as important places for conserving wildlife, and as places that offer opportunities to interact with wild animals and training avenues for staff/ conservationists.

Other perspectives considered zoos as places which organize animal conservation campaigns, treat sick and injured animals, breed animals actively, and as places where people see wild animals without having to destroy their natural environment. The high percentage agreements found in the study support the fact that visitors are aware of the wildlife conservation roles of zoos (through animal breeding, conservation campaigns and protection of the *in situ* environment) and the close human-animal interactions they offer. The factors of least percentage agreement were the roles of zoos in reintroducing wild animals into the wild and serving as venues for social functions such as birthday/ wedding party and conference. This means that the visitors least acknowledged the re-introduction agendas of zoos. This may be because, despite reintroduction being an agenda for zoos, it is hardly practiced, especially in Nigerian zoos. The exception may be the animal sanctuary/ rescue centres that are committed into restoration programs than the conventional zoos. Visitors also largely disagreed with the idea that zoos are venues for social events. It is one thing to state the purpose of establishment of a destination, it is another thing for people to perceive it as such. In the case of the study zoos, the core purposes of establishment, especially for a contemporary zoo (ie. education, research, conservation, recreation and income generation (Yager et al., 2015; Knezevic et al., 2016) corresponds with how visitors perceive it. In essence, visitors across the zoos have a good impression of the basic concept of zoos and their practices.

The age of visitors was found to have a significant relationship with destination image while other demographic characteristic, such as marital status, education, income and education, showed no significant relationship. This was also reported by Rafael and Almeida (2017) who found that younger people had better image than older people in online environments. This study established that older people had better image of zoos than the younger ones. This may be due to their experience over time, and probably more visits to zoos than the younger ones.

CONCLUSION

This study examined visitors' characteristics and destination image in zoos in Nigeria, and the existing interrelationships. Also, visitor's satisfaction and loyalty were explored in relation to their influence on destination image. The findings have shown that visitors in Nigerian zoos share similar personal and travel characteristics with zoo visitors globally, hence drawing some parallels with past studies. Visitors' characteristics can be leveraged in understanding the travel behaviour of these visitors as well as developing marketing plans to suit this market for the utmost success and continued relevance of zoos.

Also, the study revealed that visitors have a positive image of zoos. Foremost were visitors' identification of zoos as places that foster close wildlife experiences, recreation and entertainment, education and income generation, all of which are in line with the basic concept of zoos and their practices. However, zoos are less often seen as conservation centres. This finding becomes significant, especially as modern zoos are primarily promoted as *ex situ* conservation centres, in the context of existing literature, but hardly has the image of zoo visitors about this role been examined. A piece of implicating evidence may be the fact that most zoos do not actively carry out breeding programs and neither is reintroduction carried out. It is important that zoo managers, especially in meeting up with the roles of the modern zoo, should engage in and/or encourage conservation activities in which visitors can be engaged, so as to promote the conservation themes of their destinations. Such activities could include: captive breeding, interpretive guided tours, improved enclosure designs, conservation themed signboards and informative zoo websites. This would re-channel the orientation of visitors to have a comprehensive image of what zoos are, and thus, would allow for the correct all-inclusive message to be portrayed. This is without downplaying the recreational function of zoos, but rather projecting an image of recreation within a greater educational and conservation inclined destination.

With respect to the effect of visitors' demographics on destination image, an age effect was found which suggests that older visitors had a better image of the zoos than the younger ones. This finding is a shift from previous studies which mostly found gender and educational effects, especially in other nature-based tourism destination contexts. There is a need for destination managers to take this into due consideration in their promotional and management context, especially given that the largest representation of these zoo visitors are youths. The promotion of an image that mirrors the goals and objectives of the zoos should be portrayed and made available on youth-dominated platforms such as social media and websites. Despite the contributions of this study, especially with regards to destination image in zoos which has been largely unexplored, the study is not without limitations as it was carried out in only four zoos found in the south west region of Nigeria. The country is made up of six geopolitical zones and has zoos spread throughout all of them and, as such, future studies can be replicated in other zones and in other counties, which would enhance the generalization of findings.

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