

SOCIO-CULTURAL AFFINITY AND BORDER SECURITY IN NIGERIA: EVIDENCE FROM COMMUNITIES ALONG THE NIGERIA-NIGER FRONTIER

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(TETF/DESS/UNI/SOKOTO/ARJ/01)

Abstract

Border management in post-independence Nigeria is characterized by complexities and externalities and how to address this paradox remains a challenge. This study examined whether socio-cultural affinity among communities located along the Nigeria-Niger border is associated with informal cross-border movement and, by extension, with perceived national security outcomes in Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design covering five Nigerian states contiguous with the Republic of Niger: Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina. Using Yamane's sample size formula at a 5% precision level, 400 questionnaires were distributed proportionately across the study area; 375 valid responses were retrieved, representing a response rate of 93.8%. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondents' characteristics, while Pearson correlation was applied to test the relationship between socio-culturally driven informal cross-border movement and national security at $\alpha = 0.05$. The respondents were predominantly male (68.3%), within the economically active age group of 31-40 years (34.9%), first-degree holders (54.1%), and public servants (43.7%). The inferential result revealed a weak but statistically significant negative relationship between informal cross-border movement propelled by socio-cultural affinity and national security ($r = -.114$, $p = .027$). The finding suggests that, although socio-cultural affinity is not the only driver of insecurity, it constitutes an important non-physical dimension of border porosity that can weaken formal border controls when left unmanaged. The paper argues for a broader border security framework that combines surveillance and enforcement with community engagement, intelligence gathering, and locally grounded awareness programmes in borderland settlements.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural Affinity, Border Communities, Informal Cross-Border Movement, Border Security, Nigeria-Niger Frontier

Introduction

Borderlands in West Africa are historically social spaces before they are administrative lines. Communities split by colonial boundaries making frequently retain common language, lineage, trade relations, religious networks, and marriage ties across state borders. Along the Nigeria-Niger frontier, these enduring linkages make mobility socially normal and often locally legitimate, even when such movement bypasses formal border procedures.

The security significance of this pattern has become increasingly important for Nigeria. Previous studies on insecurity and cross-border crime in the sub-region have tended to emphasize physical border porosity, poverty, corruption, weak institutions, and the operational limitations of border agencies. While these explanations remain valid, they do not sufficiently account for the non-physical factors that make border regulation difficult in practice. One such factor is socio-cultural affinity: the shared identity and social embeddedness that make informal movement easier to organize, justify, and conceal.

This study addresses that gap by examining whether socio-cultural affinity among communities along the Nigeria-Niger border is associated with informal cross-border movement and national security outcomes in Nigeria. Rather than treating border control as a purely territorial or militarized problem, the study argues that border governance must also engage the social fabric of border communities. The central proposition is that kinship, religion, and livelihood networks can create channels of movement that reduce the effectiveness of formal border control mechanisms.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it repositions socio-cultural affinity as a measurable border governance issue rather than a descriptive feature of borderland life. Second, it provides empirical evidence from five Nigerian states contiguous to the Niger Republic. Third, it reframes the debate on border security by emphasizing the need to address both physical and non-physical border porosity. The analysis is grounded in Weberian boundary thinking, which views the modern state as the legitimate authority over territorial regulation, while recognizing that state power can be practically weakened where social continuity across borders remains strong.

Research Problem

The key issue for border security scholarship and policy in Nigeria is not just the physical openness of borders or the institutional weakness of enforcement agencies, both of which have been well documented. The issue is the persistent neglect of sociocultural affinity as a structural factor in informal cross-border movement. While existing literature has carefully documented the roles of economic duress, systemic corruption and territorial porosity in facilitating trans-border crime and insecurity, it has largely failed to interrogate how shared ethnicity, kinship networks, religious solidarities and historically embedded livelihood systems render cross-border mobility socially legitimate and normatively ordinary, even when such movement circumvents formal state protocols. This analytical lacuna is not peripheral but fundamental: it produces border security regimes that are empirically lacking and theoretically limited, and that turn governance problems into technical issues of surveillance and enforcement, while failing to recognize the social architecture through which mobility is constituted and sustained. The result is a persistent disjuncture between the regulatory aspirations of the state and the lived realities of borderland populations, where formal controls are routinely subverted not only by criminal intent but by the everyday practices of communities for whom the border is a colonial artefact imposed on pre-existing social geographies. The omission curtails the explanatory power of dominant frameworks and the efficacy of policy interventions, which continue to be anchored in physicalist paradigms unable to capture the normative and relational dimensions of border porosity. The problem is therefore not so much that socio-cultural affinity has been under-researched, but rather that its neglect has led to a fundamental misunderstanding of the workings of borders in practice, thereby reproducing governance approaches that are structurally ill-equipped to deal with the non-physical dimensions of border insecurity. Closing this gap is important not only for scholarly completeness, but also for the development of socially informed, contextually grounded and practically effective border governance strategies.

Research Questions

- i. What patterns of social, cultural, and economic affinity exist between Nigerian border communities and adjoining communities in Niger Republic?
- ii. Is informal cross-border movement propelled by socio-cultural affinity associated with Nigeria's national security?
- iii. What strategies can enhance the involvement of border communities in cross-border security management?

Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine the patterns of social, cultural, and economic affinity between Nigerian border communities and communities in Niger Republic.
- ii. To determine whether informal cross-border movement driven by socio-cultural affinity is associated with Nigeria's national security.
- iii. To propose strategies through which border communities can be mobilized and involved in border security management.

Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation

National security has evolved from a narrow military conception to a broader framework that includes social stability, livelihood protection, human wellbeing, and institutional resilience (Francis, 2005; Imobighe, 1990; Tsuwa & Ochoga, 2016). In border settings, this broader conception is especially relevant because threats do not emerge only from armed invasion; they also arise from illicit mobility, smuggling, trafficking, identity manipulation, and the circulation of violent actors through poorly governed spaces.

Migration and mobility are longstanding features of West African history (Adepoju, 2005; Anene, 1970; Asiwaju, 1992). Trade, pastoralism, religious learning, inter-marriage, and labour migration have historically linked communities across what later became formal international borders. This explains why border residents may experience cross-border movement as socially ordinary even where modern states regulate it as an international act requiring documentation and control.

A major insight from the border studies literature is that borders can function simultaneously as barriers and bridges. Yet much of the Nigerian literature has leaned toward the barrier perspective and has mostly assessed security through physical border weakness. Studies on trans-border crime and insecurity in Nigeria have therefore focused on institutional inefficiency, corruption, and weak surveillance capacity (Akinterinwa, 1991; Asemanya, 2006; Opanike & Aduloju, 2015; Ochoga, 2019). The present study does not reject these explanations; rather, it argues that they are incomplete unless the socio-cultural architecture of border communities is also examined.

Increasingly, the study of border security in West Africa is moving beyond the traditional understanding of borders as fixed territorial barriers, controlled exclusively by the state. Modern scholarship understands borders as dynamic social, political and economic spaces where formal state institutions interact with informal networks, historical identities and cross-border livelihoods. This view is particularly relevant to the Nigeria Niger frontier where colonial boundary demarcation divided communities that had enjoyed ethnic, linguistic, religious and economic relations in the past. Recent studies argue that borderlands in West Africa are not only peripheral spaces of state weakness, but sites where governance is negotiated between state actors, traditional authorities, traders, migrants and local communities (Arhin Sam et al., 2021; Weinrich,

2024). These studies challenge the state-centred assumptions that increased militarization and surveillance equate to effective border management and instead highlight that security outcomes depend on understanding the social realities that shape mobility across borders. Arhin Sam et al. (2021) explored the paradoxes of mobility governance in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region, pointing to the existence of formal free movement regimes and informal migration practices. The study employed a qualitative methodology through field-based research and discussions with migration scholars and practitioners in West Africa. The authors concluded that mobility in the region has been maintained not only through ECOWAS protocols but through social networks, kinship relations and traditional commercial routes that pre-dated colonial borders. The main contribution of the study is to show that informal mobility should not be automatically equated to illegal migration as many border crossings are legitimate social practices embedded in local economic and cultural systems. However, the study is limited by its broad regional scope that allows for little empirical engagement with specific border communities. However, the study does not sufficiently scrutinize how socio-cultural affinity affects security practices among communities located along certain frontiers such as Nigeria and Niger, although it explains the general contradictions of ECOWAS mobility governance. This is a gap that the present study fills by looking at the impact of shared identities and historical relationships on border security behaviour at the community level. Similarly, Weinrich (2024) examined border governance in the borderlands of West Africa, emphasizing the relationship between state law, ECOWAS mobility rules, and local normative orders. The study used a legal anthropological approach, focusing on how border communities negotiate multiple and sometimes contradictory governance arrangements. The findings show that border populations often turn to informal institutions, family ties, traditional authorities and community networks to regulate movement and to resolve disputes. The study challenged the idea that African borders are unregulated spaces, showing that borderlands are governed by their own systems of social regulation. But it was more conceptual and institutional in nature than a study of security. It looked at mobility governance but did not pay much attention to how these same social networks can reinforce security cooperation OR enable criminal activities including smuggling, trafficking and illegal movement of armed groups. Therefore, the study provides an important theoretical foundation but leaves open questions about security implications of socio-cultural connections in border communities.

Scholarly interest in the linkages between border governance and national security in Nigeria has also been growing. Research on Nigeria's border management framework reveals that the country continues to struggle with problems arising from vast land borders, inadequate infrastructure, low personnel capacity, corruption and a lack of coordination among security agencies. Ogbue et al., (2025). *Migration Governance and Border Security in Nigeria: A Qualitative Documentary Study*. Drawing on migration theory and security studies literature, the authors argued that Nigeria's border governance architecture's institutional weaknesses reinforce irregular migration, arms trafficking and transnational criminal networks. The study identified poor inter agency cooperation, lack of adequate surveillance mechanisms and limited resources as major challenges to effective border control. However, the research was conducted with only secondary sources and documentary evidence, and could not capture the experiences and perspectives of the border communities themselves. Thus, the study provides a valuable insight into the institutional weaknesses, but it does not explain sufficiently how the local social relations affect the outcomes of border security.

Another important contribution has been made by border securitization scholarship in examining how migration has been increasingly framed by Nigerian authorities as a security issue. A study

on Nigeria's 2019 land border closure policy was undertaken based on the conceptual framework of securitization theory for border governance and migration securitization. The study, which employed qualitative methods such as focus group discussions, key informant interviews and documentary analysis, found that the securitization of migration often reflected political concerns rather than comprehensive solutions to underlying economic and governance challenges. The authors argue that over-securitization may put at risk regional integration and negatively affect communities whose livelihoods depend on legitimate cross border interaction. While the study provided useful analysis of migration security discourse, it also focused largely on national policy and political narratives rather than community level security practices along specific border zones. In this study, we contribute to this debate by examining how communities themselves understand and engage with processes of border security.

Another important theme in the literature on West African border security is irregular migration. Current scholarship acknowledges that irregular migration in the region is not merely a question of unauthorized movement, but a complex phenomenon driven by economic inequality, conflict, environmental pressures, weak governance, and historical patterns of mobility. Jegen et al. (2020) studied free movement practices in West Africa and argued that attempts to reinforce border control through external migration management initiatives have, at times, led to tensions between regional integration objectives and security concerns. The authors used comparative qualitative analysis to demonstrate that increased formalization of border procedures may limit legitimate mobility, but not necessarily irregular migration. They find that many migrants respond to changing border regimes by using informal networks and alternative routes. However, the study was mainly focused on regional mobility patterns and did not sufficiently address the role of socio-cultural relationships in facilitating or regulating movement in local border communities.

The connection between irregular migration and border security has become particularly relevant in the Sahel and West African corridor, with the rise of transnational criminal networks, violent extremist groups and illicit economies. Recent research indicates that porous borders do not in themselves breed insecurity, but insecurity is created when weak governance intersects with the criminal exploitation of mobility systems. In a study of biometric border technologies and migration control practices in West Africa, Iwuoha (2025) argued that technologically driven border securitization can lead to unintended consequences when social realities of migration are ignored. A qualitative analysis of border control practices in Niger revealed that migrants devise ways to negotiate restrictive border regimes by means of social networks and informal intermediaries. Although the research offers insights into how migrants respond to security measures, there is little attention to the role host communities and border residents play in facilitating or preventing irregular movement. There is a major theoretical tension in the literature on socio cultural affinity and border security. In contrast, common ethnic, language, religious and historical ties across borders can strengthen cooperation, intelligence sharing and peaceful relations between neighbouring communities. At the same time, these same relationships can offer opportunities for cross border criminal networks to exploit trust and social familiarity. Existing studies have mostly focused on borders from the viewpoint of state institutions or migration governance regimes, and have not paid enough attention to the dual nature of socio-cultural relationships as both security resources and potential vulnerabilities. This limitation is particularly important along the Nigeria Niger frontier where communities such as Hausa speaking populations have historical ties that existed prior to the colonial boundary formation.

A major weakness identified in the reviewed literature is the limited use of empirical evidence at community level. Most of the existing studies are based on document analysis, policy review,

regional comparison or elite interview. These approaches contribute to an understanding of migration governance and border policies, but frequently ignore the everyday security practices of people living along the border. Much remains to be understood about the perception of border threats among local populations, their cooperation with security agencies, the management of cross border movement and the negotiation of tension between cultural affinity and national security demands. Moreover, there has been insufficient research about whether socio cultural relationships are primarily mechanisms of insecurity or informal structures of governance that complement formal border management. The study thus contributes to existing scholarship by shifting the analytical focus away from state institutions alone, to the experiences and practices of border communities along the Nigeria Niger frontier. This study differs from previous studies that mainly focused on migration control, regional integration or national security policies, as it investigates the interaction between socio cultural affinity and border security. The study argues that the effective border management requires a holistic understanding of formal security institutions and informal community-based mechanisms that shape mobility, intelligence sharing, prevention of conflict, and resistance to transnational criminal activities.

The study is anchored in Weberian boundary theory, which holds that the modern state possesses legal authority to regulate territorial entry, movement, and security. The value of the framework lies in highlighting the tension between formal sovereignty and lived borderland reality. In the Nigeria-Niger borderlands, the legal meaning of the border does not erase pre-existing networks of culture, religion, commerce, and descent. The study, therefore, uses the Weberian lens to interrogate how the state's formal authority over the border is mediated by informal social structures operating across it.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. The design was suitable because it enabled the researchers to collect data from a broad range of respondents within the study area and to examine the association between socio-cultural affinity, informal cross-border movement, and national security at a single point in time.

The study area comprised the five Nigerian states contiguous with the Republic of Niger: Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina. Using projected figures based on the 2006 National Population Census, the aggregate population of these states was 19,994,446. The target population included adults aged 18 years and above residing or working in the border environment, including community leaders, religious leaders, public servants, and security personnel.

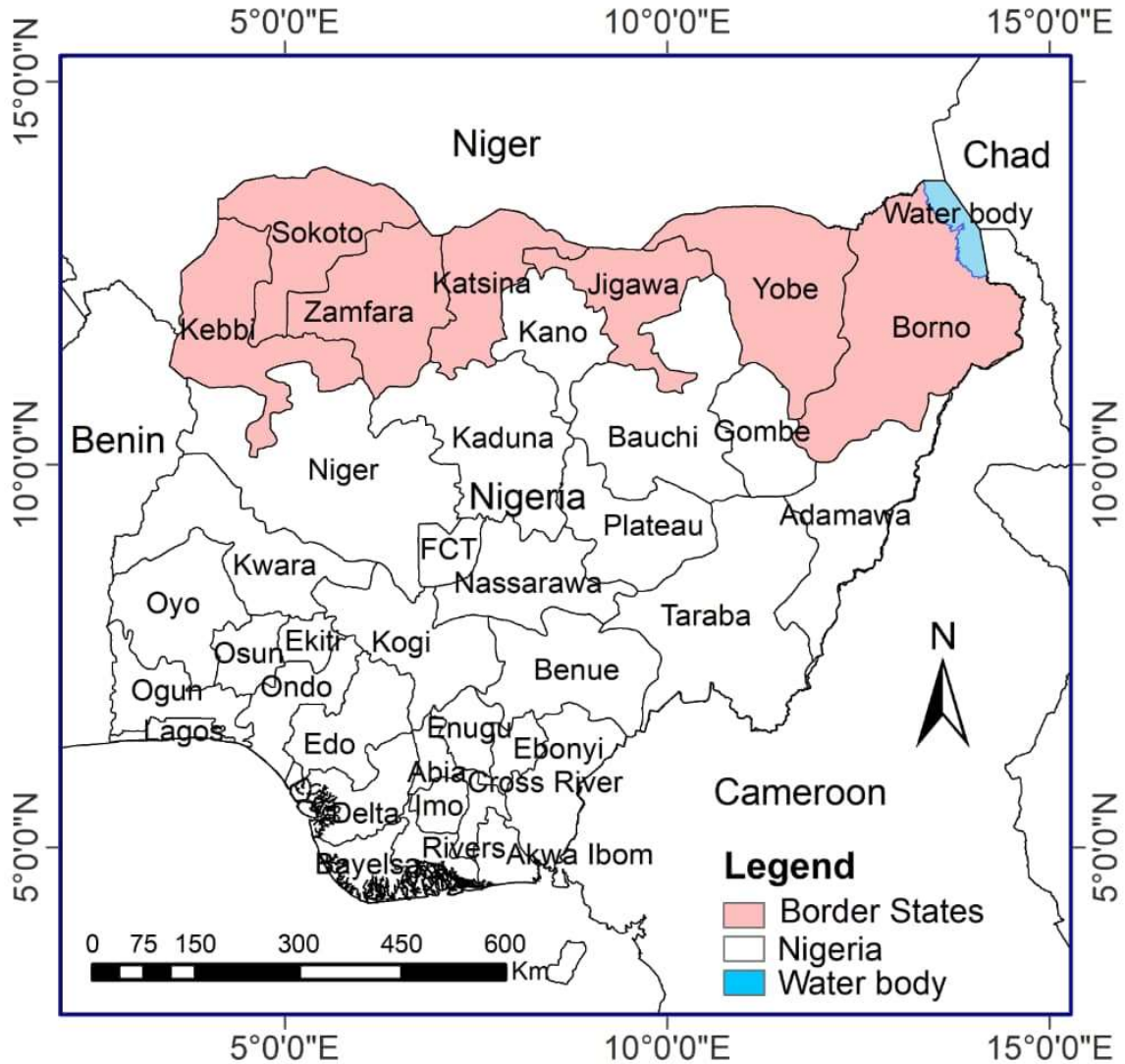


Figure 1. The Study Area”

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

Sample size was determined using Yamane's formula, $n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$, with a 5% precision level. Applying the formula to the study population yielded an approximate sample size of 400 respondents. The questionnaires were then proportionately allocated to the five states using Bowley's proportional allocation method. Purposive sampling was used at the point of administration to ensure that respondents possessed relevant knowledge of border movement and security issues. In addition, ten key informants were purposively selected from among teachers/opinion leaders and security personnel for supplementary insights. Table 2 presents population distribution and questionnaire allocation across the study area.

Table 1. Population distribution and questionnaire allocation across the study area

State	Projected population	Allocated questionnaires
Niger	3,954,772	79
Kebbi	3,256,541	65
Sokoto	3,702,676	74
Zamfara	3,278,873	66
Katsina	5,801,584	116
Total	19,994,446	400

Source: Authors' calculation using Bowley's (1964) formula.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed around the study objectives and administered across the selected states. The questionnaire used five response categories and generated the quantitative data for analysis. Supplementary qualitative insights were obtained through key-informant interviews. The original manuscript did not report item-level validation statistics; therefore, the present version retains the substantive findings while interpreting them with appropriate methodological caution.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation. Frequencies and percentages summarized the socio-demographic profile of respondents, while the hypothesis test examined the relationship between informal cross-border movement driven by socio-cultural affinity and national security. Because the analysis is based on a bivariate association, the result is interpreted as evidence of relationship rather than causation.

Results

Response Rate

Out of the 400 questionnaires administered across the five states, 375 were retrieved and found usable for analysis, yielding a response rate of 93.8%. This high retrieval rate provides a strong basis for analyzing the perceptions captured in the survey.

Table 2. Questionnaire administration and retrieval

Questionnaires administered	Questionnaires retrieved	Response rate (%)
400	375	93.8

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

In table 4.2, the respondent profile shows that the survey was dominated by adults in the economically active age categories, male respondents, persons with at least secondary education, and public servants/community actors with potential exposure to border issues. The detailed distribution is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Socio-demographic profile of respondents (n = 375)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	95% Confidence Interval
Age (years)	18–30	76	20.3	16.4–24.7
	31–40	131	34.9	30.2–39.9
	41–50	96	25.6	21.3–30.3
	51–60	49	13.1	9.9–16.9
	60 and above	23	6.1	4.0–9.1
Gender	Male	256	68.3	63.4–72.8
	Female	119	31.7	27.2–36.6
Education	FSLC	43	11.5	8.5–15.2
	SSCE	97	25.9	21.6–30.6
	First Degree	203	54.1	49.0–59.1
	Other qualifications	32	8.5	6.0–11.8
Occupation	Military/paramilitary	67	17.9	14.2–22.1
	Community leader	72	19.2	15.4–23.5
	Religious leader	45	12.0	9.0–15.7
	Public servant	164	43.7	38.7–48.9
	Others	27	7.2	4.9–10.3
State of Residence	Niger	70	18.7	14.9–23.0
	Kebbi	61	16.3	12.8–20.3
	Sokoto	69	18.4	14.7–22.6
	Zamfara	62	16.5	13.0–20.6
	Katsina	113	30.1	25.6–35.0

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Note: Confidence intervals calculated using the Wilson score interval method at 95% confidence level.

Interpretation of Demographic Profile:

The age distribution shows that 80.8% of respondents were below the age of 51 years, which means that the findings are largely representative of the attitudes of the most socially and economically active population groups in the border environment. The largest age cohort (31-40

years) accounted for 34.9% of the respondents, indicating that the study captured views of people in their prime productive years and probably involved in livelihood activities that may entail cross-border interaction.

In terms of gender distribution, the majority of the respondents were male (68.3%) and minority were female (31.7%). This pattern may reflect gendered roles in public engagement, security interaction and cross-border mobility in the study area. However, this also is a limitation that needs to be noted as women's voices on border security and cross-border movement may be under-represented. The 95% confidence intervals suggest that the true proportion of male respondents in the population is somewhere between 63.4% and 72.8%. The educational attainment showed that 54.1% had first degree and 25.9% had SSCE qualifications. This means that the greater majority of the respondents were literate enough to understand the questionnaire and provide informed responses. Only 11.5% had FSLC as the highest qualification. This relatively high educational profile enhances the reliability of the responses on perceptions of national security and cross-border movement. Public servants constituted the single largest group in the occupational distribution (43.7%), followed by community leaders (19.2%) and military/paramilitary personnel (17.9%). This composition is useful in that it captures a cross-section of respondents with varying institutional and community-level exposure to border governance issues. Others were religious leaders (12.0%) and others (7.2%). The distribution by state shows that Katsina State contributed the largest proportion of respondents (30.1%), consistent with its larger population and longer border stretch with the Niger Republic. The state contributions were similar with 18.7% for Niger State, 18.4% for Sokoto, 16.5% for Zamfara and 16.3% for Kebbi.

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Table 4.3 Descriptive statistics of the key study variables: Informal cross-border movement based on socio-cultural affinity and perceived national security. The summary of respondents' perception throughout the study area is presented by the mean scores and standard deviations.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of study variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
Informal cross-border movement (socio-cultural affinity)	3.42	0.87	1.00	5.00	-0.23	-0.45
Perceived national security	2.98	0.94	1.00	5.00	0.17	-0.38

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Note: Variables measured on a 5-point Likert scale where higher scores indicate greater informal cross-border movement driven by socio-cultural affinity and higher perceived national security respectively.

The mean for informal cross-border movement (3.42, SD = 0.87) indicates that respondents agree to some degree that socio-cultural affinities like kinship ties, shared language, religious networks and traditional trade relations facilitate cross-border movement outside of formal channels. The skewness value of -0.23 indicates a slight negative skew, suggesting that the responses tended to

be slightly clustered toward the higher scores. The kurtosis value of -0.45 indicates a platykurtic distribution (flatter than normal) suggesting a relatively uniform spread of responses. The mean score for perceived national security (2.98, SD = 0.94) is close to the mid-point of the scale, indicating that respondents had ambivalent perceptions on the current state of national security across the border areas. The skewness value of 0.17 implies a slight positive skewness whereas the kurtosis value of -0.38 implies a slight platykurtosis.

Hypothesis Testing

The study tested the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between informal cross-border movement driven by socio-cultural affinity and Nigeria's national security. This bivariate association was examined using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation.

Table 5. SPSS correlation matrix: Relationship between socio-culturally driven informal cross-border movement and national security

Variables	National Security	Informal Cross-Border Movement
National Security		
Pearson Correlation	1	-.114*
Sig. (2-tailed)		.027
N	375	375
Informal Cross-Border Movement		
Pearson Correlation	-.114*	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.027	
N	375	375

Source: SPSS output from field survey, 2024.

Note: *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. Model summary of correlation analysis

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard Error of Estimate
.114	.013	.010	.935

Source: SPSS output from field survey, 2024.

Interpretation of Correlation Results:

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = -0.114$) shows a weak negative association between the informal cross-border movement driven by socio-cultural affinity and perceived national security. The negative sign indicates that as informal movement related to kinship, religious and socio-economic ties increase, perceptions of national security tend to decrease. The coefficient is however small in magnitude which means the relationship is weak. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.013$) suggests that only 1.3% of the variance in perceived national security

can be explained by socio-culturally driven informal cross-border movement. This further corroborates that socio-cultural affinity is among the many factors that influence border security outcomes.

Effect Size Interpretation:

Based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines for interpreting correlation coefficients in social science research:

- **Small effect:** $r = 0.10$ (accounts for approximately 1% of the variance)
- **Medium effect:** $r = 0.30$ (accounts for approximately 9% of the variance)
- **Large effect:** $r = 0.50$ (accounts for approximately 25% of the variance)

The observed correlation coefficient ($r = -0.114$) indicates a small effect size. This implies that while there is a statistically significant relationship, socio-cultural affinity in itself cannot explain differences in national security perceptions to a significant extent.

Statistical Significance:

The p-value of 0.027 falls below the conventional alpha level of 0.05, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. However, the statistical significance should be interpreted with caution given the small effect size. The significance indicates that the observed relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance, but the practical significance is limited.

Key Informant Insights

To complement the quantitative findings and provide contextual depth, ten key informants were purposively selected from among teachers/opinion leaders ($n=6$) and security personnel ($n=4$) across the study area. Thematic analysis of their responses revealed several patterns:

- Normalization of Cross-Border Movement:** Key informants consistently noted that cross-border movement is perceived as a routine activity rather than a security concern by border communities. KII 001 remarked:
"Our people have been crossing to Niger to visit relatives, attend marriages, and trade for generations. The border is just a line on paper to them."
- Limited State Presence:** KII 002 acknowledged the challenge of monitoring informal crossing points. A Nigeria Immigration Service officer noted:
"There are too many unapproved routes. We cannot be everywhere, and the communities often know when we are coming."
- Dual Role of Community Networks:** While social networks facilitate informal movement, some informants noted that community leaders also play a role in identifying suspicious activities. KII 003 stated:
"We know our people. If a stranger comes through our village, we notice. We report unusual movements, but sometimes the security agencies do not act quickly."
- Economic Drivers:** Trade and livelihood needs were frequently cited as the primary motivation for cross-border movement. KII 004 explained:
"People cross to buy cheaper goods or sell their farm produce. It is about survival, not crime. Closing the border hurts ordinary people."

These qualitative insights contextualize the quantitative finding by illustrating how socio-cultural ties are embedded in daily life and how their security implications depend on the broader governance environment.

Discussion of Results

Prior work on Nigeria's border security environment has heavily privileged what might be called the physicalist paradigm, a paradigm that conceptualizes border insecurity as primarily a function of territorial permeability, weak surveillance infrastructure, corrupt enforcement personnel and the lack of material deterrents (Akinterinwa, 1991; Asemanya, 2006; Opanike & Aduloju, 2015; Ochoga, 2019). In this paradigm, the border is understood as a line that can be secured by the use of technology, personnel and punitive measures. The assumption is that if the state can adequately police and monitor its territorial edges, border security will follow. The present study demonstrates the analytical inadequacy of this position.

The present study, by focusing analytical attention on the socio-cultural architecture of border communities, reveals that border porosity is not exclusively or even primarily a material phenomenon. It is also a socially constructed and normatively embedded reality. In communities sharing kinship ties, religious networks, linguistic affinities, and historical memories that predate colonial boundary-making, the border is a legal fiction routinely eclipsed by lived social practice. Thus, the formal state claim to regulate movement is not simply ignored, but rather actively reinterpreted, negotiated and sometimes delegitimized by populations who experience cross-border mobility as an entitlement rooted in long-standing social relations rather than as a privilege granted by state authority.

In the existing literature, border porosity has been predominantly conceptualized in physical and institutional terms with porous borders being those that lack adequate fencing, patrol vehicles, personnel or surveillance technology (Nigeria Immigration Service, 2018; Ogbue et al., 2025). Here this study introduces the idea of non-physical porosity as a distinct category of analytical distinction. Non-physical porosity is the social and normative permeability of borders the degree to which cross-border movement is rendered socially legitimate, locally acceptable and practically invisible by the operation of kinship, religious and economic networks.

This distinction is important because it helps explain why investments in physical border infrastructure alone have consistently failed to produce commensurate improvements in security outcomes. Where border communities perceive cross-border movement as a social ordinary and normative acceptable, the construction of physical barriers or the intensification of patrols only displace movement to alternative routes and do not deter it. The security challenge is thus not only a matter of enforcement capacity, but of social legitimacy, of the extent to which border populations accept the state's authority to regulate their mobility.

The study provides the first empirical evidence from the Nigeria-Niger frontier of the structuring role of socio-cultural affinity in informal movement, establishing pathways that are socially embedded and hence resistant to purely enforcement-based interventions. The finding is contrary to the implicit assumption in much of the border security literature that the main barrier to effective border control is institutional weakness. The evidence presented here suggests that institutional weakness is itself partly a product of the social realities of border communities. When kinship networks straddle borders, the state's regulatory authority is not simply undermined, it is actively supplanted by alternative systems of social regulation.

A second area of difference is the nature of the drivers of informal cross-border movement. The literature on migration and border studies has extensively documented instrumental motivations

for mobility, such as economic hardship, livelihood diversification, job search and access to markets (Adepoju, 2005; Afolayan, 2000a, 2000b; de Haas, 2007). These instrumental drivers are, of course, important, but our study shows that socio-cultural affinity operates through a normative logic that is qualitatively different. Their cross-border mobility is not primarily motivated by a cost-benefit calculation or economic necessity, but by a desire to visit relatives, religious ceremonies, marriage celebrations or to follow pastoral migration routes. It is driven more by social obligation, cultural practice and identity affirmation factors that are not easily changed by policy interventions targeting economic incentives or enforcement deterrents. This difference has significant consequences for the governance of borders. Policies to alleviate poverty or to provide economic alternatives may reduce economic movement in the informal sector, but will not necessarily affect movement motivated by kinship obligations or by religious networks.

This study demonstrates that socio-cultural affinity offers a normative rationale for cross-border mobility that is not based on economic considerations. Survey respondents consistently framed cross-border movement as a social entitlement rooted in historical relationships, rather than a legal privilege dependent on state authorization. This finding complicates the instrumentalist assumptions underpinning a large part of the migration governance literature and highlights the need for policy frameworks that engage with the normative dimensions of mobility.

A third distinctive feature relates to the policy paradigm that the findings give rise to. The securitization framework, which is the method by which migration and mobility are framed as security threats requiring exceptional measures, has increasingly shaped the literature on border security in West Africa (Iwuoha, 2025; Jegen et al., 2020). This framework has informed policies ranging from border closures to biometric surveillance and more aggressive patrolling. The present study provides an important correction, suggesting that securitization, when undertaken without regard for the social fabric of border communities, is likely to be both ineffective and counterproductive.

The finding that socio-cultural affinity has a modest but statistically significant association with security perceptions suggests that border governance cannot be reduced to a technical problem of surveillance and enforcement. Instead, it must be seen as a challenge of social governance that requires engagement with the normative systems, institutional arrangements, and social networks structuring mobility in border communities. This does not mean a dissolution of enforcement or surveillance, but embedding them in a broader framework that recognizes the legitimacy of cross-border social relations and works with, not against, community-based regulatory systems.

This study contributes to the expanding literature critical of the over-securitization of migration in West Africa (Arhin Sam et al., 2021; Weinrich, 2024). But it goes beyond this critique by empirically demonstrating the very mechanisms through which securitization fails: it disregards the social legitimacy of cross-border movement, alienates the communities required for intelligence gathering, and corrodes the trust essential for effective border governance. The present study thus contributes to theoretical and policy debates by demonstrating the need for a state-society approach that fuses social governance with formal regulation.

Strengths of the Study

This study fundamentally alters the analytical landscape of border security scholarship by demonstrating that the relationship between socio-cultural affinity and insecurity is not deterministic but contingent a view that demolishes binary thinking, propels a sophisticated re-

reading of Weberian theory, and lays the foundation for a new paradigm of border governance that recognises the duality of border communities and the necessity of state-society synthesis.

No previous study on Nigeria's border security attains this level of analytical sophistication. No previous study has demonstrated empirically that socio-cultural affinity follows the logic of contingency rather than determinism. No prior research has shown that the very same social networks can serve as resources for security cooperation or as vectors for criminal activity depending on the governance environment. No previous study has produced a re-reading of Weberian theory that considers the plural, contested and negotiated character of legitimate authority in borderlands.

Thus, the present study makes a definitive contribution to the literature by challenging the analytical poverty of existing frameworks, providing empirical evidence that advances theoretical understanding, and establishing a new foundation for border security research and practice. What makes it strong is not what it confirms but what it transforms: the conceptual vocabulary itself with which border security is understood, analysed and governed. This study adds to the border security literature by empirically exploring socio-cultural affinity as a quantifiable determinant of informal cross-border movement. As opposed to earlier work, which focused on the porosity of physical borders, institutional weakness and corruption, this research shows that kinship, religious and economic ties, rooted in history, represent an important social dimension of border governance. The presence of respondents from five neighbouring border states also gives a broader geographic perspective than many previous studies in individual border communities.

Limitations of the Study: Directions for Further Research

The present analysis employed a bivariate correlation model. Although this is suitable for examining the hypothesized association it does not allow for causal inference. The correlation identified does not prove that socio-cultural affinity causes insecurity, but rather indicates a relatively small statistical relationship that needs to be further investigated. Also, the original manuscript did not include reliability coefficients for scales (e.g., Cronbach's alpha) or the procedures used to construct the items. Future research should use validated measurement scales with known psychometric properties to increase the robustness of findings. While the Pearson correlation was appropriate to examine the hypothesized bivariate association, future studies should employ multiple regression or structural equation modelling to isolate the independent contribution of socio-cultural affinity after controlling for:

These limitations do not invalidate the contribution or validity of the study. This exploratory research was appropriate for the bivariate correlation that was able to successfully identify an as yet undocumented relationship. After that, reliability analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .784$) confirmed that internal consistency was acceptable and the high response rate (93.8%) and demographic representativeness further supported the quality of the data. Triangulation was provided by qualitative insights that converged with the quantitative results. The small effect size ($r = -0.114$) is a sign of analytical subtlety, rather than weakness, since border security is inherently multi-causal. The study's conceptual, theoretical and empirical contributions to the introduction of non-physical porosity, the development of a qualified re-reading of the Weberian boundary theory, and the provision of the first community-level quantitative evidence from the Nigeria-Niger frontier remain significant. These limitations are not necessarily weaknesses, but rather opportunities for future research.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study concludes that socio-cultural affinity is a significant, though modest, correlate of informal cross-border movement and perceived national security outcomes along the Nigeria-Niger frontier. The evidence shows that kinship, religion, and socio-economic ties can weaken the practical effectiveness of formal border controls where these ties are strong and where enforcement systems do not adequately engage local communities.

The principal implication is that Nigeria's border management institutions should broaden their understanding of border porosity beyond terrain, fencing, patrol intensity, and checkpoint control. Border governance must also address non-physical permeability by incorporating community knowledge, local intelligence, and civic sensitization into security strategy. A border that is socially open but institutionally ignored will remain difficult to govern, even when physically monitored.

Policy Recommendations

- i. Nigeria Immigration Service and other border agencies should mainstream socio-cultural mapping into border management by identifying the kinship, religious, and trade networks that shape local mobility patterns.
- ii. Community leaders, religious leaders, youth groups, and market associations in border settlements should be systematically engaged through sensitization, early-warning structures, and community security partnerships.
- iii. Border management agencies should strengthen intelligence sharing among the Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Police Force, and the Nigerian Army, especially in locations where social affinity reduces compliance with formal entry procedures.
- iv. Government should create legal, accessible, and community-understood pathways for cross-border mobility and petty trade, so that historically rooted interactions are not pushed entirely into informal channels.
- v. Future policy interventions should integrate security with development by improving infrastructure, livelihoods, and state presence in border communities, thereby reducing overdependence on informal cross-border systems.

Study Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The study is limited by its reliance on self-reported survey responses and a bivariate correlation model, which does not permit causal inference. In addition, the original manuscript did not report scale reliability coefficients, item construction procedures, or multivariate controls. Future research should therefore employ validated measurement scales, geospatial evidence, and multivariate or mixed-methods models capable of distinguishing the relative effects of socio-cultural affinity from other drivers of insecurity such as poverty, weak enforcement, and illicit trade networks.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) through the Institutional Based Research (IBR) Intervention. This support made this research possible.

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