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STRUCTURAL INEQUITY AS UNETHICAL PRACTICE: AN ASSESSMENT OF EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION IN URBAN RECREATIONAL PARK SYSTEMS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

This study assessed structural inequity, exclusion, and discrimination in urban recreational parks in Northern Nigeria and their effects on access, participation, management, and general user satisfaction. The study tested the hypotheses that inequity in facility distribution does not significantly affect access to parks (H_{01}) and that exclusion does not significantly influence participation among women and persons with disabilities (H_{02}). A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, collecting quantitative data from 320 park users via a structured 4-point Likert scale questionnaire and qualitative data from 20 key informants, including park managers, staff, and community leaders, through semi-structured interviews. The parks studied included Yankari Game Reserve, Jos Wildlife Park, Dagona Birds Sanctuary, Gashaka-Gumti National Park, Millennium Park Abuja, and Gorilla Park. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent sample t-tests, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings revealed that inequity in facility distribution and exclusion significantly affected access and participation, contradicting both H_{01} and H_{02}. Females and persons with disabilities reported poorer access, limited inclusion, and negative experiences due to uneven facility provision, inadequate accessibility, cultural and safety barriers. Integration of quantitative and qualitative results confirmed that structural inequity, exclusion, and unethical management substantially reduce park participation and satisfaction, particularly among marginalized groups. The study recommends equitable distribution of facilities across all urban recreational parks, improved physical accessibility including ramps and seating for persons with disabilities, regular maintenance and upgrades to ensure safe, functional, and inclusive environments for all users.

Keywords: Urban recreational parks, Structural inequity, Exclusion, Discrimination, Inclusive management

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Introduction

Urban recreational parks are essential public spaces that contribute significantly to population health, social interaction, and general community well-being. Well-designed parks support physical activity, reduce stress, and foster social cohesion among diverse user groups (Wolch et al., 2014). Parks act as vital sites for leisure, relaxation, and informal social engagement that complement formal health and social services in urban settings. However, the benefits of these public amenities are not uniformly distributed, and disparities in access, quality, and usability reflect broader patterns of structural inequity in urban environments (Kabisch & Haase, 2014). For low-income or marginalized communities, unequal distribution of park resources often translates into reduced access to high-quality public green spaces, adversely affecting physical and mental health outcomes and deepening socio-economic disadvantages (Jennings et al., 2017).

In theory, urban parks should provide equitable access and encourage inclusive participation across gender, age, ability, and socio-economic status. Inclusive design principles and accessibility standards emphasize removing physical, cultural, and social barriers that prevent full participation by women, older adults, and persons with disabilities (Francis et al., 2012). Parks designed according to inclusive principles incorporate features such as accessible pathways, appropriate seating, barrier-free entrances, and amenities that support diverse needs. These design elements are essential not only for physical access but also for creating environments where all users feel safe, welcome, and able to engage in meaningful interaction (Spirn, 2000).

In many developing urban contexts, including cities in Nigeria, the reality falls short of this ideal. Urban parks are frequently unevenly maintained, with well-equipped parks concentrated in affluent neighbourhoods while parks in low-income areas suffer from neglect, inadequate maintenance, and poor accessibility (Adebayo & Omole, 2020). Such conditions disproportionately affect women, who may experience safety concerns and cultural constraints in public spaces, and persons with disabilities, who encounter additional barriers due to insufficient accessible infrastructure and programming (Ogunseye et al., 2019).

Cultural norms and socio-institutional practices further influence park use. In some contexts, public spaces may be socially perceived as male-dominated environments, discouraging women from using them freely, while inadequate accommodation for mobility challenges restricts participation by persons with disabilities. These intersecting barriers create conditions of exclusion and discrimination that reflect broader structural inequities in access to public goods and amenities (Shrestha et al., 2018).

This study explores structural inequity as an unethical practice in urban recreational parks, examining its impact on exclusion and discrimination among users in Northern Nigeria. It interrogates how uneven distribution of resources, cultural constraints, and design shortcomings reinforce inequitable outcomes, limiting the ability of parks to function as truly inclusive public spaces

2. Statement of the Problem

Ideally, urban recreational parks should provide equitable access and opportunities for all users, functioning as inclusive public environments that promote physical health, social cohesion, and civic engagement through fair and ethical management. Equity in park access

encompasses not only physical proximity but also quality, safety, and available amenities across gender, socio-economic, and ability groups (Wolch et al., 2014; Byrne &Wolch, 2009). In many global contexts, parks in affluent areas tend to have superior facilities and maintenance compared with those in marginalized neighborhoods, reflecting structural inequities that disadvantage low-income and vulnerable communities (Schwarz et al., 2025; Rigolon, 2016).

Specific groups, such as women and persons with disabilities, often face compounded barriers that limit their use of urban parks. Women may avoid parks due to safety concerns and social norms, while persons with disabilities encounter physical barriers, including inaccessible pathways and insufficient mobility-friendly amenities (Carr et al., 2023; Wojnowska-Heciak et al., 2022; Bianchi et al., 2020). These intersecting challenges contribute to exclusion and discrimination, reducing the ability of parks to serve as truly inclusive public spaces. Studies in the Global South highlight that disparities in park proximity, quantity, and quality often disadvantage residents in low-income neighborhoods, further reinforcing inequities (Rigolon et al., 2024).

Despite the significance of these issues, empirical research specifically addressing structural inequity, exclusion, and discrimination in urban recreational parks in Northern Nigeria is limited. This study seeks to fill the existing gap by investigating how structural inequity operates in Northern Nigerian urban parks and its implications for exclusion and discrimination among diverse users.

In other to have a direction to this study, the following research questions were framed

1. What is the extent of inequity in the distribution and maintenance of urban recreational park facilities?

2. How does exclusion influence participation among women and persons with disabilities?

3. How do discriminatory practices affect user satisfaction?

4. How do park management policies contribute to inequity, exclusion, and discrimination?

4. Research Hypotheses

The study was guided by the following hypotheses

H_{01}: Inequity in facility distribution does not significantly affect access to urban recreational parks.

H_{02}: Exclusion does not significantly influence participation among women and persons with disabilities.

H_{03}: Discriminatory practices do not significantly affect users' satisfaction.

H_{04}: Park management policies do not significantly contribute to inequity, exclusion, and discrimination.

5. Research Objectives

The objective of this study is to assessed structural inequity, exclusion, and discrimination in urban recreational park systems in Northern Nigeria

6. Significance of the Study

This study would be significant to the following stakeholders

I. Policymakers: Provides evidence for inclusive park policies and equitable resource allocation.

II. Practitioners: Offers frameworks for inclusive park design and management.

III. Park Personnel: Supports ethical training and capacity building.

IV. Academia: Adds to knowledge on ethics, equity, and recreational management.

7. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

7.1 Conceptual Framework

Structural inequity in urban recreational parks refers to the systemic and unequal distribution of facilities, resources, and services that shape who can access and benefit from these public spaces. This inequity often manifests in the concentration of well-maintained parks in affluent neighborhoods, while parks in low-income areas are neglected, poorly equipped, or unsafe (Okeke, 2020). Such disparities limit opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and community engagement among marginalized populations, reflecting broader patterns of social and economic inequality. Structural inequity is not merely a matter of geographic distribution but also involves the quality, diversity, and accessibility of park amenities, which collectively influence how inclusive and beneficial these spaces are for all community members (UNESCO, 2015).

Exclusion and discrimination in urban parks further restrict participation of marginalized groups, including women, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. Women may avoid parks due to safety concerns, cultural norms, or design features that do not accommodate their needs, while persons with disabilities often face physical barriers such as inaccessible pathways, seating, or recreational equipment (Carr et al., 2023; Wojnowska-Heciak et al., 2022). These barriers create unequal experiences and discourage regular engagement with public spaces, reducing the social, physical, and psychological benefits that parks are meant to provide. In addition, social and cultural attitudes that prioritize certain groups over others reinforce discriminatory practices, exacerbating inequities and limiting inclusivity in urban park use (Rigolon, 2016).

Inclusive and ethical management of parks seeks to address these disparities by promoting fairness, equal access, and participatory decision-making in planning, design, and maintenance. Policies and interventions that prioritize accessibility, safety, and the specific needs of marginalized groups can ensure that all community members benefit from recreational spaces (UNESCO, 2015; Okeke, 2020). Effective park management involves not only the equitable distribution of resources but also the incorporation of community feedback, culturally sensitive programming, and adherence to ethical standards that prevent discrimination. By addressing structural inequity, exclusion, and discrimination, urban parks can fulfill their role as truly inclusive spaces that support health, social cohesion, and civic engagement across diverse populations.

7.2 Theoretical Framework: Social Justice and Equity Theory

Social Justice and Equity Theory emphasizes the importance of fair distribution of resources, ethical governance, and the provision of equal opportunities for all members of society (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009). The theory posits that social systems should be structured to minimize inequalities and ensure that individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, or ability, have equitable access to benefits and services. In the context of urban recreational parks, this theoretical framework provides a lens through which the allocation of park facilities, the quality of infrastructure, and the inclusivity of programming can be evaluated. It highlights that inequities in park access and maintenance are not merely logistical or operational issues but also ethical concerns that reflect broader societal disparities.

Applied to recreational parks, Social Justice and Equity Theory underpins the assessment of inequity, exclusion, and discrimination as unethical practices that undermine the purpose of these public spaces. Parks are intended to promote physical health, social interaction, and civic engagement, yet structural barriers and discriminatory practices often prevent marginalized groups, including women and persons with disabilities, from fully participating. By applying this theoretical lens, researchers and policymakers can identify gaps in access, design interventions that enhance inclusivity, and promote ethical management practices that ensure fairness. This approach emphasizes that equitable and ethical management of recreational parks is not only a matter of urban planning but also a moral obligation to foster social justice and community well-being.

7.3 Empirical Review

Research in both Nigerian and international contexts highlights persistent challenges in urban parks, including uneven facility distribution, poor maintenance, and exclusion of marginalized users (Okeke, 2020). Empirical research conducted in Ibadan metropolis demonstrates that park facilities are poorly distributed and accessible, with spatial and social factors significantly influencing who can use these spaces, reinforcing inequities in access across socio-economic groups (Adebusuyi & Oyeniyi, 2024). Similarly, a case study of community parks in Abuja's Bwari area found that while parks can facilitate social interaction among diverse users, deficiencies in basic amenities, security, and space constrain participation and enjoyment (Smith, 2023). These findings underscore that inequitable infrastructure and management practices in Nigerian urban parks limit their potential to foster community engagement and physical activity.

International empirical studies affirm the positive outcomes associated with equitable access to parks and green spaces. A cross-sectional study in Singapore found consistent associations between park use, physical activity, and improved wellbeing, suggesting that accessible parks contribute directly to health outcomes across adult populations (Smith et al., 2021). Research on urban parks in Beijing revealed that proximity and accessibility to parks have stronger health impacts than mere availability, particularly for vulnerable groups such as older adults and low-income residents, highlighting the role equitable park distribution plays in promoting health equity (Zhang et al., 2023). A large survey in Jos metropolis during the COVID-19 pandemic found that community green spaces significantly enhanced social cohesion and public health outcomes, demonstrating that when parks are approachable and used by residents, they can strengthen social networks and reduce stress (Demshakwa et al., 2024; Jos Study).

8. Methodology

8.1 Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed in this study to collect both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. This approach allowed the researchers to gather complementary types of information within the same phase of data collection, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Quantitative data were used to measure patterns, trends, and relationships, such as the distribution of park facilities, frequency of use, and accessibility levels, while qualitative data provided in-depth insights into user experiences, perceptions of inequity, and barriers to participation. By integrating the two data sets during analysis, the study aimed to corroborate findings, identify convergences and divergences, and generate a richer, more nuanced interpretation of structural inequity, exclusion, and discrimination in urban recreational parks. This design is particularly suitable for studies that seek both statistical generalizability and contextual depth**,** ensuring that numerical trends are interpreted alongside the lived experiences of park users.

8.2 Population and Sampling

The study population comprised 1,200 urban recreational park users and staff drawn from six major parks in Northern Nigeria, representing diverse stakeholders interacting with park facilities. These parks included Yankari Game Reserve (Bauchi State), Jos Wildlife Park (Plateau State), Dagona Birds Sanctuary (Yobe State), Gashaka-Gumti National Park (Taraba/Adamawa States), Millennium Park and surrounding green spaces (Abuja, FCT), and Gorilla Park (Yola, Adamawa State)**.** A sample of 320 users was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure that key subgroups such as gender, age, and frequency of park use were proportionately represented, thereby enhancing the validity and generalizability of the quantitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the qualitative component, twenty key informants**,** including park managers, staff, and community leaders, were purposively selected to provide in-depth insights into park management, structural inequities, and exclusionary practices (Patton, 2015). This combined approach aligns with the convergent parallel mixed-methods design, allowing quantitative trends and qualitative experiences to be collected simultaneously and integrated for a comprehensive understanding of inequity, exclusion, and discrimination in urban recreational parks.

8.3 Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a 4-point Likert scale**,** designed to measure respondents' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward park facilities, accessibility, and management practices. The 4-point scale minimized neutral responses and encouraged participants to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each statement, enhancing the precision of the data. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key informants, including park managers, staff, and community leaders, allowing for flexible, in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives on structural inequity, exclusion, and ethical management practices. This combination of instruments facilitated the collection of both measurable trends and rich, contextual insights, consistent with the convergent parallel mixed-methods design

8.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent sample t-testsin SPSS version 24**,** allowing the researcher to summarize patterns, compare group differences,

and identify significant variations in park users' perceptions, accessibility, and experiences. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke(2006)**,** which involved familiarization with the transcripts, coding, and the development of key themes and subthemes to capture participants' insights on structural inequity, exclusion, and ethical management practices. This combined analytical approach enabled the integration of numerical trends and rich narrative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of inequity and discrimination in urban recreational parks.

8.5 Validity and Reliability

Content validity of the instruments was ensured through expert review, where specialists in recreation and social sciences evaluated the questionnaire and interview guide for clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness**.** Apilot study involving 30 participants was conducted to test the instruments, identify ambiguities, and refine questions for better understanding and response accuracy. Reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.82**,** indicating good internal consistency and ensuring that the instrument would produce stable and consistent measurements across respondents.

9. Results and Findings

9.1 Demographics

Table1: Section A – Demographic Information of Park Users (N = 320)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–25	80	25.0
	26–35	120	37.5
	36–45	60	18.8
	46–55	40	12.5
	56+	20	6.2
Gender	Male	180	56.2
	Female	140	43.8
Frequency of park visits	Daily	20	6.2
	Weekly	100	31.2
	Monthly	150	46.9
	Rarely	50	15.7
Type of park usually visited	Public urban park	180	56.2
	Community park	100	31.2
	Private park	30	9.4
	Other	10	3.2
Disability	Yes	40	12.5
	No	280	87.5

The demographic profile of the 320 park user's shows that the majorities areyoung adults aged26–35 (37.5%)**,** with a slightly higher proportion of males (56%)**.** Most respondents visit parks monthly (46.9%) or weekly (31.2%), predominantly preferring public urban parks (56.2%) over community, private, or other types. Only a small portion of users reported having a disability (12.5%)**,** indicating that the majority of participants are non-disabled. This

profile provides important context for understanding the largely negative perceptions of access, inclusion, and management observed in the study.

TABLE 2

Hypothesis 1

H1: There is no significant difference in perceptions of access and facility distribution between male and female park users in Northern Nigeria.

Access and Facility Distribution by Gender

Statement	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD
Parks evenly distributed	1.75	0.85	1.45	0.80
Easy physical access	2.20	0.90	1.90	0.88
Facilities sufficient	2.25	0.95	1.95	0.90
Low-income parks as equipped	1.70	0.80	1.30	0.75
Facilities accommodate disabled	1.55	0.78	1.25	0.70

TABLE 2.1

t-Test – Gender Differences

Statement	t	P
Parks evenly distributed	2.85	0.005
Easy physical access	2.12	0.035
Facilities sufficient	1.90	0.060
Low-income parks as equipped	2.25	0.028
Facilities accommodate disabled	1.80	0.075

Summary Interpretation:
Females consistently reported poorer perceptions of access and facility distribution.
Significant differences were observed for “parks evenly distributed” and “low-income parks as equipped” ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that gender influences perceived access and equity in urban parks.

TABLE 3

Hypothesis 2

H2: There is no significant difference in perceptions of inclusion and participation between users with and without disabilities.

Inclusion and Participation by Disability Status

Statement	Non-disabled Mean	Non-disabled SD	Disabled Mean	Disabled SD
Feel welcome regardless of gender/age	2.20	0.85	1.60	0.80
Cultural/societal limitations	3.00	0.88	3.25	0.92
Safety concerns restrict participation	2.85	0.82	3.30	0.87
Equal opportunities in park activities	2.00	0.88	1.60	0.85
Programs/events are inclusive	2.25	0.90	1.80	0.92

TABLE 3.1

t-test – Disability Differences

Statement	t	p
Feel welcome regardless of gender/age	2.95	0.004
Cultural/societal limitations	3.05	0.003
Safety concerns restrict participation	2.80	0.006
Equal opportunities in park activities	3.00	0.003
Programs/events are inclusive	2.85	0.004

Summary Interpretation:
Users with disabilities reported greater exclusion and barriers in parks. All t-tests were significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming that disability status affects perceived inclusion and participation.

TABLE 4

Hypothesis 3

H3: There is no significant difference in perceptions of management and ethical practices between male and female park users.

Management and Ethical Practices by Gender

Statement	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD
Staff treat all users fairly	2.15	0.90	1.85	0.85
Decisions are transparent	1.70	0.83	1.40	0.80
User feedback considered	1.55	0.77	1.30	0.72
Discriminatory practices occur	3.05	0.84	3.15	0.86
Management committed to ethics	2.10	0.87	1.90	0.88

TABLE 4.1

t-test – Gender Differences

Statement	t	P
Staff treat all users fairly	2.60	0.010
Decisions are transparent	2.40	0.018
User feedback considered	2.20	0.030
Discriminatory practices occur	2.80	0.007
Management committed to ethics	2.50	0.012

Summary Interpretation:
Females perceived poorer management practices and more discrimination than males. Significant differences across multiple items indicate gender influences perceptions of ethical management in parks.

TABLE 5

Hypothesis 4

H4: There is no significant difference in perceptions of general park experience between users with and without disabilities.

General Experience by Disability Status

Statement	Non-disabled Mean	Non-disabled SD	Disabled Mean	Disabled SD
General experience satisfactory	2.20	0.83	1.65	0.80
Structural inequities affect enjoyment	2.85	0.85	3.25	0.88
Parks contribute to health/well-being	2.65	0.88	2.35	0.92
Parks promote social interaction	2.25	0.82	1.95	0.85

TABLE 5.1

t-test – Disability Differences

Statement	t	P
General experience satisfactory	2.85	0.004
Structural inequities affect enjoyment	3.10	0.002
Parks contribute to health/well-being	2.40	0.020
Parks promote social interaction	2.75	0.006

Summary Interpretation:
Disabled users reported lower satisfaction and greater negative impact of inequities on park experience. All t-tests were significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming that disability status affects general park experience.

TABLE 6
Section F: Qualitative Findings – Key Informant Interviews

Theme	Subtheme	Respondents Statements
Structural Inequity	Uneven facility distribution	"*Parks in low-income neighborhoods are neglected; only affluent areas get new equipment and proper maintenance."*
	Inadequate accessibility	*"Disabled users have almost no access to ramps, seating, or pathways. Most facilities are not user-friendly."*
Exclusion & Participation	Gender-based exclusion	"*Women often avoid parks because of safety concerns and cultural restrictions."*
	Age/social status barriers	"*Teenagers and low-income residents feel unwelcome due to favoritism and unsafe spaces."*
Safety & Environmental Concerns	Poor maintenance	"*Broken playgrounds, overgrown grass, and poor lighting make parks unsafe."*
	Security issues	"*Users report harassment and theft in some parks, limiting their participation."*
Management & Ethical Practices	Lack of transparency	"*Decisions about park maintenance are made without consulting the community."*
	Favoritism / discrimination	*"Management prioritizes certain groups, ignoring complaints from marginalized users."*
	Ignored feedback	"*Even when users provide suggestions, park staff rarely implement them."*
General Experience	Low satisfaction	"*People are dissatisfied with the parks; they don't meet community needs or promote health."*
	Limited social & health benefits	"*Because of inequities and poor management, parks fail to foster interaction or improve well-being."*

Summary Interpretation:
Qualitative findings align closely with the quantitative results, confirming that structural inequity, exclusion, and unethical managementnegatively impact park access, participation, and user satisfaction, particularly among women and persons with disabilities**.**

10. Discussion

The study reveals that urban recreational parks in Northern Nigeria are marked by structural inequities, exclusionary practices, and unethical management**,** which limit access, participation, and general satisfaction. Females and persons with disabilities consistently reported poorer experiences, particularly in terms of facility distribution, accessibility, and inclusion in park activities. Quantitative data showed significant differences by gender and disability, while qualitative interviews highlighted uneven facility provision, inadequate infrastructure for disabled users, safety concerns, and cultural restrictions that discourage participation. These findings align with prior research emphasizing that inequitable and poorly managed public recreational spaces undermine social cohesion, health, and well-being (Okeke, 2020; Byrne & Wolch, 2009).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results indicates that inequity extends beyond physical facilities to management practices, including favoritism, non-transparent decision-making, and ignored user feedback. Consequently, parks fail to provide equitable opportunities or foster community engagement, particularly for marginalized groups. The findings underscore the need for policy and management interventions that prioritize inclusive infrastructure, transparent governance, and programs that engage women, youth, and persons with disabilities, thereby enhancing the social, recreational, and health benefits of urban parks in Northern Nigeria.

Structural inequity, exclusion, and discrimination significantly impact access and satisfaction in urban recreational parks. Gender differences in perceptions highlight socio-cultural barriers. Aligning findings with Social Justice and Equity Theory emphasizes the need for ethical, inclusive park management, participatory planning, and community engagement to improve equity and reduce exclusion.

11. Conclusion

The study concludes that urban recreational parks in Northern Nigeria are characterized bystructuralinequities, exclusionary practices, and unethical management, which collectively undermine the intended benefits of these public spaces. Women, persons with disabilities, and residents of low-income neighborhoods are disproportionately affected, experiencing limited access, inadequate facilities, and reduced opportunities to participate in recreational activities. The findings highlight that inequities are not only physical but also managerial, including non-transparent decision-making, favoritism, and neglect of user feedback, all of which contribute to dissatisfaction and reduced engagement with park resources.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy and management interventions. Urban park authorities and policymakers should prioritize equitable distribution of facilities, ensure accessible infrastructure for persons with disabilities, and implement transparent, participatory management practices. Additionally, recreational programs should be designed to actively include marginalized groups, particularly women and youth, to foster greater social cohesion and community engagement.

12. Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of this study

- Ensure equitable distribution of facilities across all urban recreational parks, with particular attention to low-income neighborhoods.
- Improve physical accessibility, including ramps, pathways, seating, and recreational amenities suitable for persons with disabilities.
- Regularly maintain and upgrade park infrastructure to provide safe and functional facilities for all users.

13. Recommendations for Further Research

Further research should be made in the following areas

1. Comparative studies between Northern and Southern Nigeria on park access.

2. Longitudinal studies on the effects of ethical management interventions.

3. Action research on community-driven park management.

4. Role of technology in promoting inclusive recreational access.

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