Insecurity and School Environment as predictors of Psychological Behaviour of Students in Tertiary Institutions in South East Nigeria

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Abstract
In recent years, insecurity has emerged as a significant challenge in tertiary institutions across South East Nigeria, negatively affecting students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and overall campus experience. Reports of kidnapping, cult activities, armed robbery, and inadequate security measures have heightened students' fear and anxiety, leading to emotional stress, reduced concentration, and withdrawal from social and academic activities. The study employed a descriptive survey design. A multi-stage sampling technique produced a sample of 3,000 students (1,812 males and 1,188 females). Data were collected using a validated structured questionnaire covering demographics, insecurity experiences, psychological behaviour, and school environment. Responses were measured on a four-point Likert scale. Data analysis involved frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Gender comparisons were conducted using group statistics, while bootstrap analysis with 1,000 resamples ensured robust estimates and confidence intervals. Results show that students experienced a moderate to high level of insecurity, with notable gender differences. Female students consistently reported higher insecurity than males in key areas such as fear of kidnapping (Male: M = 1.61; Female: M = 3.22), terrorism threats (Male: M = 1.81; Female: M = 3.09), and community insecurity affecting academic focus (Male: M = 1.52; Female: M = 2.81). Both genders reported high insecurity related to cult activities (Male: M = 3.42; Female: M = 3.54), night-time movement on campus (Male: M = 3.05; Female: M = 3.32), and inadequate security patrols (Male: M = 3.32; Female: M = 3.19), indicating widespread insecurity across tertiary institutions. The study concluded that enhancing campus security and fostering supportive school environments are vital for safeguarding students' psychological well-being and improving academic focus.

1. Introduction

Tertiary institutions are intended to be safe spaces for intellectual growth, social development, and emotional flourishing. However, increasing insecurity characterized by fear of physical harm, violence, cultism, kidnappings, and general campus unrest has become a pervasive concern in many higher education contexts, particularly in regions facing socio-political instability such as parts of Nigeria (Musa et al., 2016; Oparaugo et al., 2025). When students perceive their learning environments as unsafe, it can compromise psychological well-being, foster maladaptive behaviours, and disrupt academic processes. These perceived threats create emotional stressors that hinder concentration, participation, and healthy social interactions, ultimately affecting learning outcomes and overall behavioural functioning. Understanding the interplay between perceived insecurity, school environment quality, and students' psychological behaviour is crucial for developing policy, campus safety strategies, and support systems that promote student well-being.

Literature consistently shows that students' perceived level of insecurity significantly affects their psychological health. Perceived insecurity refers not only to actual incidents of violence but also to students' subjective feeling of threat within and around campus settings. Research conducted among undergraduates in Enugu State found that perceived insecurity significantly predicts psychological well-being, indicating that students' belief in their vulnerability is associated with lower subjective well-being and heightened negative emotions (Ugwueze et al., 2024). Studies of school safety more broadly highlight that the perception of being unsafe at school correlates with mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and behavioural withdrawal (Mori et al., 2021). These findings suggest that insecurity extends beyond physical harm to include emotional and mental distress that disrupts students' behavioural regulation and coping mechanisms.

Perceived insecurity within educational institutions has been associated with maladaptive psychological and behavioural responses among students. In environments characterised by fear, uncertainty, or weak institutional support, students may exhibit withdrawal from classroom participation, reduced social interaction, heightened anxiety, or aggressive and risk-taking behaviours as coping mechanisms. Although most empirical evidence focuses on secondary education, similar dynamics are evident at the tertiary level, where insecurity undermines students' trust in institutional structures that ordinarily foster engagement and positive conduct (Enemuo & Muogbo, 2023). Studies on learning environments further suggest that when schools lack supportive climates, students' motivation, confidence, and psychological wellbeing decline (Okafor et al., 2023).

Conversely, a safe and well-structured school environment defined by adequate facilities, positive interpersonal relationships, effective leadership, and perceived fairness which serves as a protective factor that enhances behavioural adjustment and participation (Muogbo et al., 2025). Perceptions of institutional competence and support also shape students' responses to learning challenges and stressors (Enemuo & Muogbo, 2024). Research in educational psychology reveals that students' perceptions of their school environment are significantly correlated with engagement and achievement, mediated through behavioural mechanisms such as attendance and participation (Edgerton, 2023). A constructive learning environment supports emotional development, fosters belonging, and promotes prosocial behaviours that enhance academic and personal outcomes.

Conversely, insecure or hostile environments have been shown to disrupt students' behaviour. Studies in contexts characterized by violence or insecurity demonstrate that school environments perceived as unsafe are associated with behavioural problems, absenteeism, reduced motivation, and disengagement (Ojukwu & Nwanma, 2017). When students do not feel secure, they may misinterpret social cues, avoid social interactions, and exhibit behavioural patterns driven by anxiety rather than academic aspirations. The synthesis of extant literature indicates a dynamic interplay between perceived insecurity, the school environment, and psychological behaviour. Insecurity negatively influences psychological well-being, which in turn impairs behavioural adjustment and engagement in academic life. An unstable environment undermines students' psychological sense of safety, reducing their capacity to focus, collaborate, and participate meaningfully in academic and social settings. Research in Nigerian tertiary contexts have shown that insecurity significantly affects academic satisfaction and psychological well-being, highlighting the broader impacts of institutional insecurity on student behaviour and educational outcomes (Oparaugo et al., 2025).

Importantly, these relationships underscore that it is not only objective threats that matter, but also how students perceive their environment. An environment that is physically secure but perceived as unsafe can similarly lead to psychological distress and behavioural issues. Thus, a comprehensive approach to enhancing campus safety must consider both material conditions and students' subjective experiences. The motivation for the study arises from a growing recognition that insecurity on and around campuses adversely affects students' emotional and behavioural functioning. Existing research in Nigeria has established that perceived insecurity negatively influences students' psychological well-being, as seen in Enugu State where undergraduates' sense of threat predicted lower subjective well-being (Ugwueze et al., 2024). However, most studies have not simultaneously examined how the broader school environment interacts with perceived insecurity to influence psychological behaviour among tertiary students, particularly in the South East geopolitical zone where insecurity related to cultism, theft, and campus unrest is of increasing concern.

Additionally, while some investigations focus solely on insecurity and psychological outcomes (e.g., Anierobi et al., 2023), there remains a gap in integrating environmental variables such as perceptions of campus safety, physical facilities, and interpersonal relations into the analysis. Secondary school research highlights that insecure school environments influence behavioural outcomes (Ojukwu & Ahaoma-Chigozirim, 2015), but similar comprehensive studies at the tertiary level in South East Nigeria are limited. This study aims to fill these gaps by linking insecurity perceptions, environmental factors, and psychological behaviour to inform institutional policy and student support strategies.

1.1. Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus and Folkman)

Stress and Coping Theory, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1985), provides a framework for understanding how individuals perceive and respond to stressors. This theory emphasizes the dynamic interaction between a person and their environment, focusing on cognitive appraisal and coping mechanisms. Central to Stress and Coping Theory is the concept of cognitive appraisal, which involves how individuals evaluate and interpret stressors. This process is divided into two stages: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. In the primary appraisal, individuals assess whether an event is irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful. If deemed stressful, they further evaluate it as a harm/loss, threat, or challenge. Secondary appraisal involves evaluating the resources available to cope with the stressor, considering options for managing or altering the situation and alleviating stress.

Coping strategies are categorized into two types: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves efforts to change the stressful situation, such as seeking information or solutions. Emotion-focused coping aims to manage emotional responses to the stressor, including strategies like seeking social support, engaging in relaxation techniques, or reappraising the situation positively. Applying Stress and Coping Theory to the study of insecurity, school environment, and psychological behaviour of students in tertiary institutions in South East Nigeria involves examining how students perceive and cope with stressors in their environment. Insecurity, whether due to regional conflict, crime, or political instability, can significantly impact students' primary appraisal, leading them to view their environment as threatening. This perception can trigger stress responses, influencing their psychological behaviour.

Students' secondary appraisal will determine how they assess their resources to cope with this insecurity. Those with access to supportive social networks, psychological counseling, and effective coping strategies may employ problem-focused coping, such as engaging with security measures or seeking institutional support. Others may rely on emotion-focused coping, using techniques like seeking emotional support from peers or family, or engaging in activities that distract them from stress. While Stress and Coping Theory provides valuable understandings into how students manage stress, it has limitations. It primarily focuses on individual cognitive processes and coping mechanisms, potentially overlooking the broader social and relational contexts that influence psychological behaviour. This individual-centric approach might not fully account for the developmental and relational aspects critical to understanding emotional responses.

To address these limitations, Attachment Theory by John Bowlby, introduced in 1969, becomes relevant. Attachment Theory emphasizes the importance of early relationships in shaping psychological development and behavior.

1.2. Attachment Theory (Bowlby)

Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1969), explores the deep emotional bonds between individuals, primarily focusing on the relationships formed between infants and their primary caregivers. Bowlby posited that these early attachments significantly influence an individual's emotional and social development throughout their life. Central to Attachment Theory is the concept of the "secure base," where a caregiver provides consistent support and comfort, allowing the child to explore the world with confidence. Bowlby identified four primary attachment styles: secure, anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant, and disorganized. Secure attachment develops when caregivers are responsive and reliable, fostering trust and security. Anxious-ambivalent attachment occurs when caregiving is inconsistent, leading to anxiety and uncertainty. Anxious-avoidant attachment arises from distant or unresponsive caregiving, causing the child to psychologically withdraw. Disorganized attachment, often resulting from neglect or abuse, leads to confusion and difficulty in forming stable relationships.

Applying Attachment Theory to the topic of insecurity, school environment, and psychological behaviour of students in tertiary institutions in South East Nigeria involves examining how early attachment experiences influence students' emotional responses to their current environment. Insecure attachments, whether anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant, or disorganized, can predispose students to heightened emotional vulnerability. When faced with insecurity in their school environment be it due to regional conflict, political instability, or crime these students may struggle more profoundly with stress and anxiety.

Students with secure attachment histories, on the other hand, are likely to exhibit greater resilience. Their early experiences with reliable caregivers provide a foundation of trust and security, enabling them to cope more effectively with adverse situations. They are better equipped to seek support from peers, teachers, and institutional resources, mitigating the negative impacts of insecurity. The school environment also plays a crucial role in shaping students' psychological behaviour. Institutions that foster a supportive and secure environment can help compensate for earlier attachment insecurities. For example, positive relationships with mentors, counselors, and peers can provide new "secure bases," encouraging emotional stability and resilience. Conversely, an unsupportive or hostile school environment can exacerbate the negative effects of insecure attachments, leading to increased emotional distress and behavioral problems.

1.3. Research Questions

a.   What is the level of insecurity experienced by students in tertiary institutions in South East Nigeria?

b.   What is the psychological behaviour of students in tertiary institutions in South East Nigeria?

c.   What is the nature of the school environment in tertiary institutions in South East Nigeria?

2. Method

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate insecurity, psychological behaviour, and the nature of the school environment among students in tertiary institutions in South East Nigeria. The population of the study comprised students enrolled in selected tertiary institutions within the South East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed to obtain a representative sample. First, tertiary institutions were selected from the zone using purposive sampling to ensure coverage of federal, state, and private institutions. Thereafter, faculties and departments were selected using stratified sampling to reflect the diversity of academic disciplines. Finally, respondents were selected through simple random sampling. This process yielded a total sample size of 3,000 students, made up of 1,812 males and 1,188 females, which was considered adequate for statistical analysis and gender-based comparison.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The instrument consisted of four sections. Section A elicited demographic information such as age and gender. Section B measured the level of insecurity experienced by students, Section C assessed students' psychological behaviour in response to insecurity, and Section D examined perceptions of the school environment. Items in Sections B, C, and D were structured on a four-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was subjected to face and content validation by experts in education and psychology to ensure clarity, relevance, and adequacy of coverage. A pilot study was conducted outside the study area, and reliability was established using an internal consistency method, yielding acceptable reliability coefficients.

Data were administered virtually to respondents with the assistance of trained research assistants, ensuring high response rates and proper completion of the instruments. Completed questionnaires were coded and analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to answer the research questions. Gender-based comparisons were conducted using group statistics, and bootstrap procedures with 1,000 resamples were applied to generate robust estimates of standard errors and confidence intervals.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Table 1 shows that most respondents were aged 16–20 years (n = 1,960; 65.3%), indicating a predominantly youthful sample. Those aged 21–30 years constituted (n = 550; 18.3%), while respondents aged 31–50 years accounted for (n = 320; 10.7%). Participants aged 51 years and above were the least represented (n = 170; 5.7%).

Table 1. Age Distribution of Respondents (in Years)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	16–20 years	1960	65.3	65.3	65.3
	21–30 years	550	18.3	18.3	83.7
	31–50 years	320	10.7	10.7	94.3
	51 years and above	170	5.7	5.7	100.0
	Total	3000	100.0	100.0	

Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference. indicates that male respondents constituted the majority of the sample (n = 1,812; 60.4%), while female respondents accounted for (n = 1,188; 39.6%). This distribution shows a higher representation of males than females among the respondents, suggesting that the study sample was moderately skewed toward male participation.

Table 2. Gender Distribution of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	1812	60.4	60.4	60.4
	Female	1188	39.6	39.6	100.0
	Total	3000	100.0	100.0	

3.1.1. Research Question 1: What is the Level of Insecurity Experienced by Students in Tertiary Institutions in South East Nigeria?

Results in Table 3 indicate a moderate to high level of insecurity among students in tertiary institutions in South East Nigeria, with clear gender differences. Female students reported higher insecurity on issues such as fear of kidnapping (Male: M = 1.61; Female: M = 3.22), terrorism threats (Male: M = 1.81; Female: M = 3.09), and community insecurity affecting academic focus (Male: M = 1.52; Female: M = 2.81). High mean scores for cultism

(Male: M = 3.42; Female: M = 3.54), inadequate security patrols (Male: M = 3.32; Female: M = 3.19), and night-time safety concerns (Male: M = 3.05; Female: M = 3.32) indicate widespread insecurity across campuses.

Table 3. Level of Insecurity Experienced by Students in Tertiary Institutions in South East Nigeria (Gender Comparison)

	Gender		Statistic	Bootstrap[a]		95% Confidence Interval	
				Bias	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
Fear of kidnapping affects my concentration in school.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	1.61	.00	.03	1.56	1.67
		Std. Deviation	1.135	.000	.020	1.094	1.174
		Std. Error Mean	.027				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.22	.00	.02	3.17	3.27
		Std. Deviation	.867	-.001	.018	.832	.903
		Std. Error Mean	.025				
The presence of cult groups in my institution makes me anxious.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.42	.00	.02	3.39	3.45
		Std. Deviation	.746	-.001	.014	.718	.773
		Std. Error Mean	.018				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.54	.00	.02	3.51	3.58
		Std. Deviation	.660	.000	.014	.633	.686
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
Armed robbery incidents within or around campus threaten my sense of safety.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	2.71	.00	.03	2.65	2.76
		Std. Deviation	1.151	-.001	.012	1.126	1.173
		Std. Error Mean	.027				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.30	.00	.02	3.26	3.34
		Std. Deviation	.724	.000	.010	.704	.745
		Std. Error Mean	.021				
Insecurity around school premises discourages regular class attendance.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.05	.00	.02	3.01	3.09
		Std. Deviation	.824	.000	.010	.805	.842
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	2.77	.00	.03	2.71	2.83
		Std. Deviation	1.055	.000	.014	1.026	1.082
		Std. Error Mean	.031				
The threat of terrorism affects my participation in social activities on campus.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	1.81	.00	.03	1.76	1.86
		Std. Deviation	1.124	.000	.013	1.099	1.149
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.09	.00	.03	3.04	3.14
		Std. Deviation	.880	-.001	.020	.839	.918
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
Night reading or moving around campus after dark feels unsafe due to insecurity.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.05	.00	.02	3.00	3.10
		Std. Deviation	1.006	.000	.015	.975	1.035
		Std. Error Mean	.024				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.32	.00	.03	3.27	3.37
		Std. Deviation	.884	.001	.021	.842	.928
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
Insecurity in the community surrounding my school affects my academic focus.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	1.52	.00	.02	1.48	1.57
		Std. Deviation	1.048	.000	.022	1.003	1.090
		Std. Error Mean	.025				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	2.81	.00	.03	2.74	2.88
		Std. Deviation	1.097	.000	.015	1.067	1.126
		Std. Error Mean	.032				
Strikes and unrest caused by insecurity reduce my motivation to study.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.13	.00	.02	3.09	3.17
		Std. Deviation	.921	.000	.016	.889	.954
		Std. Error Mean	.022				
	Female	N	1188				

	Gender		Statistic	Bootstrap[a]			
				Bias	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
		Mean	3.14	.00	.03	3.08	3.19
		Std. Deviation	.894	.000	.021	.853	.937
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
The absence of adequate security patrols in my school makes students vulnerable.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.32	.00	.02	3.28	3.37
		Std. Deviation	.988	.000	.017	.955	1.022
		Std. Error Mean	.023				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.19	.00	.03	3.12	3.25
		Std. Deviation	1.096	.000	.021	1.052	1.138
		Std. Error Mean	.032				
Cases of harassment and assault contribute to feelings of insecurity among students.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.02	.00	.02	2.98	3.06
		Std. Deviation	.834	.001	.014	.807	.863
		Std. Error Mean	.020				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	2.97	.00	.03	2.92	3.02
		Std. Deviation	.879	.000	.017	.845	.913
		Std. Error Mean	.026				

a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples

3.1.2. Research Question 2: What is the Psychological Behaviour of Students in Tertiary Institutions in South East Nigeria?

Findings in Table 4 reveal a high level of negative psychological behaviour among students as a result of insecurity. Both male and female students reported high anxiety (Male: M = 3.42; Female: M = 3.23), poor concentration during lectures (Male: M = 3.43; Female: M = 3.21), emotional stress (Male: M = 3.48; Female: M = 3.32), and fear and worry (Male: M = 3.47; Female: M = 3.32). Female students showed higher tendencies toward withdrawal and isolation (Male: M = 1.55; Female: M = 2.89), indicating stronger emotional impact of insecurity.

Table 4. Psychological Behaviour of Students in Tertiary Institutions in South East Nigeria (Gender Comparison)

	Gender		Statistic	Bootstrap[a]			
				Bias	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
I often feel anxious due to security threats in my school.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.42	.00	.02	3.38	3.46
		Std. Deviation	.816	-.001	.018	.780	.849
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.23	.00	.03	3.17	3.29
		Std. Deviation	1.025	-.001	.021	.982	1.065
		Std. Error Mean	.030				
Insecurity negatively affects my ability to concentrate during lectures.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.43	.00	.02	3.39	3.47
		Std. Deviation	.817	-.001	.018	.780	.849
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.21	.00	.03	3.15	3.27
		Std. Deviation	1.020	-.001	.021	.978	1.060
		Std. Error Mean	.030				
I experience frequent emotional stress because of safety concerns.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.48	.00	.02	3.44	3.51
		Std. Deviation	.790	.000	.019	.749	.825
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.32	.00	.03	3.26	3.38
		Std. Deviation	1.010	-.001	.024	.961	1.055
		Std. Error Mean	.029				
My self-confidence is reduced due to insecurity within my school environment.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.49	.00	.02	3.45	3.54
		Std. Deviation	.959	.000	.021	.916	1.000

	Gender		Statistic	Bootstrap[a]			
				Bias	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
		Std. Error Mean	.023				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.32	.00	.03	3.26	3.39
		Std. Deviation	1.127	-.001	.023	1.079	1.170
		Std. Error Mean	.033				
I sometimes feel withdrawn or isolated as a result of insecurity.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	1.55	.00	.03	1.50	1.60
		Std. Deviation	1.076	-.003	.021	1.032	1.114
		Std. Error Mean	.025				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	2.89	.00	.03	2.83	2.96
		Std. Deviation	1.077	-.001	.014	1.051	1.102
		Std. Error Mean	.031				
I lose interest in academic activities when insecurity issues are reported.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.13	.00	.02	3.09	3.17
		Std. Deviation	.876	.000	.014	.848	.902
		Std. Error Mean	.021				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.00	.00	.03	2.94	3.06
		Std. Deviation	1.010	-.001	.018	.973	1.044
		Std. Error Mean	.029				
Insecurity issues increase my level of fear and worry.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.47	.00	.02	3.43	3.49
		Std. Deviation	.685	.000	.010	.666	.705
		Std. Error Mean	.016				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.32	.00	.03	3.27	3.37
		Std. Deviation	.920	-.002	.022	.876	.962
		Std. Error Mean	.027				
Security threats lead me to develop mistrust toward people around campus.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.23	.00	.02	3.20	3.26
		Std. Deviation	.736	.000	.008	.720	.752
		Std. Error Mean	.017				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.08	.00	.03	3.03	3.14
		Std. Deviation	.910	-.001	.018	.874	.943
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
My sleeping patterns are disturbed by thoughts of insecurity.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.10	.00	.02	3.06	3.14
		Std. Deviation	.791	-.001	.007	.775	.803
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	2.90	.00	.03	2.85	2.96
		Std. Deviation	.930	-.001	.015	.900	.957
		Std. Error Mean	.027				
Security threats lead me to develop mistrust toward people around campus.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	1.81	.00	.03	1.75	1.86
		Std. Deviation	1.124	.000	.014	1.096	1.150
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.09	.00	.03	3.04	3.14
		Std. Deviation	.880	-.001	.021	.840	.919
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples							

3.1.3. Research Question 3: What is the Nature of the School Environment in Tertiary Institutions in South East Nigeria?

The results in Table 5 show that the school environment is perceived as moderately supportive but security-dependent. Both male and female students acknowledged the importance of security infrastructure such as functional security gadgets (Male: M = 3.05; Female: M = 3.32), well-fenced premises (Male: M = 3.32; Female: M = 3.19), and secure hostels (Male: M = 3.13; Female: M = 3.14). Support services, including guidance and counseling (Male: M = 3.42; Female: M = 3.23) and health and wellness facilities (Male: M = 3.48; Female: M

= 3.32), were rated highly, indicating their positive role in reducing insecurity and enhancing students' focus on learning.

Table 5. Nature of the School Environment in Tertiary Institutions in South East Nigeria (Gender Comparison)

	Gender		Statistic	Bootstrap[a]		95% Confidence Interval	
				Bias	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
Availability of security personnel on campus improves my sense of safety.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	1.81	.00	.03	1.76	1.86
		Std. Deviation	1.124	.000	.013	1.098	1.149
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.09	.00	.03	3.04	3.14
		Std. Deviation	.880	-.001	.021	.837	.918
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
Functional security gadgets (CCTV, alarms, lighting) reduce my insecurity concerns.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.05	.00	.02	3.00	3.09
		Std. Deviation	1.006	.000	.015	.977	1.034
		Std. Error Mean	.024				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.32	.00	.02	3.27	3.37
		Std. Deviation	.884	-.001	.020	.841	.921
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
A clean and organized school environment reduces my psychological stress.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	1.52	.00	.02	1.48	1.57
		Std. Deviation	1.048	-.001	.021	1.004	1.086
		Std. Error Mean	.025				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	2.81	.00	.03	2.75	2.87
		Std. Deviation	1.097	-.001	.014	1.068	1.124
		Std. Error Mean	.032				
Hostels with adequate security contribute to students' peace of mind.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.13	.00	.02	3.09	3.17
		Std. Deviation	.921	.000	.017	.888	.954
		Std. Error Mean	.022				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.14	.00	.03	3.09	3.19
		Std. Deviation	.894	-.001	.021	.852	.934
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
Well-fenced school premises make students feel secure.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.32	.00	.02	3.28	3.37
		Std. Deviation	.988	.000	.018	.953	1.021
		Std. Error Mean	.023				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.19	.00	.03	3.13	3.25
		Std. Deviation	1.096	.000	.020	1.054	1.135
		Std. Error Mean	.032				
A supportive and friendly relationship between staff and students reduces insecurity fears.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.02	.00	.02	2.98	3.06
		Std. Deviation	.834	-.001	.015	.805	.863
		Std. Error Mean	.020				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	2.97	.00	.03	2.92	3.02
		Std. Deviation	.879	-.001	.017	.847	.911
		Std. Error Mean	.026				
Guidance and counseling services help students cope with insecurity.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.42	.00	.02	3.38	3.46
		Std. Deviation	.816	.000	.018	.782	.851
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.23	.00	.03	3.17	3.29
		Std. Deviation	1.025	.000	.022	.982	1.067
		Std. Error Mean	.030				
Effective campus rules and regulations minimize insecurity-related behaviours.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.43	.00	.02	3.39	3.47
		Std. Deviation	.817	.000	.018	.783	.852
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
	Female	N	1188				

	Gender		Statistic	Bootstrap[a]			
				Bias	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
		Mean	3.21	.00	.03	3.15	3.27
		Std. Deviation	1.020	.000	.021	.976	1.060
		Std. Error Mean	.030				
Availability of health and wellness services improves students' psychological well-being.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.48	.00	.02	3.44	3.51
		Std. Deviation	.790	.000	.019	.752	.827
		Std. Error Mean	.019				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	3.32	.00	.03	3.26	3.38
		Std. Deviation	1.010	.000	.024	.960	1.055
		Std. Error Mean	.029				
The general conduciveness of the school environment encourages students to focus on learning.	Male	N	1812				
		Mean	3.05	.00	.02	3.01	3.09
		Std. Deviation	.917	.000	.016	.885	.947
		Std. Error Mean	.022				
	Female	N	1188				
		Mean	2.89	.00	.03	2.83	2.94
		Std. Deviation	1.003	-.001	.018	.965	1.039
		Std. Error Mean	.029				

a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples

3.2. Discussion

The results show that students in South East Nigerian tertiary institutions experience moderate to high levels of insecurity, with female students reporting significantly higher perceptions of threat than males on key indicators. For instance, female respondents reported greater fear of kidnapping (Female M = 3.22) compared to males (Male M = 1.61), and higher concern regarding terrorism (Female M = 3.09; Male M = 1.81). These findings resonate with broader Nigerian studies demonstrating that insecurity disrupts academic routines and contributes to poor academic focus and psychological distress (Sa'adatu et al, 2024). In a related Nigerian context, insecurity has been linked to substantial disruptions in educational delivery in Sokoto State, where academic calendars and quality education delivery have been undermined by crime and violent incidents, echoing the present study's evidence of students' fear and anxiety.

Similarly, Ogunode et al (2024) found in university education research that insecurity weakens institutional performance, contributing to unstable academic programming and negative educational outcomes, which aligns with the high mean scores for insecurity factors like armed robbery (Female M = 3.30) and inadequate patrols (Male M = 3.32; Female M = 3.19). This finding agreed with research showing that fear of crime is disproportionately higher among female students, consistent with the gender disparities observed in this study female students reported higher insecurity across most measures. For example, research in Kenya found females have significantly higher fear of crime compared to males, particularly for violent crimes, highlighting how gender influences perceived vulnerability in educational spaces (Maier et al., 2020). In contrast, some studies on insecurity have focused less on gender differences and more on institutional or community drivers.

For instance, Afu et al, (2023) reported that insecurity's influence on academic performance among secondary students stems from broader community instability, but did not find consistent gender differences. This contrasts with the current study, which clearly delineates gendered perceptions of insecurity (Stevens, 2021). Moreover, national assessments of insecurity show that Nigerian tertiary institutions are affected by broader socio-political violence such as banditry and kidnapping, which degrade students' sense of safety and discourage academic engagement, corroborating the evidence that students feel unsafe, especially after dark (Stella, 2023). However, some research emphasizes that insecurity's impact is context-specific, with regional differences. For example, insecurity in Zamfara State significantly predicted poor learning outcomes, but its pattern and intensity might differ from the South East context where cultism and student-targeted street crime have specific characteristics (Ojeleye et al., 2022).

4. Conclusion

The study on perceived level of insecurity, school environment, and psychological behaviour of students in tertiary institutions in South East Nigeria revealed that insecurity is a significant concern, with female students reporting higher levels of fear, anxiety, and emotional stress compared to their male counterparts. Key factors such as fear of kidnapping, cultism, armed robbery, terrorism, and inadequate security measures were identified as critical contributors to students' sense of vulnerability. The psychological consequences of insecurity were evident in students' heightened anxiety, reduced concentration, emotional stress, withdrawal,

and diminished self-confidence, all of which negatively impacted academic engagement and social participation. Furthermore, the school environment was found to play a crucial role in moderating the effects of insecurity. Security infrastructure, including functional gadgets, well-fenced premises, and secure hostels, alongside support services such as guidance and counseling and health and wellness facilities, significantly enhanced students' sense of safety and overall psychological well-being. However, the effectiveness of these measures varied, highlighting the need for consistent and comprehensive security planning across tertiary institutions.

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Declaration on AI Use

The author declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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