

Impact of Low-Intensity Conflicts on The Mental Health and Academic Performance of Undergraduates: A Comparative Study Between Universities in Southeast and South-South Geopolitical Zones of Nigeria

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of university undergraduates in low-intensity conflict and non-conflict zones in Southeast and South-south, Nigeria. Four research questions and three hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. The ex-post facto research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised all the 107,024 undergraduates enrolled for the 2023/2024 session in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; Alvan Ikoku University of Education, Owerri; University of Education, Agbor and University of Uyo, Uyo. A sample of 800 undergraduates was selected from these four universities, using a convenience sampling technique. Data were collected using the Low Intensity Warfare Questionnaire (LIWQ), Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS); and students' Cumulative Grade Point Average, CGPA from the 2022/2023 academic session. The reliability of the instruments was ascertained using the Cronbach's Alpha technique. The coefficient yields were .88 and .89 for the LIWQ and WEMWBS, respectively. Face and content validation was done by three experts in the Department of Educational Foundation, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Data collected were analyzed using independent sample t-tests and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). The study found a significant difference in the academic performance of students in low-intensity conflict zones compared to those in non-conflict zones. However, no significant differences were found in the mental health status of the compared groups. Additionally, no significant gender-based differences were observed in mental health and academic performance. The study recommends implementing academic and mental health support programmes for vulnerable students to help mitigate poor mental health and academic outcomes.

Keywords: Low intensity conflict, Academic performance, Mental health, University undergraduates

Introduction

Prolonged exposure to stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, often aggravated by violence and insecurity, has a detrimental impact on students' cognitive abilities and intellectual development. These conditions impair their capacity to learn, acquire knowledge, and develop the competencies required for future professional success. This raises a critical concern for students residing in regions classified as low intensity

conflict zones, where the unpredictability of daily life, including academic activities, is a constant source of stress.

Low Intensity Conflict, also known as Low Intensity Warfare, is a pervasive global phenomenon. While less intense than conventional wars, these conflicts have profound and far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities. These conflicts frequently involve non-state actors such as insurgent groups, terrorist organizations, or militias, employing tactics like guerrilla warfare, sabotage, and raids (Kaldor, 2013). Recent research highlights the intricate and multifaceted nature of these conflicts, which range from localized insurgencies to large-scale terrorist attacks (Paul, 2020). The repercussions of such conflicts on civilian populations include widespread displacement, human rights violations, and economic instability (Smith, 2019).

Nigeria, a nation of approximately 211 million people with a rich diversity of ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, has not been spared the challenges posed by low intensity conflicts. These conflicts, often rooted in ethnic, religious, or political tensions, have been reported in numerous regions, including Southeastern Nigeria. Such conflicts represent a destabilizing force, yielding no positive outcomes. The country faces an unprecedented wave of multifaceted and overlapping security threats, with almost every geopolitical zone experiencing some form of insecurity. These challenges have significantly compromised human security and have resulted in widespread bloodshed (Nwiko *et al*, 2022; Nwiko & Akudolu, 2023; Policy Brief, 2021).

The persistence of low intensity conflicts in Nigeria over the past decade is deeply troubling. Across the country, there are daily reports of violence and the accompanying loss of life. According to Nextier (2023), over 60,000 Nigerians have died due to violent conflicts in the past decade. The organization identifies banditry, terrorism, farmers-herders' clashes, gunmen attacks, cult related violence, secessionist uprisings, and kidnappings as the most pervasive forms of conflict afflicting Nigeria. Supporting this, Daily Trust (2023) references the Center for Democracy and Development (CDD, n.d.), which emphasizes the widespread prevalence of these conflicts across Nigeria, including the southeast, and the seeming ineffectiveness of government strategies to address the crisis. These persistent security challenges have spurred numerous studies exploring the concept of low intensity conflicts and their implications for occupational and psychological outcomes.

The Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria comprises five states: Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. It is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group, a people renowned for their entrepreneurial spirit, rich cultural heritage, and significant contributions to Nigeria's political and economic development (Nsoedo, 2019). However, the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafran War, continues to present socio-political challenges for the region, deeply rooted in the legacy of the conflict. Saro-Wiwa (2012) noted that, despite the reintegration of the Igbo people into Nigerian society following the war, they have remained subject to systemic economic discrimination. The rhetoric of “No victor, no vanquished” and “reconciliation,” is criticized as largely superficial, given the persistent economic disadvantages imposed on the Southeasterners more than fifty years after the war. Aduba (2027) further highlighted the £20 flat-rate policy enforced by the Nigerian government, which required Biafrans seeking to exchange their old currency to accept such significantly reduced

amount is quite punitive. He argued in "The Will" newspaper that this policy was intentionally designed to hinder economic recovery within the region. The extensive loss of lives and property, coupled with ethnic marginalization, continues to influence contemporary conflicts and deepen grievances within the Southeast (Ibeanu, Orji, & Iwuamadi, 2016; Okwuosa, Nwaoga, & Uroko, 2021).

The resurgence of secessionist movements in the Southeast can be traced to the post-Biafran War period. Over the past two decades, these movements have gained momentum, spearheaded by organizations such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Nwanike, 2022). These groups have articulated dissatisfaction with the Nigerian state, citing political and economic marginalization of the Southeast in terms of federal appointments and infrastructural development. Additionally, they have accused the state of suppressing Igbo identity. This claim is supported by findings from Onyemaobi, Chris-Sanctus, and Ngwu (2023), who argue that state repression is significantly implicated in the increased militarization of secessionist agitations in Southeast Nigeria.

Beyond secessionist movements, the Southeast region has contended with militancy and rising insecurity. Groups like the Eastern Security Network (ESN), which IPOB claims was created for self-defense against Fulani herders, have engaged in militant activities. The government of Nigeria considers the ESN an armed insurgent group, leading to clashes that have further destabilized the region (Amnesty International, 2019). Additionally, periodic violence has been triggered by land disputes, boundary conflicts between communities, and tensions between indigenous farmers and migrant herders, resulting in casualties and displacement (Amnesty International, 2019).

More recently, the Southeast has witnessed an increase in violent crimes, with kidnappings for ransom being particularly prevalent. Criminal gangs, some with links to separatist or militant groups, have exploited security gaps to perpetrate acts of violence. This rise in crime further destabilizes the region, impeding normal economic and academic activities (Amnesty International, 2019).

Studies indicate that government responses to insecurity in the Southeast have often been characterized by heavy-handed military crackdowns, a strategy that has sustained conflict rather than resolved it. For instance, Operation Python Dance was deployed, with Amnesty International (2019) alleging widespread human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and mass arrests of innocent civilians. Critics argue that such approaches fuel resentment and radicalize more youths toward separatist ideologies (Onyemaobi, Chris-Sanctus, & Ngwu, 2023).

Literature suggests that the government's failure to implement sincere measures to address conflicts in the Southeast, similar to those employed in other regions, has exacerbated the crisis. For example, while negotiations and reintegration policies were adopted to manage the Niger Delta crisis, the Southeast agitation has been largely met with militarization. In the North, bandits have been engaged in dialogue and, in some cases, granted amnesty. Conversely, IPOB members have been subjected to "shoot-on-sight" directives and proscribed as a terrorist organization. Many argue that the government's strategy of suppressing dissent rather than addressing the root causes of

grievances specific to the Southeast is a major driver of the low-intensity conflicts ravaging the region.

In contrast, the South-South region of Nigeria is not classified as a low-intensity conflict (LIC) zone due to its relative stability in recent years. This stability can be attributed to the federal government's sustained efforts to address the primary drivers of conflict in the region, including agitation for resource control, environmental degradation, and political marginalization. According to Eteng and Ajake (2020), government-led peace building initiatives have played a crucial role in reducing conflict triggers and fostering stability in the region.

Furthermore, despite the South-South region's history of militancy and restiveness, several factors have contributed to its current state of relative peace. Notably, the region's increased allocation from federal government revenues, bolstered by the thriving oil and gas industry, has provided economic incentives for stability. Additionally, the presence of robust traditional institutions has been instrumental in maintaining peace and mitigating conflict (Ikporukpo, 2020; Ogbonnaya, 2020).

University undergraduates constitute a significant demographic that is particularly vulnerable to the effects of low-intensity conflicts. This vulnerability stems from their age group, which falls within the populous margins of Nigeria's population. According to data from the National Universities Commission (NUC, 2022), the population of Nigerian undergraduates is estimated to be approximately 2.5 million. Alarming, 40% of this population has been reported to be susceptible to the adverse impacts of low-intensity conflicts (Oladipo & Akinyemi, 2022; Ogbuagu & Ogbuagu, 2021; Adewuya & Oyegun, 2020). This highlights the pressing need for evidence-based and policy-oriented intervention to mitigate the growing prevalence of low-intensity conflicts across the country.

Academic performance is critically important for undergraduate students, as it directly influences their prospects for success, employment opportunities, and preparation for future endeavors, and contributions to society. Low-intensity conflicts breed situations that are most likely inimical to positive academic outcomes. When learners are left in an environment rife with fear, there are bound to be serious consequences for academic motivation, engagement and achievement (Tal *et al.*, 2019; Abu-Rabia & Marzouk, 2019). However, studies have not been emphatic on possible discrepancies in academic outcomes of students in LIC zones, based on socio demographic discrepancies.

Equally significant is students' mental health, which has far-reaching consequences for their physical, social, and emotional well-being. Exposure to the daily challenges and pressures of academic life has been identified as a predictor of stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016). These challenges are exacerbated for undergraduates in Southeastern Nigeria, who are frequently exposed to societal disruptions such as terror, banditry, cultism, and other manifestations of low-intensity conflict. With several studies drawing linkages between conflict, psychological problems such as anxiety-related disorders and stress. Khan *et al.* (2019) highlighted the impact of low-intensity on mental outcomes, alluding to strong resilience and support networks as possible mitigating factors in the associations between LIC and poor mental health outcomes.

Empirical data has shown that these conflicts have led to the loss of thousands of lives, the destruction of properties, and the displacement of millions of Nigerians, including young people (Nextier 2023; Daily Trust, 2023). Consequently, it is essential to investigate the academic performance and mental health of undergraduate students from different regions, particularly Southeast and South-South Nigeria, considering the disparities in the prevalence of low-intensity conflicts across these regions. Against this backdrop, this research seeks to explore the impact of low-intensity conflicts on the academic performance and mental health of university undergraduates in Southeast and South-South Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The insecurity problem in Nigeria is globally acclaimed to be a worrying situation. Non-state factors have taken up arms to inflict terror on the masses, killing and maiming tens of thousands of people and displacing millions. Low-intensity conflicts in Nigeria include banditry attacks, farmer-herders clashes, cult-related wars, kidnapping, secessionist attacks, and gun-men attacks. Focus on the menace of these conflicts remain on the quantifiable losses inflicted which are measured by number of lives lost, worth of property destroyed and number of people displaced and turned to internally displaced persons. A significant number of studies have focused on the psychological trauma inflicted on victims of these attacks, but there are obvious gaps in understanding dimensions of the trauma inflicted and the demographic characteristics of the more vulnerable people.

University undergraduates make up a significant number of our teeming youth population. Evidence is found in literature that 40% of our estimated 2.5 million university undergraduates are exposed to one form of low intensity conflict or another. Bearing in mind that the intensity of these conflicts may differ along regional lines, with students in South East Nigeria more exposed to low intensity conflicts than their peers in universities in South-South, there is need to understand the differences that exist in the mental health status and academic performance of university students from these regions based on their varying levels of exposure to low-intensity violence. Thus, this study investigates the impact of low-intensity conflicts on the academic performance and mental health of university undergraduates in South-East and South-South, Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. How does the mental health status of university students in low-intensity conflict zones in South-East Nigeria compare to that of students in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria?
2. What are the differences in academic performance between university students in low-intensity conflict zones in South-East Nigeria and those in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria?
3. How does the mental health status of university male students in low-intensity conflict zones in South-East Nigeria compare to that of male students in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria?
4. How does the academic performance of university female students in low-intensity conflict zones in South-East, Nigeria, compare to that of female students in non-conflict zones in South-South, Nigeria?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the mental health status of university students in low-intensity conflict zones in South-East Nigeria compared to students in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria.
2. There is no significant difference in the academic performance of university students in low-intensity conflict zones in South-East, Nigeria, compared to students in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria.
3. There is no significant difference in the mental health status and academic performance of university male and female students in low-intensity conflict zones in South-East Nigeria compared to students in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria.

Method

This study employed an ex-post facto research design. Ezech (2015) defined it as a design aimed at explaining cause-and-effect relationships where the causes already exist and cannot be manipulated. This design was deemed appropriate for the study as it focuses on utilizing existing conditions to explain underlying phenomena. According to Nworgu (2015), this research design is particularly suitable for studies that seek to describe and analyze phenomena without altering the variables involved.

The population for this study comprised all 107,024 students enrolled during the 2023/2024 academic session at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; Alvan Ikoku University of Education, Owerri; University of Education, Agbor; and the University of Uyo, Uyo. A total sample of 800 students (200 from each university) was selected using a convenience sampling technique. Nworgu (2015) justified the use of this sampling approach, particularly when the basis for sample selection is accessibility rather than adherence to predetermined criteria. This technique was considered appropriate, as it allowed for the selection of respondents who were readily available and willing to participate in the online survey used for data collection. Three instruments were utilized to collect data for the study. Low-intensity warfare was assessed using a researcher-designed instrument titled the Low Intensity Warfare Questionnaire (LIWQ). Academic performance was measured using the students CGPA, while mental health was assessed using an adapted version of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS). The LIWQ consisted of 10 items rated on a 4-point scale: Frequently (F), Most Times (MT), Sometimes (S), and Never (N), with corresponding weights of 3, 2, 1, and 0, respectively. The academic performance of the students were measured using their Cumulative Grade Point Average, CGPA, from the preceding academic session (2022/2023) and ranges from 1.00- 5.00. Also, the adapted WEMWBS was rated using the same 4-point scale and corresponding weights of 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively.

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were employed, while inferential statistics, including independent t-tests and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), were used to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses at a significance level of 0.05.

Results

Research Question One: How does the mental health status of university students in low-intensity conflict zones in South East Nigeria compare to that of students in non-conflict zones in South South Nigeria?

Table 1: Mental Health Mean Comparison Between University Students of Low-intensity conflict zones (Southeastern) and Non-conflict Zones in (Southsouthern) Nigeria

Mental Health Status		South East	South-South
N	Valid	400	400
	Missing	0	0
Mean		33.2	33.6
Std. Deviation		0.66	0.62

Table 1 reveals that the higher mean value of university undergraduates' mental health status was observed in the South-south (33.2). This showed that when comparing the mental health status of university students in low-intensity conflict zones (South East) to that of students in non-conflict zones (South-South) in Nigeria, the students in non-conflict zones tend to have better mental health status than those in low-intensity conflict zones.

Research Question Two: What are the differences in academic performance between university students in low-intensity conflict zones in South East Nigeria and those in non-conflict zones in South South Nigeria?

Table 2: Academic Performance Mean Difference Between University Students in Low-intensity conflict Zones (Southeastern) and Non-conflict Zones in (South southern) Nigeria

Academic Performance		South East	South-South
N	Valid	400	400
	Missing	0	0
Mean		2.89	3.05
Std. Deviation		0.79	0.28

The mean difference values of academic performance were shown in Table 2. The highest mean value was recorded in the non-conflict zones (South-South) while the lower value was observed in low-intensity conflict zones (South East). This implies that students in South-South universities had higher mean CGPA (3.05) than their contemporaries in South-East universities (2.89). Thus, academic performance of university students in non-conflict zones was higher than that of students in low-intensity conflict zones.

Research Question Three: How does the mental health status of university male students in low-intensity conflict zones in Southeastern Nigeria compare to that of male students in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria?

Table 3: Mental Health Status of University Male Students in Low-intensity conflict zones (South East) and in non-conflict zones in (South-South) Nigeria

	South East	South-South
Frequency	119	116
Percent (%)	29.8%	29.0%
Mean	33.2	33.8
N	119	116
Std. Deviation	0.67	0.66

The data in Table 3 shows the mental health status of the male undergraduates in low-intensity conflict zones and non-conflict zones. The male respondents in South East zones were 119 (29.8%) while 116 (29.0%) male respondents were recorded in South-South. The mental health status of the male undergraduates in non-conflict zones was higher (mean = 33.8) than those in low-intensity conflict zones (mean = 33.2) of Nigeria. This implied that male students in non-conflict South South were higher than that of their contemporaries in the low-intensity conflict South East zone.

Research Question Four: How does the academic performance of university female students in low-intensity conflict zones in Southeastern Nigeria compare to that of female students in non-conflict zones in South southern Nigeria?

Table 4: Female Academic Performance Between University Students in Low-intensity conflict Zones (Southeastern) and Non-conflict Zones in (South southern) Nigeria

	South East	South-South
Frequency	281	284
Percent (%)	70.3%	71.0%
Mean	2.88	2.95
N	281	284
Std. Deviation	0.52	0.28

Table 4 reveals the academic performance of the female university students in low-intensity conflict zones and non-conflict zones. The percentage of the female respondents in South East zones was 70.3% while in South-South, female respondents recorded the percentage of 71.0%. The academic performance of female undergraduates in non-conflict zones (mean = 2.95) was higher than those in low-intensity conflict zones (mean = 2.88) in Nigeria.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the mental health status of university students in low-intensity conflict zones in Southeastern Nigeria compared to students in non-conflict zones in South southern Nigeria.

Table 5: Independent Sample t-test for the Mental Health Status of Undergraduates in Low-intensity Conflict Zones and Non-conflict Zones of Nigeria

Groups		Group Statistics									
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error						
Mental Health	South East	400	33.2	0.66	0.03						
	South-South	400	33.6	0.62	0.03						
Independent Samples Test											
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI of the Difference	Lower	Upper
Mental Health	Equal variances assumed	7.42	0.01	0.28	798	0.78	0.01	0.05	-0.08		0.10

Table 5 shows the result of the independent t-test in the mental health status of undergraduates in low-intensity conflict and non-conflict zones of Nigeria. The significant value ($p = 0.01$) for the Levene's test for equality of variance showed the homogeneity of variance (normally distributed) for both groups. The t-test significant value [$t_{(798)} = 0.28$, $p = 0.78$] recorded showed that there was no significant difference in the mental health status of undergraduates in low-intensity conflict zones (South East) when compared to those in non-conflict zones (South-South). Thus, the null hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the academic performance of university students in low-intensity conflict zones in Southeastern Nigeria compared to students in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria.

Table 6: Independent Sample t-test for the Academic Performance of University Students in Low-intensity Conflict Zones and Non-conflict Zones of Nigeria

		Group Statistics								
Groups		N		Mean		Std. Deviation		Std. Error		
Academic Performance	South East	400		2.89		0.28		0.01		
	South South	400		3.05		0.79		0.04		
Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI of the Difference	
Academic Performance	Equal variances assumed	448.55	0.00	15.65	798.00	0.00	0.65	0.04	0.57	0.74

The result of the independent t-test for the academic performance of the university students in low-intensity conflict and non-conflict zones of Nigeria was shown in Table 6. The significant value ($p = 0.00$) for the Levene's test for equality of variance showed the homogeneity of variance (normally distributed) for the both groups. The t-test significant value [$t_{(798)} = 15.65, p = 0.00$] showed that there was a significant difference in the academic performance of undergraduates in low-intensity conflict zones (South East) when compared to those in non-conflict zones (South-South). For the mean difference, it was found that the academic performance of undergraduates in non-conflict zones of Nigeria was significantly higher than those in low-intensity conflict zones with a difference of 0.65. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis 3 : There is no significant difference in the mental health status and academic performance of university male and female students in low-intensity conflict zones in Southeastern Nigeria compared to students in non-conflict zones in South southern Nigeria.

Table 7: Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) for the Mental Health Status and Academic Performance of both University Male and Female Students in Low-intensity conflict zones and Non-conflict zones of Nigeria

		Multivariate Tests ^a				
Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Groups	Pillai's Trace	0.22	114.34 ^b	2	795	0.00
	Wilks' Lambda	0.78	114.34^b	2	795	0.00
	Hotelling's Trace	0.29	114.34 ^b	2	795	0.00
	Roy's Largest Root	0.29	114.34 ^b	2	795	0.00
Gender	Pillai's Trace	0.00	.51 ^b	2	795	0.61
	Wilks' Lambda	1.00	.51^b	2	795	0.61
	Hotelling's Trace	0.00	.51 ^b	2	795	0.61
	Roy's Largest Root	0.00	.51 ^b	2	795	0.61
Groups * Gender	Pillai's Trace	0.01	1.86 ^b	2	795	0.16
	Wilks' Lambda	1.00	1.86^b	2	795	0.16
	Hotelling's Trace	0.01	1.86 ^b	2	795	0.16
	Roy's Largest Root	0.01	1.86 ^b	2	795	0.16

a. Design: Intercept + Groups + Gender + Groups * Gender

b. Exact statistic

		Tests of Between-Subjects Effects				
Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Groups	Mental Health	0.02	1	0.02	0.04	0.83
	Academic Performance	78.27	1	78.27	224.59	0.00
Gender	Mental Health	0.01	1	0.01	0.02	0.89
	Academic Performance	0.32	1	0.32	0.93	0.34
Groups * Gender	Mental Health	0.53	1	0.53	1.28	0.26
	Academic Performance	1.03	1	1.03	2.94	0.09
Error	Mental Health	327.33	796	0.41		
	Academic Performance	277.41	796	0.35		

Total	Mental Health	9318.63	800
	Academic Performance	9187.52	800
a. R Squared = .002 (Adjusted R Squared = -.002)			
b. R Squared = .239 (Adjusted R Squared = .236)			

The results of the analysis of variance for the interactive effect of mental health status and academic performance of both the male and female undergraduates in low-intensity conflict zones and non-conflict zones in Nigeria were shown in Table 7. The Wilks' Lambda's test showed that there was a significant interactive effect between mental health and academic performance of undergraduates in both low-intensity conflict zones and non-conflict zones of Nigeria, ($F = 114.34$, $p = 0.00$; Wilks' $\Lambda = .78$). The results also showed that there was no significant interactive effect between the mental health and academic performance of both the male and female university students in low-intensity conflict zones and non-conflict zones in Nigeria, ($F = 1.86$, $p = 0.16$; Wilks' $\Lambda = 1.00$). The p-value ($F = 224.84$, $p = 0.00$) showed that there was a significant difference in the academic performance of male and female undergraduates in low-intensity conflict zones (South East) compared to students in non-conflict zones (South-South) in Nigeria, while the mental health status of male and female students was not significantly different in the compared geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Therefore, the interactive effect of mental health status and academic performance of the male undergraduates as well as female undergraduates in low-intensity conflict zones, when compared to non-conflict zones was not significantly different. Thus, the null hypothesis was accepted.

Discussion of Findings

Based on objective No. 1 and Hypothesis 1, there is no significant difference in the mental health status of undergraduates in low-intensity conflict zones in southeastern Nigeria and their contemporaries in universities in non-conflict zones in South-South Nigeria. This implies that there is no impact of low-intensity on the mental health status on university undergraduates. This goes against the findings of Chaudhury *et al.* (2016) that found low-intensity conflicts to affect the psychological well-being of Indian students in a conflict-prone area. Oyewole *et al.* (2022) also disagreed with the finding claiming that exposure to conflict increases anxiety levels among young learners in addition to creating non-conducive environments for learning to take place. Khan *et al.* (2019), however explained that when young learners have strong social networks and resilience, they could cope with adverse psychosocial stimuli that are characteristic of low-intensity conflict zones.

Based on Objectives 2 and hypothesis 2, it was found that academic performance of undergraduates in low-intensity conflict zones (South East) revealed lower mean scores, implying a significant difference in the academic performance of between the low-intensity conflict zone undergraduates and their non-conflict zone counterparts. This augurs well with the findings of Tal *et al.* (2021) which found that adolescents exposed to low-intensity conflict had lower scores on reading and achievement tests, as well as lower Grade Point Average than students in non-conflict. Khan *et al.* (2019) also corroborated the finding. They (Khan *et al.* 2019) found that low-intensity conflict predicted poor academic performance among young learners. This was explained by the tendency to stay away from school as a result of anxiety and tension

triggered by the feeling of uncertainty and security. In addition to the above studies, Abu-Rabia and Marzouk (2019) further claimed that students in low-intensity conflict areas lack motivation, a sense of belongingness and motivation to continue with their academic pursuits. These make it extremely difficult for them to maintain good grades.

Based on objective No. 3, hypothesis 3, and hypothesis 4; there is no significant difference in the impact of low-intensity conflict on both the mental health status and academic performance of undergraduate students, based on gender is not significant. This is in line with the research findings of Kofmann *et al.* (2019) that found no significant difference in academic performance of male and female students in both low-intensity conflict and non-conflict zones. However, Kofmann *et al.* (2019) also inferred that female student in low-intensity conflict zones showed significant levels of stress when compared to female students in non-conflict zones. However, Khan *et al.* (2019) disagreed with the findings of the study, citing very significant differences in both mental health status of university students. Also, Kim (2020) found no significant difference in the academic performance of students, based on gender across low-intensity conflict and non-conflict areas. Female students in conflict zones had similar achievement scores than their contemporaries in non-conflict zones. Ab-deen *et al.* (2021) also agreed with the findings of hypotheses 3 and 4, reporting no significant differences in depression, anxiety, stress level of university students in low-intensity conflict and non-conflict zones, based on gender.

Conversely, significant differences were noted among students in low-intensity conflict zones and non-conflict zones based on gender. Smith and Jones (2021) found that male students in low-intensity conflict zones performed better academically than their contemporaries in non-conflict zones. Smith and Jones (2021) pointed out that this could be explained by access to social support. Also, Al-Khateb *et al.* (2020) found that female in non-conflict zones perform better, academically than their peers in low-intensity conflict zones, while male students in non-conflict zones had a more stable mental health status than male students in low-intensity conflict zones, with the latter displaying symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD.

Conclusion

It was concluded that low-intensity conflict has a significant impact on the academic performance of university students in low-intensity conflict areas, compared to university students in non-conflict areas. It was also concluded that the impact of low-intensity conflict on the mental health status of university students in low-intensity conflict areas compared to university students in non-conflict zones is not significant.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings.

1. The university management should provide additional academic support to students in low-intensity conflict areas such as tutoring, mentoring and academic counselling to help them cope with the impact of conflict on their academic performance
2. The university management should offer mental health resources and support services to all students, regardless of gender or location, to promote overall well-being and resilience.

3. Government should formulate policies that will help reduce these conflicts to the barest minimum.
4. There is need for continuous monitoring and research on possible intervention that will help in managing mental health problems associated with low-intensity conflicts.

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