Socio-demographic Profiles of Customers' Food Preferences at Ecotourism Destinations in South Western, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *The travel and tourism industry in the twentieth century has changed its eating patterns and meal preferences. Food to an extent is a reflection of social status and individual identification, hence, an explicit way of understanding customer's food consumption behaviour is to study their food preference. The provision of meals is one of the key determinants of meeting customers' expectations and satisfaction at destinations, hence, this study assessed the Socio-demographic profiles of customers' food preferences at ecotourism destinations in South Western, Nigeria. An exploratory research approach was conducted through the use of structured questionnaires for data gathering. The data were collected from a purposely selected population comprising both customers and staff of Ikogosi Warm Spring and Olumo Rock Resorts. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The Chi-Square results on meal preferences concerning age shows a significant influence of age on soup and starchy morsel, Assorted rice dishes, Yam and potato dishes, Beans and Beans products and Non-Alcoholic beverages, a significant association and influence was shown among genders for beans and beans products, customers income and education has no influence on their preference for alcoholic beverages and a significant relationship between food choices of customers and marital status was noticeable. The research findings reveal that customers' food preferences are shaped by Socio-demographic influences. This study concluded that the dimensions of customers' food preferences are majorly tilted towards Socio-demographic variables of age, gender, marital status, income and educational qualifications. It is recommended that customers' Socio-demographic characteristics should be a key indicator in food and beverage planning, preparation and marketing at ecotourism destinations.*
KEYWORDS; socio-demographic, food, preference, ecotourism, customers, south western.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the primary drivers of economic growth and, a major drive of development and prosperity in terms of job creation in emerging economies throughout the world (Arowosafe *et al*,2021). The tourism industry has boosted the economy of nations globally, just as the exceeding important economic sectors such as oil exports, food production and automobiles (UNWTO, 2020). Ecotourism, a form of tourism that takes place in natural areas, creates local communities' sustenance, which involves a form of learning experience (Mondino & Beery,2019). This research tends to focus on customer's food consumption at ecotourism destinations with a focus on their eating preference. There has been a heightened interest in understanding the key factors driving tourist food consumption at tourist destinations. Studies also indicated that food consumption expenditure can constitute up to one-third of the total tourist expenditure at destinations (Mak,2018). By and large, the benefits of understanding customer's (whether tourist or visitors) food consumption behaviour is enormous and significant to a destination economically, considering the extent of research carried out on it.

Alamai (2020) inferred that a destination is made of a geographical region that desires to provide tourists with a memorable experience. Ecotourism potentials include unpolluted sandy beaches, unique wildlife, magnificent scenic views; waterfalls, mountains, rivers and lakes as well as cultural and art festivals. Nadube & Akahome (2017) classified ecotourism destinations into two as; attractions and recreation, which are sightseeing sites, zoos, museums, monuments, beaches and parks and hospitality (accommodation, food and drinks). Therefore, in this study, each of the classifications; monuments and sightseeing sites, shall be studied to determine the food preferences of customers at these destinations.

Food is one determinant of meeting customer expectations and satisfaction at a tourist Centre, food is one of the most important biological human needs, forming an inseparable part of tourism (Kocevski & Risteski, 2018). Visitors are drawn to tourist attractions by other assets such as the quality of food, people and diversity of a destination (Oladeji *et al.*,2020). Food is regarded as a physical necessity, which embodies cultural identity and individuality and individual food choices form the food consumption pattern as it occurs with changes in the natural environment (Chen & Antonelli,2020). Food consumption to some customers is an experience and to others is a non-experience, It all points to the fact that food is an important part of the customer's experience and a major factor in the decision-making of a customer in this context tourist; hence, knowing their eating preference is a major bonus for destinations. It helps in understanding what drives tourist local food consumption and satisfaction, and whether this holds true across different tourist groups would provide significant insights relevant to destination marketing and management. (Promsivapallop,2020). It is argued that people's food preference and food behaviour is influenced

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by the environment they live and understanding factors that drive food behaviour is of great interest in the field of gastronomy. (Spence, 2021)

The travel industry in the twentieth century has changed its eating patterns and meal preferences; Beauty and health considerations are related to the consumption of food, for genders, especially young women and the elderly (Papapnou *et al.*,2023). Tourism practitioners are not only interested in knowing the food preferences of tourists but also in the actual dish consumed, for each type and each meal of the day to develop more focused marketing strategies in the face of more competition rising in the food industry at destinations (Yun *et al.*,2017; Athar.,2020). This explains the importance of the food consumption behaviour of customers in defining a destination's menu assemblage and relieving operators from errors during planning. Social demographic characteristics are significant variables that explain variations in food consumption (Voksanovic,2017).

In customer's preferences or behaviour related to food consumption, having an understanding and knowledge of their Socio-demographic background correctly provides a better interpretation of their food choice, preference and pattern of eating. The preference for food as a fondness or likeness developed towards food or meal, depicts an emotional disposition to a physiological requirement, while the tremendous diversity in food preference reflects a fundamental feature of the sensory evaluative process that governs food choice and tourism practitioners are not only interested in food type preference of tourist, but in the actual chosen dishes consumed (Lin,2018; Quan Vu e*t al.*,2019). The actual individual food choice starts first with the eyes (sight), nose (smell), and hands (feel), before the actual mouth-eating action or process, which may be regarded as the decision-making process to food choice; preferring one food ingredient, condiment, dish, menu course or beverage over another is another path of assessing preference. The accuracy of information on customers' food preferences will enhance proper menu planning and development for food business operations at tourist destinations as well as increase the understanding of entry points for food system improvement and boost opportunities for business development (Mengesha, 2021). Globalization has created more standardization of food consumption habits and changed the eating patterns of customers (Santo *et al.*,2021).

The statement of research problem is tilted toward genders having different food choices for diverse reasons; preference and choice for a particular menu have been observed among the female gender compared to the male gender (Kraus *et al.*,2017; Dahal et al.,2022) and also there is a dearth in study on customer's food preference at ecotourism destination in South Western, Nigeria. Several studies have been carried out on consumer food behaviour related to preference and one of the earliest researchers was Randall & Sanjur, (1981) developed a conceptual model capturing the relationship between food preference and food consumption and other related variables.

Rosin &Tuorila (1993) on an individual's appreciation of taste, which depends on their sensory perception, experience, tastes and attitudes. Chang *et al*. (2011) examined dining behaviour and food consumption at tourist destinations, to determine their meal preference and eating habits. While Kim *et al*., (2013) investigated tourists' wish to experience local food and drinks on their travel, to assess the local food-eating experience of tourists at chosen destinations. Mak *et al*. (2012;2017) identify and conceptually capture factors influencing tourist food consumption as cultural/nationality, religious factors, Socio-demographic factors, motivational factors, food-related personality traits and past experience/ exposure. Koesveld (2017) researched on qualitative inquiry food consumption behaviour of tourist from the familiar food approach, using the qualitative approach to uncover reasons why tourist still eats and choose to eat familiar dishes even in an unfamiliar environment and Promsivapallop (2020) studied factors affecting tourist food consumption, identifying five key factors of culture and demography. Promisivapallo *et al*., (2019) expressed that despite a strong surge in food tourism research, the lack of articles published relating to tourist local food consumption is surprising. There is limited research done on customers' (tourist) food consumption preferences, particularly at ecotourism destinations in South Western, Nigeria. There is therefore a need to examine and fill the knowledge gap and enrich the scanty research available on the food preferences of customers at ecotourism destinations. However, there is a need to undertake this research by adopting a quantitative approach to investigate the Socio-demographic profiles of customers at resort centres concerning their food consumption preferences. The objective of this study is to assess Socio-demographic profiles of customers' food preferences at ecotourism destinations in South Western, Nigeria and to specifically determine how customer's age, gender, income, marital status and level of education affect food choices and preference at the study areas.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research approach was conducted which covers two ecotourism destinations in South Western, Nigeria; Ikogosi Warm/Cold Spring Resort, Ekiti State and Olumo Rock Resort, Ogun State (Figure1). Ikogosi Warm Spring Resort is located in the Ikogosi community, Ekiti West local government area of Ekiti state, South West Nigeria. It is situated in the midst of high and thick well maintained and protected forest vegetation covering an area of about 31.38 hectares of land, where two springs, warm and cold meet at a confluence, each maintaining its thermal properties of 70°c and 37°c without changes (Kukoyi *et al*.,2013). Olumo Rock is a mountain resort located in Ikija community, Abeokuta North local government area of Ogun state, South West, Nigeria. The mountain has a height of about 137 meters above sea level. Olumo rock was discovered by a hunter, who used it as a natural fortress during inter-tribal warfare in the 19th century for the Egba ethnic group. Olumo Rock was turned into a tourist site in 1976 and commissioned in 2006 as a tourist destination (Adeleke,2015).
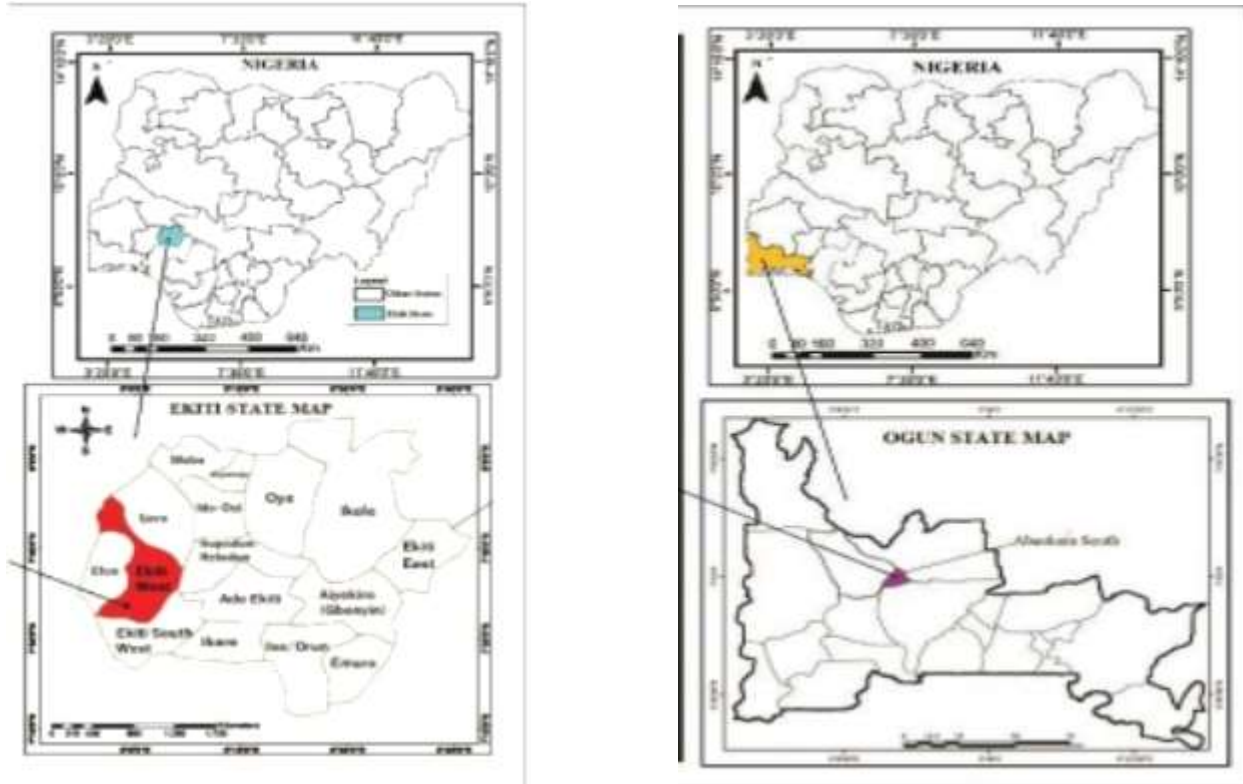
Figure 1. Map of Nigeria showing Ekiti state (Ikogosi warm spring) and Ogun state (Olumo Rock).
The study population consist of the customers and staff of the food and beverage section, which were purposely selected to generate data on customers' food preference at surveyed destinations. The two states, Ekiti and Ogun were purposely selected based on the presence of peculiar ecotourism attractions that are active with natural uniqueness to customer's travel experience and popularity as monuments and sightseeing sites. The visitor's record was provided by the resort centres from guest/ticket registers for the past five years (2016 -2020) preceding the research period. As indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Customer's (visitors) Population at selected Destinations from   2016-2020

	Study Destinations	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
1	Ikogosi Warm Spring Resorts	16427	13050	11877	-	-
	Olumo Rock Resort	38701	30776	54855	48858	-

Sampling frame consumers from destinations for 2016-2020

A sampling frame to categorize and identify population units, before determining the sample size.

Table 2:   Total Sample of Population for Study Destinations

Study Destinations	Total Population
Ikogosi Cold/ Warm Spring Resorts	41354
Olumo Rock Resort	173190
Total	**214,544**

Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determinant table was used to determine the sample size of 384 employed for this study population (table 2) at an acceptable margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. The sources of data used in this study were both primary and secondary. The primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and the secondary sources were from customers'/tourist registers of study areas.

A test-retest reliability was carried out to test the consistency as well as determine the coefficient reliability of the survey instrument. In the pilot test, ten small groups of customers were sampled at two separate intervals using a similar hospitality and tourism industry, using the Cronbach Alpha test of reliability. The test-retest result was 0.528 implying that the research was reliable at 52.8 %. However, for an exploratory study, the reliability should be equal to or higher than 0.60 (Taherdoost,2016). Therefore, to achieve a higher reliable value, adjustments were made on the number of questions, and pruned and the instrument was re-administered to the same samples (customers) in the same area to obtain responses measuring the same variables. The reliability test of the re-administer research instrument, based on the Cronbach Alpha test of reliability, showed a reliability value ranging from 0.764 - to 0.876, this implies that the research instrument was highly reliable and was then, employed for the field survey.

This research employed quantitative techniques of data collection approach, while descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze data retrieved to generate numerical data required for this study. Descriptive statistics employed include frequencies, tables, simple percentages, mean and inferential statistics that include, factor analysis, regression and correlation while the Chi-square test was adopted to test for a significant relationship between variables.

Measurement of variables
Independent variables measured in this study include socio-demographics of age, gender, marital status, income and educational qualification, while the dependent variables measured the level of preferences using the five-point Likert scale (*most preferred, preferred, undecided, slightly preferred and not preferred*)

Food selection keys

Soup and Starchy Morsel (SSM) includes; all dishes referred to as "swallow", a Nigerian term for solid meals (eba, amala, pounded yam, fufu, tuwo and plantain and wheat meal) accompanied with varieties of indigenous sauces or soups.

Assorted Rice (AR) includes; fried, white boiled, jollof, coconut, palm oil and braised or pilaf rice dishes.

Yam and Potato Products (YPP) includes; all foods prepared with yam and potatoes (Irish or sweet) and presented as pottage, roasted, fried, boiled, balls and pies.

Beans and Beans Products (BBP) includes; all recipes prepared with legumes such as; akara (fried bean cake) moi-moi and ekuru (pudding), boiled, baked beans and pottage beans.

Non-alcoholic Beverage (NAB) includes; water, juices, wine, carbonated soft drinks and other non-alcoholic drinks.

Alcoholic Beverages (AB) includes; beer, spirits, wines, cocktails, punches and any drink with alcoholic content.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Socio-demographic distribution of respondents in surveyed areas.
The result in Table 4 shows that the female gender accounted for 67.2% of customers at Ikogosi Warm Spring, above the male accounts for 47.4% at Olumo Rock. The age range of respondents between 18-30 years was the highest category that frequently visited the surveyed destinations. While the age of 70 and above rarely patronised the research surveyed area which accounts for the lowest percentage of 3.9% at Olumo Rock resort. On marital status, single respondents account for the highest level of patronage at 51%. The monthly income range of respondents was between N30,000 -and N90,000, which formed the bulk of respondents' earnings, especially in Olumo Rock resort (46.3%). on educational qualification, respondents with HND/BSc (49.2%) are more at the centres.

Table 4: Socio-demographic distribution of respondents.

Respondents	Ikogosi Warm Spring		Olumo Rock	
Gender	**F**	**%**	**F**	**%**
Male	20	32.8	121	47.4
Female	41	67.2	134	52.6
Age (years)				
18 – 30 years	25	40.9	101	39.6
31 – 43 years	19	31.1	83	32.5
44 – 56 Years	10	16.4	36	14.1
57 – 69 Years	4	6.6	25	9.8
70 and above	3	4.9	10	3.9
Marital Status				
Single	23	37.7	130	51.0
Married	17	27.9	100	39.2
Widow/widower	8	13.1	9	3.5
Separated/Divorced	13	21.3	16	6.3
Educational Qualification				
Masters/PhD	5	8.2	10	3.9
HND/B.Sc	30	49.2	113	44.3
NCE/ND	15	24.6	82	32.2
SSCE	5	8.2	43	16.9
Primary	0	0.0	0	0.0
Others(non-formal)	6	9.8	7	2.7
Monthly Income				
30,000-60,000	23	37.7	118	46.3
61,000-90,000	20	32.8	110	43.2
91,000-120,000	6	9.8	14	5.5
121,000 & above	12	19.6	13	5.0

Source: Field Survey, (2023)

Table 5. Socio-demographic profile of customers' food preference at study areas.

Table 5 consists of the results of the analysis on the level of food preference from Ikogosi warm Spring and Olumo rock resorts base*d on age, gender, income, marital status and educational qualifications.*

Age

The result in Table 5 shows that younger customers aged between 18-30 years exhibited a high preference for Soup and Starchy Morsel dishes at both resort centres, Ikogosi Warm Spring (40.5%) and Olumo Rock (45.0). The age range of 44-56 years accounts for the lowest preference for SSM dishes at 2.7% in Ikogosi warm spring.

Across all age groups, there was a high preference for assorted rice dishes, although older age groups show a lower preference for AR dishes at Olumo Rock (3.6%), while those aged 31– 43years demonstrated a relatively high preference at both Olumo Rock (45.4%) and Ikogosi Warm Spring(40.0%) for AR. The younger age group (18 - 43 years) had a notably higher preference for yam and potato dishes at all locations, but, least popular among those aged 70 and above, particularly in Olumo Rock (3.9%).

The preference for beans and bean products was higher among the age range of 18 - 43 years particularly at Ikogosi Warm Spring (41%), but BBP was less preferred among those aged 70 and above (2.1%) at Olumo Rock. The age preference for non-alcoholic beverages was relatively high among the 18 - 43 years age group at both destinations, with a slight difference in the age range of 18-30 years at Olumo Rock (43.6%). The age range of between 18 - 30 years reveals a 45.9 % high preference for alcoholic beverages at Olumo Rock and 38.1% at Ikogosi warm spring.

Gender

The popularity of soup and starchy morsel dishes preference is relatively equal among genders in Ikogosi Warm Spring and Olumo Rock. However, a higher preference distinction was noticed among the female genders (54.5%) in Ikogosi warm spring and Olumo Rock (52.8%) respectively for SSM. The males and female genders both showed a strong preference for assorted rice dishes, with females showing a slightly higher preference across all locations, especially at Ikogosi Warm Spring (59.3%). However, male and female genders showed a comparatively equal high preference for beans and beans products at both locations, female genders showed a higher preference at Ikogosi Warm Spring (59.5%) and Olumo Rock (58.0%). Male and female genders both showed a high preference for non-alcoholic beverages at the two centres. Nevertheless, the female gender showed a higher preference for Olumo Rock (55.9%) and Ikogosi Warm Spring (51.1%) for NAB. Equal preference was shown for alcoholic beverages by singles at both locations Ikogosi Warm Spring (50.0%) and Olumo Rock (50.2%). interestingly, the female gender showed a higher preference for alcoholic beverages at Ikogosi Warm Spring (61.8%) and Olumo Rock (55.3%), over the male gender in both surveyed centres.

Income
Higher monthly income did not correlate with increased interest in soup and starchy morsel dishes, particularly, individuals earning 211,000 and above exhibited a 20.7% interest, but the highest preference for SSM indicates income earners of between N30,000 - N90,000 from both resort centres. High-income levels do not necessarily correspond to a higher preference for assorted rice dishes, respondents with a monthly income of N30,000 - N90,000 showed a higher preference at Olumo Rock (47.1%) compared to other income groups at the same location. The preference for yam and potato dishes shows an even distribution across different income groups, but, respondents earning between N61,000- N90,000 showed more preference for yam and potato dishes especially at Olumo Rock (54.5%), while those earning between N30,000 - N60,000 showed a slightly high preference at Ikogosi warm spring (37.7%). The preference decision for Beans and Beans products dishes was notably high among respondents earning between N61,000 - N90,000 at Olumo Rock (52.0%) and income earners of N211,000 and above showed a low preference in Ikogosi Warm Spring (24.4%). However, Preference for non-alcoholic beverages was noticeably equal among individuals earning between N30,000 - N90,000 at Ikogosi Warm Spring (35.1%) while N61,000-N90,000 were the highest earning preference for NAB at Olumo Rock (46.4%). The choice for alcoholic beverages was significantly high among respondents earning between N30,000 - N90,000 (46.2%) at Olumo Rock. nevertheless, respondents earning N211,000 and above in Ikogosi Warm Spring (21.1%) show a small increase in preference for alcoholic beverages in contrast to Olumo Rock (5.7%).

Marital status
This provides an interesting insight, both singles and married respondents showed a high interest in soup and starchy morsel dishes at Olumo Rock (45.5%) but the highest preference level was noticed among the singles in Ikogosi Warm Spring (47.9%). Assorted rice dishes seem popular among all marital statuses. However, at Olumo Rock 48.4% of singles showed an increase in preference for AR dishes, while the married respondents accounted for 47.8% at Ikogosi Warm Spring. Married and singles demonstrated a high preference for yam and potato dishes at all surveyed destinations, but, there was an equal preference for YP dishes among the married at Ikogosi Warm Spring (46.3%) and singles(46.8%) at Olumo Rock. However, preference was quite low among separated/divorced individuals, lowest at Ikogosi Warm Spring (2.9%). The preference for beans and beans products dishes varied significantly for marital status of respondents, married respondents showed equal preference at both Ikogosi Warm Spring (48.6%) and Olumo Rock (47.3%). However, preference was quite low among separated/divorced individuals, lowest at Ikogosi Warm Spring (2.9%). Non-alcoholic beverage preference was high across all marital statuses, with married individuals showing the highest preference at Ikogosi Warm Spring (52.8%) and singles (46.6%) at Olumo Rock. Equal preference was shown for alcoholic beverages by singles at both Ikogosi Warm Spring (50.0%) and Olumo Rock (50.2%). However, married respondents showed a slight preference for AB at both centres.

Educational Qualifications

Respondents with Masters/PhD qualifications showed low interest in soup and starchy morsel dishes across all locations and in contrast to those with HND/BSc (48.1%) who show a higher preference for Ikogosi. NCE/ND qualification demonstrated only a 29.6% preference level in Olumo Rock Resort. Across all locations, individuals with HND/B.Sc. qualifications showed a high preference for assorted rice meals, most notably at Ikogosi (52.0%). In the same vein, for respondents with HND/BSc, preference for beans and beans products was particularly high at Ikogosi warm spring (64.7%) and Olumo Rock (40.4%). Those with primary education and other qualifications showed the lowest preference especially at Olumo Rock (3.1%). The preference for yam and potato dishes was high across all locations, peaking at 56.5% in Ikogosi warm spring. The respondents with an HND/BSc, prefer non-alcoholic beverages more at both resort centres with Ikogosi Warm Spring (45.5%) and Olumo Rock (43.0%), Respondents with primary education and other qualifications showed varying, but low preferences for NAB. Alcoholic beverage preference was also quite high among HND/BSc (50.0%) at Ikogosi Warm Spring 42.8% at Olumo Rock and 29.9% at Olumo Rock for respondents with NCE/ND educational levels, while Master/PhD and other educational qualifications across all locations were generally low in preference for AB.

Table 5 Socio-demographic profile of customers' food and beverage preferences in surveyed areas.

Age of Customers	Starchy &Morsel Soup	Assorted Rice	Beans &Beans Products	Yam & Potato Products	Alcoholic Beverages	Non-Alcoholic Beverages
Ikogosi	%	%	%	%	%	%
18- 30	40.5	28.6	41.2	38.8	38.1	39.5
31- 43	24.3	40.0	35.3	36.1	33.3	34.2
44 - 56	2.7	8.6	2.9	8.3	9.5	2.6
57- 69	18.9	14.3	17.6	8.3	14.3	15.8
70 & above	13.5	8.6	2.9	8.3	4.8	7.9
Olumo Rock						
18- 30	45.0	45.4	39.6	43.6	45	43.6
31- 43	28.3	29.6	34.7	29.6	25.9	34.1
44 - 56	13.3	14.3	13.2	15.1	17.8	8.9
57- 69	8.7	7.1	10.4	7.8	8.2	10.1
70 & above	4.6	3.6	2.1	3.9	2.2	3.4

Gender of customers

Ikogosi (M)	45.5	38.9	40.5	33.3	38.5	48.9
(F)	54.5	59.3	59.	66.7	61.8	51.1
Olumo (M)	47.2	41.9	41.9	41.6	44.7	44.1
Rock (F)	52.8	58.1	58.0	58.4	55.3	55.9

Marital status

Ikogosi

Singles	47.9	43.5	42.9	41.5	50.0	44.4
Married	33.3	47.8	48.6	46.3	36.7	52.8
Widows	10.4	6.5	5.7	7.3	10.0	2.8
Seper/ divc	8.3	2.2	2.9	4.9	3.3	0

Olumo Rock

Singles	45.0	48.4	44.3	46.8	50.4	46.6
Married	42.5	40.8	47.3	40.9	38.7	41.7
Widows	5.0	4.9	4.6	7.1	3.6	6.1
Seper/divc	7.5	5	3.8	5.2	7.3	5.5

Income

Ikogosi (₦)

30,0 - 60,0	36.2	35.2	31.1	37.7	32.7	35.1
61,0 - 90,0	34.5	35.2	33.3	32.8	36.5	35.1
91,0 -120,0	8.6	11.1	11.1	9.8	9.6	9.2
121,0 & above	20.7	18.5	24.4	19.6	21.1	20.5

OlumoRock (₦)

	44.8	42.7	38.8	33.7	42.3	42.0
30,0 - 60,0	43.3	47.1	52.0	54.5	46.2	46.4
61,0 - 90,0	5.9	4.4	7.1	5.1	5.8	5.8
91,0 -120,0	5.9	5.8	4.0	6.8	5.8	5.8
121,0 & above						

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Educational Qualification

Ikogosi

MSc/PhD	9.6	8.0	5.9	8.7	8.0	9.1
HND/BSc	48.1	52.0	64.7	56.5	50.0	45.5
NCE/ND	26.9	22.0	8.8	23.9	22.0	25.5
SSCE	5.8	8.0	11.8	8.7	8.0	9.1
Primary& others	15.4	10.0	8.8	2.2	12.0	10.9

Olumo Rock

MSC/PhD	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.5	4.6	4.3
HND/BSC	43.0	40.6	40.4	48.7	42.8	43.0
NCE/ND	29.6	29.4	28.5	27.9	29.9	29.6
SSCE	19.9	21.9	23.8	18.8	19.1	19.9
Primary& others	3.2	3.7	3.1	3.0	3.6	3.2

Chi-square test of significance between meal choice and Socio- demography

Pearson Chi-square test of a significant relationship and Spearman correlation test for the strength of association between variables was carried out in this study at a **p-value < 0.05 acceptance level**. The result from Table 6 indicates that the Chi-square test shows a significant relationship between age and choice for soup and starchy morsel, assorted rice dishes, yam and potato dishes, beans and beans products and non-alcoholic beverages as a menu choice, but insignificantly related in preference for alcoholic beverages. However, there is no significant correlation between meal choices and the age of customers for soup and starchy morsel, assorted rice dishes, beans and beans products, and alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, although there is a significant correlation between age and yam and potato dishes.

Table 6: Meal preference concerning age of customers.

Preference	Pearson Chi-square	p-value	Remark	Spearman correlation	p-value	Decision
Soup and starchy morsel	33.417	0.006	Significant	-0.67	0.229	Not Significant
Assorted rice dishes	48.899	0.000	Significant	-0.87	0.112	Not Significant
Yam &potato dishes	75.899	0.000	Significant	-0.182	0.01	Significant
Beans and Beans product	57.050	0.000	Significant	-0.40	0.461	Not Significant
Alcoholic beverages	18.189	0.313	Not significant	-0.44	0.417	Not Significant
Non-Alcoholic beverages	54.444	0.000	Significant	-0.93	0.87	Not Significant

The result presented in Table 7 shows that Soup and starchy morsel dishes, assorted rice dishes, yam and potato dishes, and alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages do not have a significant relationship with gender food preference. In contrast, the result of the Spearman correlation indicates a negative association between gender and all foods and beverages, except assorted rice and beans and beans products which reveals a significant correlation with gender food choice at the level of preference.

Table 7: Meal Choices Concerning Gender

Preference	Pearson Chi-square	p-value	Remark	Spearman correlation	p-value	Decision
Soup and starch morsel	8.024	0.910	Not significant	-0.49	0.350	Not significant
Assorted rice dishes	12.433	0.140	Not significant	0.176	0.01	Significant
Yam and potato dishes	10.354	0.359	Not significant	0.87	0.89	Not significant
Beans and Beans product	16.942	0.020	Significant	0.130	0.011	Significant
Alcoholic beverages	1.471	0.832	Not significant	0.350	0.497	Not significant
Non-Alcoholic beverages	6.899	0.141	Not significant	-0.62	0.224	Not significant

Table 8. indicates that soup and starchy morsel, assorted rice dishes, yam and potato dishes, beans and beans products and non-alcoholic beverage shows a significant relationship to the income of

customers in variance to alcoholic beverages which shows an insignificant relationship to income of customers. On the aspect of correlation, there is a significant association between income and food preference of customers at the resort centres.

Table 8: Meal Choices Concerning Income

Preference	Pearson Chi-square	p-value	Remark	Spear man correlation	p-value	Decision
Soup and starchy morsel	69.266	0.000	Significant	-0.104	0.470	Not Significant
Assorted rice dishes	148.125	0.000	Significant	-0.870	0.910	Not Significant
Yam and potato dishes	76.377	0.000	Significant	-0.760	0.141	Not Significant
Beans and Beans product	54.077	0.000	Significant	0.002	0.969	Not Significant
Alcoholic beverages	23.618	0.484	Not Significant	-0.580	0.259	Not Significant
Non-Alcoholic beverages	62.386	0.000	Significant	-0.006	0.914	Not Significant

In regards to the educational qualification of customers, Table 9 showed a significant relationship between all the meal choices and their educational qualification, while the correlation indicates there is a significant association between soup and starchy morsel dishes and alcoholic beverages with an insignificant association with other menu choices.

Table 9: Meal Choices Concerning to Education qualification

Preference	Pearson Chi-square	p-value	Remark	Spear man correlation	p-value	Decision
Soup and starchy morsel	53.989	0.000	Significant	0.227	0.000	Significant
Assorted rice dishes	74.282	0.000	Significant	-0.108	0.390	Not Significant
Yam and potato dishes	82.740	0.000	Significant	0.007	0.901	Not Significant
Beans and Beans product	52.406	0.001	Significant	-0.470	0.377	Not Significant
Alcoholic beverages	103.085	0.000	Significant	0.169	0.001	Significant
Non-Alcoholic beverages	46.830	0.004	Significant	-0.680	0.199	Not Significant

Table 10. depicts that there is a significant relationship between all food choices of customers and marital status, except for alcoholic beverages which indicate an insignificant relationship with marital status of customers. Nevertheless, there is no significant correlation between marital status and all the food choices available at the resort centres.

Table 10: Meal Choices Concerning Marital Status

Preference	Pearson Chi-square	p-value	Remark	Spearman correlation	p-value	Decision
Soup and starchy morsel	25.788	0.012	Significant	-.109	0.058	Not Significant
Assorted Rice dishes	50.051	0.000	significant	-0.99	0.084	Not Significant
Yam and Potato dishes	35.296	0.000	significant	-0.148	0.09	Not Significant
Beans and Beans products	36.773	0.000	significant	0.058	0.309	Not Significant
Alcoholic Beverages	15.676	0.207	Not significant	-0.032	0.577	Not Significant
Non-Alcoholic Beverages	29.343	0.004	significant	-0.067	0.239	Not Significant

DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic distribution of respondents.

The distribution of Socio-demographic characteristics of customers in the two surveyed destinations is significant in determining the different influences of meal preferences as supported by Voksanovic (2017); Stakaly *et al.*,(2019) in the research on food consumption of tourists, that Socio-demographic characteristics are significant variables, which explains food consumption variations as it affects different situations and location. The study reveals that the female gender has an appreciably higher number of respondents at all locations over the male respondents aligned with Quynh *et al.,* (2021) that the demographic majority of respondents visiting ecotourism destinations are female; women are more participatory in tourism consumption than men. This is attributable to lifestyle and social change in women, gender turnaround that young women travel more than young men; women tend to have higher levels of loyalty, satisfaction, and trust than men (Tilley & Houston,2016; Kara & Mkwizu,2020). Contrary to Akande & Ogunjinmi (2021); Arowosafe *et al.,* (2021) where the majority of respondents visiting an ecotourism destination were male. In the age category, the 18-30years age bracket has the bulk representation over other ages in the survey, but 70 and above rarely patronize this location, findings from a survey conducted in research by Tomic *et al.*,(2019) revealed that ages between 15-24 years may have specific reasons and events in mind for visiting a tourist destination, while 50 and above prefer a sedated visit.

Marital status, there is an increase in single or unmarried customers over married customers, it was also noted that there were low numbers of widows, separated and divorced. This finding reveals that more singles with relative income is increasing, Kara & Mkwizu (2020) view singles as more participatory in tourism consumption activities than married. The monthly income bracket range of N30,000 to N90,000 is the highest range of responses from customers, findings align with Rudez (2018); and Monga &Zor (2019) that income significantly affect tourism trend and participation and is also a determinant of destination selection. The educational qualification of respondents at various destinations indicated that there is a high population of HND/BSc graduates. This showed that most of the respondents are literate and can express their opinion, motivated to travel and education significantly impacts their tourist leisure behaviour (Chen *et al.,*2018). In contrast, Ma *et al.*, (2018) opined that the educational level of tourists/customers negatively influences travel motivation.

Socio-demographic profile of customers' food preference in surveyed areas.
Research has suggested that tourist (customers) food consumption at destinations is influenced by varied Socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, social status, educational level, income and nationality or country (Matala *et al.*, 2023; Mohammed, 2022). Therefore, the outcome of the study conducted at two different locations reveals a complex interplay of demographic factors influencing the food and beverage preferences of customers. The different levels of preference suggest a mix of Socio-demographic, socioeconomic and cultural interplay that shaped these choices and it agrees with Szakaly *et al.*,(2019), Vuksanovic & Milijanko (2019), Plasek *et al.*, (2021) and that there is a significant relationship between socio-demographic profile embodied in age, gender, education level, marital status, and income as influencing factors to food preference and consumption. The preference for traditional soup and starchy morsel dishes was high among the older age groups, similar to the findings of Mak*, (*2018), which study revealed that older customers showed a higher choice for traditional foods, which aligns with the observations of Vuksanovic,(2017) that age increases people's concern for health and brings in food selection and sticking to familiar foods. The Chi-square test also reveals a significant relationship as well as a correlation between age, gender and preference for soup and starchy morsel, assorted rice dishes, yam and potato dishes, beans and beans products and non-alcoholic beverages. It connotes a strong preference for these foods among individuals according to age, gender and according to their level of familiarity. Women's preference for traditional soup and starchy morsel foods was also noticeable, especially among the singles; this finding consented with Tomassini (2021); Choe *et al.,*(2018) and Reddy and van Dam(2020) that women are more likely to choose local and traditional foods as part of habits and daily routines and maintenance of health. However, the Contrary research findings in Ikogosi warm spring resort, reveal the popularity of soup and starchy morsel dishes was relatively equal between genders. This agrees with Vuksanovic *et al.,* (2019) who observed that people's diversification in their eating patterns and some eating habits formed are not easily erased especially, when away from familiar terrines; the difference between female and male food-related behaviours are supposedly formed through

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evolutionary, biological, psychological and social factors (Matala *et al.*,2023). Surprisingly, alcoholic beverages revealed the highest preference among the younger female gender, especially in Olumo Rock resort, but an equal preference for non-alcoholic beverages was noticed between the genders**.**

The study also revealed that the population comprises more income earners of between N30,000 - N90,000 and this category shows a high preference for all the dishes, except alcoholic beverages, which remain static to increase or decrease in income, relating sto Park *et al* (2018) study, that environment was a major influence in alcoholic beverage preference and consumption and not income, preference for the favourite brand does not change irrespective of income or people. Preference as a perception defines the individuality of consumer choice of satisfying a need, consumption of non-alcoholic beverages is not restricted to age, gender or income (Dada & Awotunde, 2017; Said & Maryono,2018). The chi-square test shows that there is a significant relationship between income and customers' food preference, in variance to alcoholic beverages which shows an insignificant relationship to income of customers. On the aspect of correlation, there is a significant association between income and food preference of customers at the resort centres. The implication is that customers can make decisions on what to spend their income on; consumption of alcoholic beverages is not affected or influenced by the size or change in income of customers but it determined by choice of brand and type of alcoholic beverages preferred; alcoholic beverage consumption is influenced by price, brand and taste sensations as well as environment (Chuan *et al.,* 2081) ; Park et al.,2019). Consumer food behaviour and decision-making can be understood as moment within a chain of practice (Tomassini et al.,2021).This study also revealed the vibrancy of the young adults (singles) in their food preferences, they were involved in choosing from all the dishes in Ikogosi and Olumo compared to the older customers as observed by Vuksanovic *et al.*, (2019) that young adult tourists are more adventurous in tasting different kinds of food range compared to older tourist, who are more conservative, suspicious and have already made food preference. However, both genders showed a high preference for SSM and AR at both locations, but the highest preference for SSM was among the singles from both locations. This study also reveals a significant correlation between gender food preference for assorted rice and beans and beans products.

Invariably, customers with HND/BSc educational qualifications have the highest participatory and food preferences for all dishes across the surveyed locations, while Master/PhD accounts for the lowest. It implies that most customers who visit ecotourism destinations are educated and literate enough to make good food decisions. In the study of education and healthy food consumption, Islam &Sim (2021) found that education influences food consumption. Travellers (customers) with higher education have a preference for healthy choices of food and prefer local foods more than those with only primary education (Gonzalez *et al.*,2019; Vladimir *et al.*,2023). The Chi-square test showed a significant relationship between all the meal choices and educational qualification, while the correlation indicates that there is a significant association between soup and starchy

morsel dishes and alcoholic beverages with an insignificant association with other menu choices. this finding may conflict with Gonzalez *et al.,*(2019) on the choice of healthy food given its significant association with alcoholic beverages and starchy morsel dishes, notwithstanding, there is a relationship between the education of customers and the preference for food consumed at destinations. Education attainment especially at the graduate level place the customers on an advantage of making choice based on knowledge and familiarity with chosen food and beverage.

CONCLUSION

The dimensions of customers' food preferences are majorly tilted towards Socio-demographic variables of age, gender, marital status, income and educational qualifications as revealed from the result of study. Eating practice and pattern is generally based on the food preference and choice decision. The level of preference for the dishes presented differ from age to marital status. It is noticeably that soup and starchy morsel and assorted rice dishes are more preferred over other dishes. Non-alcoholic beverages are generally most preferred over alcoholic beverages. This establish the fact that individuals involved in leisure activities may also be health conscious, cultural and religious in their food or meal preference.

Recommendations
Based on the research findings, the following are recommended;
Customers demography should be an indicator in meal planning and preparation and marketing at ecotourism destinations.
Traditional meals are preferred by aged(elderly) and female genders, consequently traditional or indigenous meals of customers should always be included in the menu especially when more female and elderly customers are expected as visitor at destinations.

Contribution to Knowledge.
The research shall fill a gap in knowledge and enriched future researches with increase in information on socio demographic profile of customer food preferences at ecotourism destinations, particularly in South Western, Nigeria.

Limitation

The study is limited to South Western, Nigeria, it did not capture the entire nation, further studies should be done on the entire nation and on other emerging countries of the world to explore tourist pattern of food preference for foreign, traditional or indigenous foods. The future empirical study should also include local and foreign tourist visiting ecotourism destinations.

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