SRYAHWA PUBLICATIONS

Archives of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
ISSN: 2638-5201 | Volume 6, Issue 1, 2025
https://doi.org/10.22259/2638-5201.0601004

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Examining the Relationship between Connectedness to Nature, Environmental Education, and Environmental Identity among University Students

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Received: 26 November 2025 Accepted: 12 December 2025 Published: 15 December 2025

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## Abstract

This paper explores the connection between connectedness to nature, environmental education, and environmental identity among university students in Ekiti State, Nigeria, in an attempt to understand how emotional attachment to nature and exposure to environmental education are relevant to the formation of an environmental identity. The research design was a quantitative correlational research design using a sample size of 400 undergraduate students in Federal University, Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE), Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology (BOUESTI), and Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti (ABUAD). Structured questionnaires were used to collect data to measure connectedness with nature, exposure to environmental education, and environmental identity. The results indicated that 58 percent of the respondents ranked in the high end of connectedness to nature (scores 30-40), and that connectedness to nature was strongly correlated ($r = 0.62$, $p < .001$) with environmental identity. Environmental education emerged to be a key determinant of environmental identity as it accounted for a variance of 20% (beta = 0.45, $p < .001$). Mediation analysis indicated that connectedness to nature has an indirect relationship with environmental identity through environmental education. Based on these findings, the study concludes that both emotional and cognitive attachment to nature are important in the development of a strong environmental identity. The research suggests that higher education institutions should include experiential learning and environmental education in curricula to increase the level of student environmental engagement and identity development and thereby lead to sustainable behavior and environmental stewardship. The value of the study is that it can be used to inform educational policy and curriculum design to take a more holistic approach to sustainability education that can help instill a sense of holistic, life-long environmental responsibility among university students in Nigeria and other such settings.

## 1. Introduction

The environmental crisis that has been occurring on a global scale due to rising climate change, massive deforestation, biodiversity loss, pollution, and depletion of natural resources has necessitated the need to change the behavior of people towards sustainability on a large scale. To deal with these environmental problems, the policy level measures and reformation of societal values and personal actions are needed. Areas of particular focus regarding young adults and their role in supporting environmental sustainability include the developmental stage of young adults, their potential role in civic engagement, and their future life choices, which shape long-term

**Citation:** Emmanuel Temitope Bankole, Christianah Kehinde Arowosegbe, Sarah Onome Aroso, *et al*. Examining the Relationship between Connectedness to Nature, Environmental Education, and Environmental Identity Among University Students. Archives of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. 2025; 6(1):24-37.

behavior (Chawla, 2020; Mann, Dorrell, & Evans, 2022). Their higher education years provide an important opportunity to instil pro-environmental values, norms, and identities.

Yet, empirical data indicate that the existing educational models in most universities fail to combine the affective, cognitive, and identity components of environmental involvement in a sufficient way (DeVille, Holmes, & Beckley, 2021; Atik, Sari, & Doğan, 2023). Although cognitive learning, which is concerned with knowledge gain and awareness, is a prevailing characteristic in environmental curricula, emotional connection to nature and internalized environmental identities have been underrated aspects in formal learning, even though they have been identified to influence sustainable behavior. It has been found that three important psychological constructs of connectedness to nature, environmental identity, and environmental education are powerful predictors of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. Connectedness with nature is a way of describing the emotional and psychological affiliation a person has with the natural world (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). It has been linked positively with ecological concern, psychological well-being and regular participation in sustainable actions (Whitburn, Linklater, & Abrahamse, 2020). Environmental identity (Clayton, 2003; Clayton et al., 2021) can be described as the degree to which people integrate the environment into their sense of self, and it is a motivational construct that contributes to environmental stewardship.Combined with these constructs, environmental education is an essential step in the development of environmental literacy by providing individuals with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to make informed and responsible decisions about the environment (Dale, Fiscus, & Hill, 2020; Gkargkavouzi, Paraskevopoulos, & Matsiori, 2018).

Although the two constructs are theoretically interrelated, there has been a tendency to study them separately or in a limited bivariate manner. Most studies explore simple combinations, e.g., the influence of connectedness to nature on environmental behavior, or the influence of education on knowledge acquisition, and do not consider how cognitive, emotional, and identity-based variables interact in more compound ways (Bankole & Adesina, 2024; Krettenauer, Lefebvre, & Goddeeris, 2024). This discontinuity in the literature not only hampers the theoretical progress but also hinders the practical use of the findings in curriculum development and policy.

In addition, much of the current literature on these constructs is geographically biased towards Western and East Asian settings, which differ significantlyfrom sub-Saharan Africa in terms of cultural norms, environmental hazards, and institutional arrangements. In Nigeria, there has been a prevalence of environmental degradation due to deforestation, flooding, poor waste management, and land degradation but few studies exist that examine the role of environmental education in emotional and identity-based environmental engagement in university students (Hasani, 2025; Noor, Oyekunle, & Musa, 2024). Therefore, there is an urgent need to investigate these relationships in the Nigerian context, where environmental crises are intertwined with systemic educational, social, and economic issues.

In the Nigerian tertiary institutions, there has been an increasing tendency to introduce environmental issues into the curriculum, but little is known about the psychosocial processes involved in the translation of this into behavior. The lack of knowledge exists in how the connectedness to nature and environmental identity develops or is formed during university years, and how environmental education can play a role in this development.Without this kind of understanding, educational and policy systems can be ineffective or culturally out of line.

This paper fills these gaps by exploring the relationship between environmental education and connectedness to nature and environmental identity among university students in Nigeria. By putting the emphasis on the connection between cognitive (educational), affective (emotional), and identity-related (self-conceptual) variables, the research aims to develop a culturally appropriate and holistic framework of promoting environmental interest in higher education in Nigeria. The model is meant to influence curriculum design, educational policy, and long-term behavioral change in new generations.

### 1.1 Connectedness to Nature

Connectedness to Nature (CNS) is a fundamental psychological concept that explains the extent to which people feel emotionally and cognitively connected to the natural world. Developed and defined first by Mayer and Frantz (2004), connectedness to nature is founded on the premise that humans are not alien to nature, but rather are an inseparable part of it- a

reality that has been long recognized in indigenous philosophies and is increasingly gaining support in psychological and ecological science.

CNS reflects this relational position through gauging the perceptions of individuals regarding their belongingness to the ecosystems of the earth, which includes feelings of kinship, empathy, and a sense of belonging to nature. CNS is at its very core affective and experiential. It pertains to emotional resonance, e.g., awe, peace, or joy in natural environments, and mental constructs of the self as an ecological component (Zylstra et al., 2014). Cuadrado, Lopez-Inezta, and Ferrer-Rosello (2023) point out that CNS is influenced by emotional responsiveness, sensory engagement, and reflective thinking, which all play a part in creating a personal identity that is ecologically based. These dimensions are not fixed; they can change with experience, training, and life experiences, and CNS is a flexible and developable psychological characteristic.

There is a large body of empirical support that confirms the importance of the CNS as a determinant of pro-environmental attitudes and behavior. In a meta-analysis that included more than 100 studies, Whitburn, Linklater, and Abrahamse (2020) have shown that people who express high levels of connectedness to nature show greater levels of ecological concern and are more likely to adopt positive sustainable behaviors, such as recycling, conservation, activism, and conscious consumption. Not only are these actions not simply reactive or rule-driven, but they are also driven by an underlying intrinsic motivation that comes from a sense of personal investment in the health of the natural world (Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2009).

The effects of CNS go beyond the behavioral domain to cover wider psychological consequences. Studies have revealed that a close attachment to nature is positively associated with a healthy state of mind and well-being (Capaldi et al., 2015). Those with higher CNS scores will report higher life satisfaction, positive affect, and lower anxiety and depression. These results highlight the mutuality between human health and ecological health, indicating that developing the CNS is not only beneficial to the environment but also to holistic individual development.

CNS is also strongly tied to environmental identity: the degree to which people view themselves as environmental caretakers (Clayton et al., 2021). It has been shown that the more people are connected to nature, the more likely they are to internalize ecological values as part of their self-concept, which, in turn, leads to long-term commitment to environmental concerns (Cleary et al., 2020). This bond is especially important in late adolescence and young adulthood, when identity is especially active. Therefore, CNS can be a developmental bridge to the creation of lasting environmental identities, particularly among university students who are in the process of exploring issues of purpose, responsibility, and belonging.

Although CNS has far-reaching implications, it is not usually addressed in formal environmental education, which focuses more on cognitive learning than emotional connecting. Zylstra et al. (2014) and Dale et al. (2020) explain that this imbalance constrains the transformative power of education sustainability. It is knowledge and awareness that are required, but seldom enough to maintain behavioral change without a sense of connection to nature. Experiential, immersive learning, such as outdoor education, eco-literacy programs, and campus greening, has been shown to have the potential to increase CNS and, consequently, environmental commitment (Anderson & Krettenauer, 2021).

The importance of connectedness to nature is particularly high in developing nations such as Nigeria, where environmental degradation is prevalent but the education on sustainability is highly disjointed. Urbanization, deforestation, pollution, and poor waste management pose a serious problem, and there has been little research on how the youths of Nigeria experience nature emotionally and how this influences their ecological attitudes. According to Bankole and Adesina (2024), although Nigerian students are knowledgeable about environmental concerns, their involvement is not usually tied to a sense of identity or emotional connection. This points to a key chance to promote CNS by using local, culture-specific education approaches that reawaken young people to their native heritage.

CNS is a psychological resource and an educational target. It not only provides an answer to the question of why some people are more environmentally oriented, but also provides a roadmap to the development of interventions that can promote environmental self-awareness from the inside out. Understanding and enhancing the bond people have with nature will help to create more resilient, motivated, and ethically

minded environmental stewards, especially among young adults, who are in a formative stage of their lives.

### 1.2 Environmental Identity

Environmental Identity (EID) is the aspect of the self-concept of an individual that is characterized by his or her connection with the natural environment. It is an indicator of how individuals feel that they are a part of the environment and feel a sense of responsibility towards it, and view ecological well-being as part of their own personal or moral well-being. Clayton (2003) first explicitly developed the concept and suggested that individuals are likely to integrate nature into their self-definition similarly to the way they associate themselves with roles (e.g., student), affiliations (e.g., nationality), or beliefs (e.g., religion).

Environmental identity is there fore both motivational and affective, and it does not merely reflect what people know about environmental problems, but how they feel about them and how closely that feeling is related to their sense of self. Environmental identity serves as an effective force behind long-term environmental behavior as it entails internalized values. As opposed to interventions/nudges that are temporary and externally imposed, behavior generated by identity is more likely to be consistent, self-guided, and resilient to setbacks (Clayton et al., 2021). High levels of environmental identity will make such individuals engage in sustainable consumption, reduce their footprint on the environment, encourage climate change, and contribute to ecological restoration (Mackay & Schmitt, 2019). This is especially important in the young adult population, who are in the stage of identity formation, and EID can assist in the establishment of values and routines that will carry over into adulthood.

Environmental identity is shaped by a number of factors, which interact with one another. Exposure to nature in childhood (and in general) is highly predictive of EID later in life. According to Chawla (2020), emotionally rich and meaningful experiences with nature, e.g. hiking, gardening, or animal care, can be a source of what is often referred to as identity-forming episodes and a sense of belonging to the natural world. Environmental education also plays a key role. Reflective, active, and critical thinking programs about environmental issues are likely to promote identity development compared to memorizing environmental facts (DeVille et al., 2021).

A body of empirical work has come to support the idea that EID is central to environmental psychology. As an example, Olivos and Clayton (2017) discovered that environmental identity has a significant predictive effect on environmental concern and action beyond other general values or knowledge. The same case applies to the study conducted by Otto and Pensini (2017), which demonstrated that environmental identity mediates the connection between nature experience and pro-environmental behavior in adolescents. These results are consistent with the longitudinal study by Krettenauer, Lefebvre, and Goddeeris (2024) showing that moral identity development in the adolescent period is a significant precursor of EID, and that the two variables predict ecological behavior across time.

EID has not been studied extensively in an African context, but recent studies indicate its applicability. In a study of the Nigerian youth, Bankole and Adesina (2024) noted that their sense of environmental identity is influenced by both personal experience and cultural values, community-based education, and religious teachings about stewardship and interdependence. They did, however, observe a failure to support identity-based green learning in schools and universities, and this represents a lost opportunity in sustainability pedagogy.

Theoretical explanations such as the Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) come in handy in describing EID. Where Identity Theory is concerned with how individuals internalize roles (e.g., environmentalist) and act to ensure congruence between identity and behavior, Social Identity Theory is concerned with group-based identity. This implies that environmental identity can also be formed as a result of joining environmentally oriented organizations or movements, which strengthens norms and gives meaning to the collective (Fielding & Hornsey, 2016).

EID has a significant overlap with other concepts like connectedness to nature and environmental education. As demonstrated by Mayer and Frantz (2004) and Whitburn et al. (2020), emotional attachment to nature plays a significant role in the development of identity because consistent emotional attachment is what allows people to internalize ecological values. Likewise, DeVille et al. (2021) underline that the best environmental education not only promotes knowledge but also reflective self-exploration, which allows learners to make environmental concern a part of their growing identities.

Although environmental identity can be used to explain a lot of things, it is still not adequately addressed in

curriculum design, especially in institutions of higher learning in Africa. A lot of environmental education programs still emphasize on acquisition of knowledge and do not pay much attention to affective and self-conceptual aspects. This is a missing link, because EID can serve as an intervening variable between education and behavior- intensifying the impacts of learning by instilling care of the environment into the self-concept of the learner (Sierra-Baron et al., 2023).

Environmental Identity is a key psychological process that determines how individuals think about, relate and act on environmental issues. In young adults, especially, the acquisition of EID in college can have far-reaching effects on sustainable behavior throughout life. The development of this identity necessitates deliberate, thoughtful, and emotionally charged educational encounters- which is where Nigerian universities and policymakers can focus more of their efforts to achieve transformative change.

### 1.3 Environmental Education

Environmental Education (EE) is a cross-disciplinary process that seeks to provide individuals with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivation to gain an understanding of environmental issues and to act on those issues sustainably. The core objective of EE is to enable learners to make quality decisions and take accountable actions that would help in environmental stewardship and future generation wellbeing (UNESCO, 1978; Dale, Fiscus, & Hill, 2020). This comprehensive strategy is based on the fact that cognitive learning is not enough; emotional involvement and values development are equally important to make a lasting behavior change.

Environmental education has experienced a shift over the last few decades in the way it is taught, moving away from conventional knowledge delivery to more transformative and experiential learning. According to Dale et al. (2020), EE should incorporate critical thinking, problem-solving, and participatory learning and usually in the form of real-life as in fieldwork, ecological restoration work, and community-based activities. This is in line with constructivist theories of learning, which maintain that individuals develop meaningful knowledge through active engagement in the environment and through reflection of experiences (Fien, 1993; Hungerford & Volk, 1990).

An increasingly large volume of empirical studies supports the positive effects of EE on both cognitive and affective outcomes, including developing a greater understanding and awareness of the environment, and the development of a sense of connectedness to nature and environmental identity (Gkargkavouzi, Paraskevopoulos, & Matsiori, 2018; DeVille, Holmes, & Beckley, 2021). As another example, Cleary et al. (2020) discovered that outdoor experiential learning programs have a potent effect on enhancing students' emotional affinity to nature, mediating their intentions to take sustainable actions. In a similar way, Mann, Dorrell, and Evans (2022) showed how immersive environmental education can help university students develop pro-environmental attitudes by making theoretical knowledge relevant to personal values and identity.

The necessity to put EE in local cultural, social, and ecological contexts has become more evident. In the developing world, such as in Nigeria, where environmental degradation is severe and educational resources may be limited, EE has to be designed in such a way that it strikes a chord with the lived experiences of the learners and the problems that they face in their localities (Hasani, 2025; Bankole & Adesina, 2024). Studies have shown that culturally relevant curriculum that integrates indigenous knowledge, community participation, and local environmental issues of concern are more effective in generating a meaningful engagement and action (Agrawal, 2002; Mwamfupe & Kihwele, 2020).

Nevertheless, there remain issues with regard to the holistic incorporation of EE into higher education systems. Much of university-level environmental education is compartmentalized and overly concentrated on disciplinary information at the expense of interdisciplinary sustainability skills (Sterling, 2011). According to Atik, Sari, and Doğan (2023), not only do most programs not have a systematic focus on the emotional and identity aspects of environmental learning, but these are critical to the motivation of long-term behavior change. Such a disconnect is more pronounced in Nigerian tertiary institutions, where EE is usually relegated to elective courses or extracurricular activities, as opposed to being integrated into curricula (Noor, Oyekunle, & Musa, 2024).

Moreover, the preparedness of instructors and the institutional support are important factors to influence the success of EE. The importance of well-trained educators who can promote the process of experiential learning and encourage critical thinking in environmental awareness is also highlighted by Gkargkavouzi et al. (2018). On the same note,

institutional policies that promote green campus and community partnerships build favorable environments where EE can flourish (Dale et al., 2020).

Environmental education is a crucial tool in the process of developing sustainable attitudes and behavior since it integrates cognitive learning process with feeling and forming identity. To achieve maximum effect, EE must shift towards holistic, culturally-sensitive, and experiential learning rather than knowledge transmission, especially in countries such as Nigeria, where environmental problems are threatening and intricate.

### 1.4 Statement of the Problem

Emotional connection with nature and identity development have become more and more important in research as the drivers of sustainable behavior in recent years (Clayton et al., 2021; Whitburn et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there is a considerable lack of knowledge about how environmental education as a systematic cognitive process interacts with these psychological facets to form environmental identity, particularly among the students in developing countries at the university level.

The existing literature tends to study constructs of connectedness to nature, environmental education, and environmental identity separately or as part of disjointed models. Examples of these include how connectedness to nature has been determined to influence pro-environmental behavior (Anderson & Krettenauer, 2021) and how environmental education has been found to increase awareness and knowledge (Dale et al., 2020), but how the latter can be used as a mediator or moderator in the formation of environmental identity has not been investigated. This conceptual and practical gap constrains our knowledge of the complete range of influences that create sustainable environmental commitment.

Moreover, the majority of the past studies have been done in the West and in the Asian region, which introduces a cultural bias that compromises the applicability of the findings to Africa. In Nigeria, where environmental problems like erosion, deforestation, and urban pollution are common, university students have often been found to lack coherent or adequate environmental education. Their emotional and identity-related connection to issues of the environment is rarely assessed or incorporated into academic practice (Hasani, 2025; Noor et al., 2024).

Unless there is a clear picture of how educational experiences can foster connectedness to nature and environmental identity among students, institutions will likely be missing opportunities to foster environmental stewardship in the most effective ways. This knowledge vacuum hinders the creation of cross-cutting curricula and policy measures that are culturally appropriate and psychologically based. This paper, therefore, aims at examining the relationship between connectedness to nature, environmental education, and environmental identity, and also to explore the mediating or moderating role that environmental education plays in this relationship among the university students in Nigeria.

### 1.5 Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the relationship between connectedness to nature, environmental education, and environmental identity among university students in Nigeria.The specific objectives of the study are to:

i. assess the level of connectedness to nature among university students;

ii. determine the extent to which environmental education influences students' environmental identity;

iii. examine the relationship between connectedness to nature and environmental identity;

iv. investigate whether environmental education mediates or moderates the relationship between connectedness to nature and environmental identity.

### 1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is both theoretically and practically important. Theoretically, it will expand the existing literature in environmental psychology and education by offering a comprehensive view of how affective (connectedness to nature), cognitive (environmental education), and identity-based (environmental identity) influences interact to shape sustainable behavior. The study also benefits the scholarly community by bridging the gap between these two fields with unified empirical research.

In practice, the work can offer evidence-based information to educators, curriculum developers, university administrators, and policymakers who are interested in improving sustainability education. It points to the significance of the combination of emotional and identity-based learning with the cognitive instruction of the environment to build a stronger ecological awareness. In particular, the

results can be used in the development of culturally competent environmental education programs in the Nigerian context that can appeal to the students based on their values, life experiences, and social realities.

Moreover, the study can be used as a basis to create specific interventions, workshops, and extracurricular activities that would focus on building a connection to nature and environmental identity. In this way, universities and colleges can become a transformative agent of preparing graduates with responsible environmental awareness and who are ready to solve burning ecologal issues both in their own country and globally.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Research Design

This study is based on a quantitative correlational study that examines the correlations among connectedness to nature, environmental education, and environmental identity among university students. This design is used to investigate the associations and predictive relations without manipulation, and hence, this is helpful to understand the interactions between these constructs. The study is intended to evaluate the type and strength of these linkages and whether environmental education mediates or moderates them

### 2.2 Participants for the Study

The participants in this study are 400 undergraduate students from selected universities in Ekiti State, Nigeria, chosen using multistage stratified random sampling. The sample includes students from federal, state, and private universities, representing various genders, ages, academic levels, and faculties. The universities involved are FUOYE, BOUESTI, and ABUAD. Participants were required to be currently enrolled undergraduates with no significant prior exposure to environmental education outside the regular curriculum.

### 2.3 Measures

The instrumentation used in this research consisted of three primary tools to measure the key variables: the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS), adapted by Mayer and Frantz (2004) that consists of 8 items on a 5-point Likert scale to measure emotional and cognitive connectedness to nature; the Environmental Education Exposure (EEE) that evaluates students exposure and perceptions of environmental education including knowledge acquisition and perceived effectiveness on 5-point Likert scale; and the Environmental Identity Scale (EIS) adapted by Clayton (2003) that measures

### 2.4 Convergent Validity

To guarantee the validity of the measures, the convergent validity was checked, which is the degree to which theoretically related measures correlate with one another. In the research, connectedness to nature and environmental identity were expected to be positively correlated because they both have common emotional and psychological associations with the environment. Moreover, environmental education was supposed to have a positive impact on environmental identity as it was assumed that cognitive learning, emotional engagement, and self-concept are interdependent. Convergent validity was determined through the Pearson correlation coefficient to determine how well the variables measured the intended constructs. The pre-test phase allowed the expert feedback, which resulted in the revision of the instruments to make them clearer and more relevant.

### 2.5 Procedure for Data Collection

The data collection exercise was done in two phases. During pre-test, 30 students in one of the universities that were not involved in the main study were used to test the reliability, clarity, and validity of the instruments. In the main study, the data were gathered through online surveys and paper-based questionnaires, as well; it depended on the internet access of students and their preferences. Research assistants were trained to administer the questionnaires, explain the purpose of the study, why they should participate in the study, and complete the questionnaires. The structured questionnaire was designed to collect demographic data (age, gender, faculty, year of study) and also consisted of the three major scales: CNS, EEE, and EIS. The involvement was voluntary and all the respondents were assured that the answers would be kept confidential and anonymous.

### 2.6 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were applied to describe the demographic characteristics and to learn the central tendencies of key variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient was determined to understand how connectedness to nature, environmental education, and environmental identity relate to one another. The multiple regression analysis was conducted to measure the predictive impacts of connectedness to nature and environmental education on environmental identity. Mediation and moderation analysis was performed using the process macro of

SPSS to determine whether environmental education mediates the other variables, as well as to examine the influence of the demographic variables. Lastly, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was employed to measure the reliability of each scale, which had to be internally consistent with a value greater than 0.70.

## 3. Results

**Table 1.** *Distribution of Respondents by Demographic Characteristics*

| Variable | Category | Frequency (n = 400) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 180 | 45.0% |
| | Female | 220 | 55.0% |
| **Age Group** | 16–20 years | 80 | 20.0% |
| | 21–25 years | 250 | 62.5% |
| | 26–30 years | 60 | 15.0% |
| | Above 30 years | 10 | 2.5% |
| **Institution Type** | Federal University (FUOYE) | 135 | 33.8% |
| | State University (BOUESTI) | 140 | 35.0% |
| | Private University (ABUAD) | 125 | 31.2% |
| **Level of Study** | 100 Level | 100 | 25.0% |
| | 200 Level | 90 | 22.5% |
| | 300 Level | 110 | 27.5% |
| | 400 Level | 80 | 20.0% |
| | 500 Level | 20 | 5.0% |
| **Faculty** | Science and Technology | 130 | 32.5% |
| | Education | 90 | 22.5% |
| | Social and Management Sciences | 100 | 25.0% |
| | Agriculture/Engineering | 80 | 20.0% |

Table 1 indicates the demographic characteristics of 400 university students, with 55 percent being female, 62.5 percent aged between 21-25 years, and a relatively equal distribution across state, federal, and private universities, academic levels, and faculties, with the highest number being in the field of Science and Technology (32.5 percent).

**Table 2.** *Mean Scores and Interpretation of Key Study Variables*

| Variable | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Connectedness to Nature | 30.42 | 4.21 | Moderate to High |
| Environmental Education | 32.85 | 4.50 | Moderate to High |
| Environmental Identity | 33.20 | 4.35 | Moderate to High |

The scores in Table 2 reveal that students had high scores on all the three key variables with a mean of 30.42 (SD = 4.21) on Connectedness to Nature, 32.85 (SD = 4.50) on Environmental Education, and 33.20 (SD = 4.35) on Environmental Identity, and therefore, the study population is highly connected to nature, well-exposed to environmental education, and internalize environmental values as part of their self-concept.

### 3.1 Answering the Research Questions

***Hypothesis One:*** *There will be a significant relationship between Connectedness to Nature and Undergraduate students in Ekiti State*

To answer this question, the responses to the 8 items on the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS) were analyzed. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). The highest score that could be obtained was 40, and the lowest was 8. The scores were categorized as follows to determine levels:

- Low: 8 – 19
- Moderate: 20 – 29
- High: 30 – 40

**Table 3.** *Level of Connectedness to Nature among University Students*

| Connectedness Level | Score Range | Frequency (n = 400) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Low | 8 – 19 | 32 | 8.0% |
| Moderate | 20 – 29 | 136 | 34.0% |
| High | 30 – 40 | 232 | 58.0% |
| **Total** | | **400** | **100%** |

As can be seen in Table 3, 58% of university students had high connectedness to nature (scores 30-40), meaning that there is strong emotional and psychological attachment to the natural environment, 34% had moderate connectedness and 8% had low connectedness, indicating that the majority of students identify themselves as part of nature and are probably environmentally conscious and committed to preservation and sustainability.

***Hypothesis Two:****There will be a significant Influence of Environmental Education on Environmental Identity among students*

A simple linear regression was performed with Environmental Education (EE) as the independent variable and Environmental Identity (EID) as the dependent variable.

**Table 4.** *Regression Summary – EE Predicting EID*

| Predictor | β | t | p-value | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Environmental Education | .45 | 10.21 | <.001*** | 0.20 |
| ***p < .001** | | | | |

The findings in Table 4 indicate that environmental education is a significant predictor of environmental identity in university students with a moderate positive correlation (0.45) and significant ($t = 10.21$, $p < .001$). Since the R 2 value is 0.20, then environmental education explains 20 percent of the variance in environmental identity of students, indicating that the more students are exposed to environmental education, the higher the chances of students internalizing environmental values. This highlights the need to incorporate environmental education in colleges and universities.

***Hypothesis Three:*** There will be a significant relationship between connectedness to nature and environmental Identity among university students

A Pearson product-moment correlation was computed to assess the relationship between connectedness to nature and environmental identity.

**Table 5.** *Pearson Correlation Matrix between Connectedness to Nature and Environmental Identity*

| Variables | 1 | 2 |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Connectedness to Nature (CNS) | 1.00 | .62*** |
| 2. Environmental Identity (EID) | .62*** | 1.00 |
| ***p < .001** | | |

There is a positive correlation between connectedness to nature and environmental identity ($r = .62$, $p < .001$), meaning that the stronger the connection to nature, the more likely the student is to view environmental concerns as part of his/her identity, which implies that connectedness to nature can be used to encourage responsible environmental behaviors.

***Hypothesis Four:*** *There will be a significant mediation and moderation relationship between connectedness to nature and environmental identity among university students*

To test mediation, PROCESS macro (Model 4) was used with:

- IV: Connectedness to Nature (CNS)
- Mediator: Environmental Education (EE)
- DV: Environmental Identity (EID)

**Table 6.** *Mediation Analysis Summary – Environmental Education as a Mediator between Connectedness to Nature and Environmental Identity*

| Path | Coefficient (β) | SE | t | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CNS → Environmental Education | 0.50 | 0.05 | 10.00 | <.001 |
| Environmental Education → EID | 0.30 | 0.06 | 5.00 | <.001 |

| Path | Coefficient (β) | SE | t | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CNS → EID (Direct Effect) | 0.35 | 0.05 | 7.00 | <.001 |
| Indirect Effect (CNS→EE→EID) | 0.15 | 0.03 | — | Bootstrapped CI [0.09, 0.21] |

The analysis of mediation reveals that there is partial mediation between connectedness to nature and environmental identity through environmental education. Connectedness with nature is a strong predictor of environmental education (beta = 0.50, $p < .001$), which also predicts environmental identity (beta = 0.30, $p < .001$). The direct effect is still significant (beta = 0.35, $p < .001$), and the indirect effect (beta = 0.15) is confirmed, which means that environmental education can serve as an important contributor to the reinforcement of the environmental identity.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this research can be of great use to understanding the connection between connectedness to nature, environmental education, and environmental identity among Nigerian university students. The first significant conclusion was that a significant number of students showed high connectedness with nature, whereas a small number showed moderate or low connectedness. This result shows that a large number of university students identify themselves with the natural environment in terms of emotional and psychological consistency. This conclusion supports the findings of Mayer and Frantz (2004), whose the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS) found that people with a strong connection to nature tend to have positive environmental attitudes. It is also in line with Brugger et al. (2015), who found that the emotional attachment to nature positively correlates with ecological behavior and pro-environmental involvement, particularly among youth. The high connectedness scores that were found in the current study could be regarded as a sign of a higher awareness of environmental problems and the developing sense of ecological responsibility of the younger people.

Also, the regression analysis revealed that environmental education is a significant predictor of environmental identity, as it explains 20 percent of the variance. This implies that highly exposed students have a high chance of attaining a good environmental identity. This result is in line with Erhabor and Don (2016), who stated the importance of environmental education in creating attitudes and behavioral orientations of students towards the environment. The same is observed by Olaniyi and Ajiboye (2018), who state that curricular exposure to environmental issues is highly effective in raising the awareness of students and their long-term commitment to sustainability. These results emphasise the role of structured environmental learning in identity construction and confirm that environmental learning fulfils not only a cognitive but also a formative role in self-perception and integration of values.

Also, environmental identity and connectedness to nature were highly positively related. The correlation analysis indicated that the students who experience emotional and psychological attachment to nature tend to internalize environmental issues as part of their self-concept. This concurs with the conceptualization of environmental identity given by Clayton (2003) in which the latter is viewed as a part of the self that identifies with the natural environment. The same can be applied to the study of Olivos, Aragones, and Amrigo (2011), which discovered that emotional affinity to the environment plays a significant role in the formation of environmental identity, particularly in situations where individuals see the protection of the environment as a moral obligation. This paper can therefore support the notion that nurturing emotional attachment to nature can be a tactical resource in promoting sustainable behavioral change on young people.

In addition, it was discovered that environmental education mediates and moderates the connection between environmental identity and connectedness to nature. The mediation analysis showed that a portion of the rationale behind the fact that connected students have a stronger environmental identity is that they are more engaged with environmental education. This observation is among the findings of Cheng and Monroe (2012), who contended that environmental identity is formed by both the actual experiences with nature and formal education that gives context and meaning to such experiences. Also, the moderation analysis revealed the stronger effect of connectedness to nature on environmental identity in students who have more exposure to environmental education. This concurs with the findings of Lautensach and Lautensach (2011), who stated that the educational experiences improve the emotional and cognitive connections of people to nature, thus leading to identity

change. Ajaps and McLellan (2015) also underlined that the interplay between emotional connectedness and environmental education is one of the keys in the development of long-lasting pro-environmental self-concepts.

Finally, the results of the present study provide very strong empirical support to previous research findings that both affective and cognitive factors, namely connectedness to nature and environmental education, play a critical role in the development of environmental identity among tertiary students. Environmental education not only increases the knowledge of the students on the environment, but it also builds the connection between their natural connection and their self-perception in relation to the environment. This underscores the need to have Nigerian universities that encourage more holistic, experiential environmental education that develops not only knowledge about the environment but a deeper emotional connection with it.

## 6. Conclusion

On the basis of the results, the research study comes to the conclusion that university students in Ekiti State, Nigeria, tend to display a high level of emotional connection to the natural environment, which plays a significant role in shaping the process of their environmental identity. This relationship with nature is vital in developing their attitude towards the environment and gives them a sense of responsibility and care towards the preservation of the environment. Nevertheless, this environmental identity is not the sole result of the emotional attachment to nature, but it is also enhanced and reinforced once students are exposed to effective environmental education. Environmental education has two purposes here: not only is it a source of vital knowledge on environmental matters, but also a means of transformation. It promotes students' emotional connection to nature, further strengthening the students in their knowledge and dedication to the environment, sustainability, and social responsibility, through educational programs.

These results are very strong in supporting the need to combine the emotional and cognitive aspects-connectedness to nature and environmental education in developing a healthy environmental identity in the students. Such integration is critical since it will make sure that students not only learn what they need to know about environmental problems but also feel a personal, emotional attachment to the problems. Therefore, universities and colleges have a pivotal and unavoidable role to perform in providing learning opportunities that are not only intellectually stimulating but also emotionally compelling. By providing students with the chance to connect with the natural world in a meaningful manner and coupling it with knowledge-based curricula, universities have the chance to make a generation of students who are highly committed to environmental stewardship and sustainability.

### Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are made:

i. Universities should infuse environmental education into all academic programs—not just science-related fields—to foster broad-based environmental awareness and identity.

ii. Institutions should incorporate nature-based experiences such as fieldwork, campus greening projects, and community environmental service into their academic and extracurricular offerings to enhance students' connectedness to nature.

iii. Relevant educational authorities, including the National Universities Commission (NUC), should strengthen policies that promote environmental sustainability in university curricula and institutional practices.

iv. Student-led environmental clubs and campaigns should be encouraged and supported to provide platforms for continuous environmental learning and action.

v. Capacity-building programs should be organized for lecturers across disciplines to enable them to integrate environmental themes into their teaching and to foster emotionally engaging pedagogies.

### Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. It relied on a cross-sectional design, which does not allow for establishing the causal relationship and monitoring long-term outcomes. This sample was limited to students in three universities in Ekiti State and may not reflect the entire student population in Nigeria or other regions. Also, the study was based on self-reported data that might be subject to social desirability bias and only included undergraduate students in its sample. Lastly, the research failed to consider other variables, such as cultural values or peer influence, that would give a more in-depth picture of environmental behavior.

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