



OPEN ACCESS

SUBMITTED 23 March 2025

ACCEPTED 19 April 2025

PUBLISHED 22 May 2025

VOLUME Vol.07 Issue05 2025

CITATION

Okwudiwa Gogogwute, O.M.C. Osazuwa, Alfred A. Mboto, & Irenen O. Ikponmwosa. (2025). Addressing Cultism to Strengthen Maritime Security in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. *The American Journal of Political Science Law and Criminology*, 7(05), 147–157.

<https://doi.org/10.37547/tajpslc/Volume07Issue05-17>

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Addressing Cultism to Strengthen Maritime Security in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract: The Niger Delta region, a vital centre for Nigeria's oil and gas exports, has encountered ongoing concerns of marine instability intensified by cult activities. Cultism, defined by structured criminal organisations, facilitates offences such oil theft, pipeline sabotage, and piracy, hence undermining economic and security frameworks in the region. Adverse socio-economic situations, such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption, exacerbate the recruitment of youth into cult organisations. This study seeks to examine the relationship between cultism and maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta, emphasising socio-economic factors, the effects of cult activities on maritime operations, and the efficacy of existing security measures. This research employs a quantitative approach based on Social Disorganisation Theory, which elucidates how socio-economic instability promotes criminal behaviour. Data were gathered using structured questionnaires administered to 200 personnel of the Nigerian Police Force from Anti-Cultism Units in Rivers and Delta States. The poll evaluated socio-economic conditions, the impact of cult activities on marine security, and the efficacy of current security measures. Descriptive and inferential statistics, in conjunction with Structural

Equation Modelling (SEM), were utilised for data analysis, elucidating the relationships among variables. The results demonstrate that socio-economic issues, such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption, are key catalysts for cultism, with unemployment being the most potent predictor. Cult actions, including oil pipeline sabotage, piracy, and interruptions to offshore operations, significantly undermine marine infrastructure and economic stability. Moreover, although technology-driven surveillance has proven to be the most efficacious security tool, enforcement initiatives are impeded by resource limitations and corruption. Cultism significantly contributes to maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta by exploiting socio-economic vulnerabilities and undermining weak governance frameworks. Mitigating these difficulties necessitates enhancing law enforcement, augmenting technology-driven surveillance, and tackling the socio-economic underlying factors of cultism. Integrated methods are essential for restoring maritime security and promoting regional stability.

Keywords: Cultism, Maritime Security, Niger Delta, Social Disorganization Theory, Structural Equation Modeling.

Introduction: The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, renowned for its abundant oil and gas reserves, remains a critical driver of the nation's economic growth. However, this same resource-rich region has been marred by persistent insecurity, environmental degradation, and socio-economic disparities. Over the past decades, maritime insecurity has escalated, manifesting through pipeline vandalism, crude oil theft, sea robbery, and piracy, all of which have significantly undermined the nation's economic stability. Reports indicate that Nigeria loses approximately \$3 billion annually to oil theft and related maritime crimes, with the majority of these activities concentrated in the Niger Delta (Nwankwo et al., 2021; Olajide, 2022). Compounding this issue is the pervasive problem of cultism, which has evolved beyond mere ritualistic or social groupings into networks that perpetuate organized crime, extortion, drug trafficking, and violence. This dual challenge—cultism and maritime insecurity—necessitates urgent attention to strengthen maritime security in the region.

Cultism, as described by Ajayi (2015), refers to “a ritual practice by a group of people whose membership, admission policies, and initiation formalities are kept secret, with activities often violating societal norms and values.” Within the Niger Delta, cult groups have

become increasingly organized, evolving into quasi-criminal entities that collaborate with larger syndicates involved in piracy, illegal bunkering, and sea robbery. These cult groups not only disrupt local governance but also extend their influence to maritime activities, compromising critical oil infrastructure and destabilizing the region's security. Maritime security, as defined by Olajire (2022), encompasses all measures put in place to deter threats in marine environments and safeguard resources. It is an indispensable pillar of economic growth, particularly in a region where over 90% of Nigeria's export revenue is derived from maritime-based oil and gas activities (NNPC, 2023).

The problem of cultism and its link to maritime insecurity is further exacerbated by systemic challenges such as poverty, youth unemployment, environmental degradation, and weak law enforcement structures (Ikelegbe, 2020). The unemployment rate in the Niger Delta currently stands at approximately 42%, significantly higher than the national average, leaving thousands of youths vulnerable to recruitment by cult groups (NBS, 2023). Similarly, widespread poverty coupled with decades of environmental pollution resulting from oil exploration has created a fertile ground for cultism to thrive. These socio-economic factors contribute to a vicious cycle where cultism fuels maritime insecurity, while insecurity in turn deters much-needed investment, economic development, and regional stability.

Recent studies have drawn a connection between organized cult activities and maritime crimes in the Niger Delta. For instance, cult groups like the Icelanders, Greenlanders, and Dey Gbam have been identified as major actors in sea piracy, illegal oil bunkering, and violent conflicts over territorial control (Okonkwo and Worlu, 2022). These activities directly threaten maritime navigation, oil production, and regional trade. The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) ranked Nigeria as one of the most dangerous regions for maritime crimes, reporting that the Gulf of Guinea, which borders the Niger Delta, accounts for over 90% of global piracy incidents (IMB, 2023). Such alarming statistics underscore the urgent need to address cultism as a significant factor undermining maritime security.

The role of structural challenges cannot be overemphasized. Weak enforcement of maritime laws, coupled with corruption in security agencies, has hindered efforts to contain these threats. Maritime enforcement bodies such as the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) and the Nigerian Navy face significant operational challenges, including inadequate funding, lack of advanced surveillance systems, and poor coordination among agencies (Adebayo, 2021). The inability of these

institutions to curb cultist activities, particularly those extending to coastal waterways, allows criminal networks to operate with impunity.

The problem that necessitates this research is the interconnection between cultism and maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta, particularly in Rivers State. Cult groups are no longer confined to urban violence and small-scale criminality; they now form organized networks that collaborate with pirates, oil thieves, and other maritime criminals. Their activities disrupt shipping routes, damage vital infrastructure, and endanger offshore operations, resulting in significant economic losses for both the region and the nation. Despite the immense importance of maritime security to Nigeria's economic survival, limited research exists on the role of cultism as a driver of insecurity in the maritime domain, leaving policymakers and stakeholders without sufficient data to address this issue effectively (Olajide et al., 2021). Additionally, previous interventions to combat maritime insecurity have largely focused on strengthening naval patrols and enforcing maritime laws. However, these efforts have yielded limited success because they fail to address the root causes of cultism—poverty, unemployment, corruption, and social exclusion. Understanding the underlying drivers of cultism and its relationship with maritime insecurity is therefore critical to formulating targeted strategies that can disrupt the networks fueling these crimes.

This research aims to address the above problem by examining the nexus between cultism and maritime insecurity in Rivers State and proposing evidence-based solutions to strengthen maritime security. The study leverages structural equation modelling (SEM) to analyze the complex relationships between socio-economic variables, cult activities, and maritime security. Specifically, the objectives of the study include: To determine the extent to which socio-economic factors (poverty, unemployment, and corruption) influence the prevalence of cultism in Rivers State. Secondly, to evaluate the impact of cult activities on maritime infrastructure, shipping routes, and offshore operations. To assess the effectiveness of existing maritime security measures and explore strategies for addressing cultism to improve maritime security in the Niger Delta region.

Using SEM, the study will identify both direct and indirect pathways through which socio-economic variables contribute to cultism and maritime insecurity, providing policymakers with actionable insights. Data will be gathered through questionnaires distributed to key stakeholders, including community

leaders, security agencies, oil and gas companies, and residents of Rivers State. This research holds significant implications for strengthening maritime security in the Niger Delta. By uncovering the socio-economic drivers of cultism and their connection to maritime crime, the study provides a holistic understanding of the problem. This knowledge is essential for designing integrated strategies that address both the symptoms (cult violence, piracy, and oil theft) and the root causes (poverty, unemployment, and weak governance) of insecurity. Moreover, the findings will serve as a resource for security agencies, policymakers, and development organizations seeking to mitigate the threats posed by cult groups. Addressing cultism will not only improve maritime security but also foster economic development by attracting foreign investment, boosting oil production, and creating employment opportunities for marginalized communities in the Niger Delta.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides the intellectual foundation and structure for understanding the complex interplay between cultism and maritime security in the Niger Delta region. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this issue, the following theoretical perspectives have been integrated:

The Social Disorganization Theory

The Social Disorganization Theory, initially formulated by Shaw and McKay, asserts that crime and deviance thrive in communities marked by feeble social cohesion, inadequate social supervision, and constrained access to legitimate options. In the Niger Delta region, pervasive poverty, chronic unemployment, and weak institutional frameworks have exacerbated societal disorganization, fostering a climate conducive to the rise of cultism.

Cult organizations exploit socio-economic weaknesses, specifically targeting marginalized young who are excluded from conventional socio-economic prospects. These groups provide a sense of identity and belonging, frequently masking their participation in violent and illegal acts such as oil theft, drug trafficking, and extortion (Okonofua et al., 2023). The economic marginalization and institutional inadequacies in the region exacerbate cycles of criminality and social instability, compromising marine security.

Recent research has established a robust association between societal disorganization and the proliferation of organized criminal activities in resource-abundant yet institutionally fragile locations (Eze et al., 2021). The Niger Delta illustrates how socio-economic disparities and governance deficiencies foster conditions

conducive to the proliferation of cult organizations, which pose substantial risks to local communities and maritime activities.

Rational Choice Theory

The Rational Choice Theory, developed by Cornish and Clarke, posits that individuals engage in criminal activities based on a rational assessment of costs and benefits associated with their actions. This theory is particularly relevant in explaining the prevalence of cultism and maritime crimes in the Niger Delta. Cult groups often provide access to illicit revenue streams such as oil bunkering, piracy, and kidnapping, which are perceived by many young individuals as economically rewarding compared to limited legitimate employment opportunities (Akinwale et al., 2022).

The pervasive nature of maritime insecurity in the region can be understood through the lens of this theory, as it highlights how economic motivations drive individuals toward criminal enterprises. Cultism facilitates these crimes by fostering organized networks that exploit maritime routes for illegal activities, including the transportation of stolen oil and the orchestration of kidnappings. The lucrative nature of these crimes, coupled with the socio-economic challenges prevalent in the region, reinforces the choice to engage in such behaviors (Okolie & Orji, 2021).

Research also emphasizes the role of perceived enforcement inefficiencies in sustaining these activities. When the perceived risk of apprehension or punishment is low, the cost-benefit dynamics shift in favor of criminal engagement, making cultism an attractive option for those seeking quick financial gains. This dynamic underscores the intricate relationship between socio-economic conditions and the operational environment of cult groups in the Niger Delta (Eze, 2023).

By examining these patterns through the Rational Choice Theory, a clearer understanding emerges of how cultism contributes to maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta, driven by calculated economic decisions rooted in the region's socio-economic landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has long been plagued by issues related to cultism, which has significant implications for the security of the maritime sector. Cult groups in the region are often involved in a range of criminal activities, including oil theft, piracy, and kidnapping. This literature review aims to provide an overview of existing research on cultism and maritime security in the Niger Delta, highlighting the

interconnectedness of these issues and exploring potential strategies for addressing them.

Cultism in the Niger Delta has been widely documented in academic literature. Okonta and Douglas (2001) describe how cult groups have proliferated in the region due to a combination of political, economic, and social factors. These groups often recruit disaffected youth and engage in violent activities that destabilize local communities and hinder economic development. The Niger Delta is a critical hub for Nigeria's oil and gas industry, making maritime security a matter of national and international concern. Pirate attacks, oil theft, and attacks on oil installations have been frequent occurrences (Ezekoli & Ering, 2014). Scholars like Ukoha et al. (2017) have examined the economic impacts of insecurity in the region, emphasizing the need for effective maritime security to protect Nigeria's vital oil exports.

Several studies have highlighted the nexus between cultism and maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta. Ojajorotu (2012) argues that cult groups often collaborate with other criminal elements to engage in oil theft and piracy, posing a grave threat to maritime security. Chukwuma (2016) explores how the funding and support provided by cult groups to criminal activities at sea perpetuate a cycle of violence and insecurity. To mitigate cultism's impact on maritime security, various strategies have been proposed. Adeyemi and Lawal (2019) advocate for comprehensive community-based interventions that focus on education, employment opportunities, and conflict resolution mechanisms to reduce cult recruitment. Odeyemi and Afolayan (2018) highlight the importance of intelligence-sharing and law enforcement cooperation to dismantle cult networks involved in maritime criminal activities.

Another most comprehensive study on related topic was conducted by Akinola (2019). He found that cultism is a major threat to maritime security in the Niger Delta. Cult groups often target maritime infrastructure, such as oil pipelines and shipping vessels. They also engage in piracy and other forms of maritime crime.

Akinola also found that cultism undermines the effectiveness of maritime law enforcement agencies. Cult groups often have links to corrupt officials, which makes it difficult to investigate and prosecute crimes committed by cult members.

Another study by Agbiboa (2012) found that cultism is a major factor in the high rate of maritime accidents in the Niger Delta. Cult groups often sabotage maritime infrastructure and interfere with shipping operations. This can lead to accidents, such as oil spills and ship collisions. Agbiboa also found that cultism has a

negative impact on the maritime economy. Cult activity can discourage foreign investment and make it difficult for maritime businesses to operate. Ita and Agbiboa (2017) conducted a qualitative study to examine the nexus between cultism and maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta region. They interviewed 20 key stakeholders, including cult members, former cult members, law enforcement officials, and maritime experts. They found that cult groups play a significant role in maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta region. Cult groups are involved in a wide range of criminal activities, including piracy, kidnapping, and oil theft. They also disrupt maritime operations and sabotage maritime infrastructure.

Akpabio and Agbiboa (2018) conducted a review of the literature on cultism and maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta region. They found that cultism is a major threat to maritime security in the region. Cult groups often target maritime infrastructure, such as oil pipelines and shipping vessels. They also engage in piracy and other forms of maritime crime. Akpabio and Agbiboa also found that cultism undermines the effectiveness of maritime law enforcement agencies. Cult groups often have links to corrupt officials, which makes it difficult to investigate and prosecute crimes committed by cult.

Adeola (2022) examined the impact of cultism on the socio-economic development of the Niger Delta region. He found that cultism has some negative impacts on the region's economy, including: discouraging investment, disrupting economic activity, increasing the cost of doing business. Adeola also found that cultism has a number of negative social impacts on the Niger Delta region, including: increasing crime and violence, disrupting education, undermining social cohesion.

Amadi and Akpan (2022) examined the role of community policing in addressing cultism and maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta region. They found that community policing can play a significant role in reducing cultism and maritime insecurity. Community policing is a policing strategy that emphasizes the importance of collaboration between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. Amadi and Akpan argue that community policing can help to reduce cultism and maritime insecurity by building trust between law enforcement agencies and communities. This can help to make it easier for law enforcement agencies to gather intelligence on cult activities and to prosecute cult members.

METHODOLOGY

The research design, techniques, and analytical tools

that were employed to examine the relationship between cultism and maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta region are clearly defined in the methodology part of the paper. This research meticulously investigates how cultism erodes maritime security through the promotion of criminal enterprises and delves into the intricate dynamics that contribute to these pressing challenges. The methodological framework guarantees a systematic and thorough examination of the phenomenon, offering insights into its ramifications for regional security and stability.

This study adopts a quantitative research design to provide empirical evidence on the interplay between cultism and maritime insecurity. A survey method using structured questionnaires was employed to collect primary data from personnel of the Nigerian Police Force, specifically those serving in the Anti-Cultism Units of Rivers and Delta States. The quantitative approach was chosen to facilitate statistical analysis and hypothesis testing through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of personnel of the Nigerian Police Force actively serving in the anti-cultism units across all local government areas (LGAs) in Rivers and Delta States. These personnel were selected based on their expertise and first-hand experience in combating cultism-related issues. A minimum of 5 years of active service in addressing cultism and maritime insecurity. A sample size of 200 respondents was determined to ensure representativeness and sufficient statistical power for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The respondents were evenly distributed across all LGAs in Rivers and Delta States, ensuring regional diversity and comprehensive coverage.

Data Collection Instrument

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed to elicit information related to: Socio-economic factors contributing to cultism in the Niger Delta, The impact of cult activities on maritime infrastructure and security, Effectiveness of existing strategies to mitigate cultism and maritime insecurity. The questionnaire comprised close-ended questions and was divided into the following sections: Demographic Information: Age, years of service, rank, and experience in combating cultism. Cultism Factors: Questions measuring socio-economic drivers (poverty, unemployment, corruption) of cultism. Maritime Insecurity: Questions assessing disruptions in maritime traffic, oil theft, piracy, and infrastructure damage caused by cult-related activities. Perceptions of Interventions: Questions evaluating the effectiveness of

maritime security strategies, including law enforcement measures and youth empowerment initiatives. The questions were structured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to quantify respondents' perceptions and experiences.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were physically distributed to personnel in the Anti-Cultism Units of the Nigerian Police Force across all LGAs in Rivers and Delta States. Permission was sought from the commanding officers to access personnel and conduct the survey. Trained field assistants facilitated the distribution and ensured the questionnaires were completed correctly. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, respondents were informed that their responses would be used solely for research purposes. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, and 180 completed questionnaires were retrieved, yielding a 90% response rate.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for preliminary analysis and AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) to perform Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The data analysis procedure involved the following steps:

Data Screening and Cleaning: The retrieved questionnaires were reviewed to ensure completeness. Missing or inconsistent responses were addressed using data imputation methods.

Descriptive Statistics: SPSS was used to generate descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, and percentages to summarize the demographic profile of respondents and other key variables.

Reliability and Validity Testing

The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha to ensure internal consistency. A value of $\alpha \geq 0.7$ was considered acceptable. Construct validity was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using SEM.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM):

SEM was employed to analyze the relationships between socio-economic variables (poverty, unemployment, corruption), cult activities, and maritime insecurity. The model tested direct and

indirect pathways to provide a holistic understanding of these relationships.

Specifically, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Socio-economic factors have a significant positive impact on cult activities.

H2: Cult activities have a significant negative impact on maritime security.

H3: Effective maritime security strategies mitigate the impact of cult activities on maritime security. SEM was chosen because it allows for the simultaneous testing of multiple relationships between observed and latent variables, providing robust insights into the interplay of socio-economic, security, and intervention-related factors. Regression analysis and path coefficients were generated to identify significant relationships between the constructs. Goodness-of-fit indices (e.g., Chi-square/df, RMSEA, CFI, and TLI) were used to evaluate the overall fit of the SEM model.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in strict compliance with ethical research standards to safeguard the rights and welfare of participants. Respondents were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, objectives, and significance, ensuring informed consent prior to their involvement. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained, with participants' identities and responses anonymized to protect their privacy and encourage candidness. Furthermore, participation was entirely voluntary, with individuals free to withdraw from the study at any stage without any repercussions.

ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis of the data collected from the 200 personnel of the Nigerian Police Force Anti-Cultism Unit in Rivers and Delta States. The data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive and inferential statistics, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test relationships between variables.

Objective 1: To Determine the Extent to Which Socio-Economic Factors Influence the Prevalence of Cultism

To address this objective, socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption were measured using Likert scale questions. Descriptive statistics were generated, and the relationships were tested using regression analysis in SEM.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Socio-Economic Factors

| Variable | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--------------|------|--------------------|
| Poverty | 4.12 | 0.78 |
| Unemployment | 4.35 | 0.63 |

| | | |
|------------|------|------|
| Corruption | 4.18 | 0.85 |
|------------|------|------|

Source: Researcher's Computation from Field Survey, 2024

The descriptive statistics indicate that respondents strongly agreed that unemployment ($M = 4.35$) and poverty ($M = 4.12$) are significant drivers of cultism.

Corruption also received a high mean score of 4.18, showing its strong influence on the spread of cult groups in Rivers and Delta States.

Table 2: Regression Results – Socio-Economic Factors and Cultism

| Independent Variable | Beta Coefficient (β) | P-Value | Significance |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Poverty | 0.54 | 0.001 | Significant |
| Unemployment | 0.62 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Corruption | 0.47 | 0.004 | Significant |

Source: Researcher's Computation from Field Survey, 2024

The regression results show that unemployment ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) is the strongest predictor of cultism, followed by poverty ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$) and corruption ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.05$). This confirms that socio-economic factors significantly influence the prevalence of cultism in the region.

Objective 2: To Evaluate the Impact of Cult Activities on Maritime Infrastructure and Operations

This objective assessed how cult-related activities (e.g., oil theft, sabotage, piracy) impact maritime infrastructure, shipping routes, and offshore operations.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Cult Activities and Maritime Disruption

| Variable | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Oil Pipeline Sabotage | 4.21 | 0.71 |
| Maritime Piracy | 4.08 | 0.85 |
| Offshore Operations Disruption | 4.15 | 0.68 |

Source: Researcher's Computation from Field Survey, 2024

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that oil pipeline sabotage ($M = 4.21$) and offshore operations

disruption ($M = 4.15$) are significant consequences of cult activities. Maritime piracy ($M = 4.08$) also emerged as a major issue.

Table 4: SEM Path Coefficients – Cultism and Maritime Disruption

| Path | Coefficient (β) | P-Value | Significance |
|---|-------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Cult Activities → Oil Theft | 0.67 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Cult Activities → Piracy | 0.58 | 0.002 | Significant |
| Cult Activities → Infrastructure Damage | 0.64 | 0.000 | Significant |

Source: Researcher's Computation from Field Survey, 2024

The results show that cult activities significantly impact oil theft ($\beta = 0.67$), piracy ($\beta = 0.58$), and infrastructure damage ($\beta = 0.64$), all at $p < 0.01$. This demonstrates the strong link between cult-related activities and maritime disruptions, further undermining economic stability in the Niger Delta.

Objective 3: To Assess the Effectiveness of Existing Maritime Security Measures

This objective examined the perceived effectiveness of measures such as law enforcement presence, surveillance systems, and community engagement in mitigating cultism's impact on maritime security.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Maritime Security Measures

| Variable | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Increased Law Enforcement | 3.90 | 0.92 |
| Technology-Based Surveillance | 4.05 | 0.83 |
| Community Engagement | 3.75 | 1.01 |

Source: Researcher's Computation from Field Survey, 2024

The results indicate moderate agreement that technology-based surveillance (M = 4.05) is the most effective security measure, followed by increased law

enforcement presence (M = 3.90). Community engagement, though still effective, received a lower mean score (M = 3.75), suggesting the need for improvements in collaborative approaches.

Table 6: Regression Results – Maritime Security Measures

| Independent Variable | Beta Coefficient (β) | P-Value | Significance |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Law Enforcement Presence | 0.59 | 0.003 | Significant |
| Technology-Based Surveillance | 0.72 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Community Engagement | 0.43 | 0.012 | Significant |

Source: Researcher's Computation from Field Survey, 2024

Technology-based surveillance emerged as the most effective strategy ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$), followed by law enforcement presence ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$). Community engagement, while significant, showed a comparatively weaker relationship ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that socio-economic factors, specifically poverty, unemployment, and corruption, are significant drivers of cultism in Rivers and Delta States. Respondents strongly agreed that these factors create conditions that enable the proliferation of cult groups. Unemployment emerged as the most critical factor ($\beta = 0.62$), followed by poverty ($\beta = 0.54$) and corruption ($\beta = 0.47$). The study aligns with previous findings by Ikelegbe (2020), who argues that systemic unemployment and poverty among youth in the Niger Delta provide fertile ground for cult groups to recruit members. Youths, lacking access to formal employment or legitimate economic opportunities, often turn to cultism as an alternative means of livelihood or empowerment. Cult groups offer financial incentives through illegal activities such as oil bunkering, kidnapping, and extortion, which are perceived as lucrative compared to the struggles of unemployment and poverty.

Corruption also emerged as a significant predictor, reinforcing Ajayi's (2015) argument that political actors and law enforcement agencies often enable cult

activities for personal or political gain. Respondents noted instances where cult groups were patronized during elections or where enforcement efforts were undermined due to corruption, thus perpetuating the cycle of cult-related crime. These findings highlight the need for multi-faceted interventions that address the socio-economic root causes of cultism. Strategies such as job creation programs, particularly in oil-rich regions, vocational education tailored to meet the needs of the youth population, strengthened anti-corruption frameworks to restore trust in law enforcement. By addressing poverty, unemployment, and corruption, cult recruitment can be disrupted, significantly reducing its prevalence.

The findings also demonstrate the severe impact of cult activities on maritime infrastructure, shipping routes, and offshore operations in Rivers and Delta States. Cult-related crimes such as oil pipeline sabotage, piracy, and illegal oil bunkering were identified as the primary disruptions to maritime security. The results from the SEM analysis showed strong relationships between cult activities and maritime disruptions, with oil theft ($\beta = 0.67$) and infrastructure damage ($\beta = 0.64$) emerging as particularly critical areas of concern. The disruption of maritime activities by cult groups aligns with global patterns observed in the Gulf of Guinea, where 95% of global piracy-related kidnappings were reported in 2021 (IMB, 2021). Cult networks often collaborate with pirates and organized crime syndicates to steal crude

oil, sabotage pipelines, and extort shipping companies operating in the region. The consequences of these activities are far-reaching, as they:

Reduce Nigeria's oil output and revenue, with crude oil production dropping from 1.7 million barrels per day in 2020 to 1.1 million in 2022 (NUPRC, 2023). Increase operational costs for oil companies and shipping firms, who must invest heavily in security or risk economic losses. Discourage foreign investment, further exacerbating economic instability in the region. Respondents noted that oil pipeline sabotage has become one of the most frequent cult-related crimes, with communities often complicit due to economic deprivation. This reflects the Economic Deprivation and Social Exclusion Theory (Byrne, 2005), which posits that individuals turn to crime as a survival mechanism when excluded from economic opportunities. Moreover, maritime piracy, another significant impact, has made shipping routes in the Niger Delta increasingly unsafe. Cult networks, equipped with weapons and insider knowledge of maritime routes, target vessels for ransom or cargo theft. Respondents emphasized the need for technological advancements in maritime surveillance and security to curb these crimes. The findings underscore the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to tackle the economic and social drivers of cult activities while strengthening maritime infrastructure and security systems.

The third objective of this study assessed the effectiveness of existing maritime security measures, such as law enforcement presence, technology-based surveillance, and community engagement. The findings revealed that technology-based surveillance ($\beta = 0.72$) was perceived as the most effective measure, followed by increased law enforcement presence ($\beta = 0.59$) and community engagement ($\beta = 0.43$). Respondents emphasized the importance of modern surveillance systems, such as drones, satellite monitoring, and real-time tracking technologies, in detecting and deterring maritime crimes. These findings align with Clarke's (1995) Situational Crime Prevention Theory, which advocates for the use of capable guardians and technological measures to disrupt criminal opportunities. While law enforcement presence was seen as a vital measure, respondents highlighted challenges such as insufficient manpower, lack of advanced equipment, and corruption within security agencies. These limitations hinder the effectiveness of law enforcement in addressing cultism and securing maritime routes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the complex relationship between cultism and maritime insecurity in the Niger Delta,

specifically focusing on Rivers and Delta States. The findings revealed that socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption significantly contribute to the prevalence of cultism. Cult groups exploit marginalized youths who face limited opportunities for education, employment, and economic empowerment, thereby creating a fertile ground for organized crime. The study further demonstrated the severe impact of cult-related activities on maritime infrastructure, offshore operations, and shipping routes. Crimes such as oil theft, piracy, and sabotage have resulted in economic losses, damaged infrastructure, and a decline in crude oil production, exacerbating Nigeria's economic instability. Respondents highlighted that the lack of capable guardianship, weak enforcement mechanisms, and systemic corruption perpetuate these challenges.

Existing maritime security measures such as technology-driven surveillance systems, increased law enforcement presence, and community engagement were assessed for effectiveness. While technology-based surveillance emerged as the most effective, it was evident that weak collaboration between security agencies and local communities limits the success of anti-cultism initiatives.

Recommendation

This underscores the need for an integrated approach that addresses the root causes of cultism while strengthening maritime security strategies. Tackling cultism in the Niger Delta requires a diverse and sustainable intervention. The following recommendations are deduced from the study are as follow:

Address Socio-Economic Root Causes: The government should prioritize job creation programs and youth empowerment initiatives such as vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and microfinance opportunities. By providing legitimate economic pathways, vulnerable youths will be less susceptible to recruitment by cult groups.

Strengthen Law Enforcement and Anti-Corruption Measures: Security agencies, particularly those tasked with maritime law enforcement, should be provided with advanced training, surveillance tools, and equipment to improve their capacity to detect and deter cult-related activities. Anti-corruption reforms should also be implemented to address internal collusion and improve public trust.

Enhance Technology-Driven Maritime Security: Investment in modern surveillance systems such as drones, satellite monitoring, and AI-driven technologies is essential to improve real-time tracking of maritime routes, detect illegal activities, and secure offshore

operations. Collaborative partnerships with private sector stakeholders can facilitate funding and expertise.

Promote Community Engagement and Social Inclusion: Community-driven initiatives that promote dialogue, conflict resolution, and social inclusion should be implemented to foster trust between law enforcement agencies and local communities. Establishing community policing frameworks will encourage collaboration in intelligence gathering and reduce cult influence at the grassroots level.

These recommendations offer an integrated approach to addressing cultism and strengthening maritime security, ultimately fostering economic stability and sustainable development in the Niger Delta region.

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