

Silence Is Not Neutral: The Discrepancy Between Bystanders' Attitudes and Behaviors in Bullying

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Article Information	ABSTRACT
Received: May 2026	Background: Bullying is sustained not only by perpetrators but also by how peers respond when witnessing it. Although students may reject bullying, uncertainty, fear, and avoidance can limit their willingness to intervene. This study examined students' self-reported bystander tendencies in bullying situations and identified related needs for guidance and counseling services. Method: A quantitative descriptive survey was conducted as a needs assessment involving 130 students aged 13–15 years in Singaraja City, Bali, recruited through convenience sampling. Result and Discussions: Data were collected using a 48-item, four-point Likert-scale questionnaire covering defender, passive bystander, and reinforcer tendencies and were analyzed using item- and dimension-level mean scores. Defender tendencies had the highest overall mean ($M = 3.40$), followed by passive bystander ($M = 2.08$) and reinforcer tendencies ($M = 1.35$). Despite the relatively high defender score, uncertainty about what to do remained prominent ($M = 2.76$), while silence and avoidance yielded means ranging from 1.71 to 1.79. The coexistence of strong defender tendencies with uncertainty and avoidance suggests that rejecting bullying does not necessarily ensure readiness to intervene. Guidance and counseling services should emphasize safe intervention skills, decision-making, and confidence in responding to bullying, enabling students to translate their prosocial tendencies into appropriate action. Keywords: Bystander, Bullying, Need Assessment, Guidance And Counseling.
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INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a persistent problem in school settings and has serious implications for students' psychological development (Ariani et al., 2025; Jumra et al., 2025; Sari & Nurhidayah, 2025). Its effects are not only felt by victims in the form of emotional distress, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem, but also impact the quality of social interactions and the overall learning environment at school (Ariani et al., 2025; Hallgren & Aftab, 2025; Zhao et al., 2024). In recent research, bullying is no longer understood as a two-party interaction between the perpetrator and the victim, but rather as a social phenomenon involving peer group dynamics, including the roles of other individuals present during the incident (Salmivalli et al., 2021; Thornberg et al., 2022).

However, the reality on the ground reveals a situation that is not entirely ideal. Although students understand in theory that bullying is unacceptable behavior, in practice many choose not to get actively involved when they witness such incidents. They tend to remain silent, avoid the situation, or take no action at all. This phenomenon is known as the bystander effect, which refers to an individual's tendency not to act in certain social situations due to the diffusion of responsibility, social pressure, and uncertainty in determining the appropriate response (Jungert et al., 2025; Thornberg, 2015).

This situation highlights a clear gap between the ideal state and the actual state. Ideally, students are expected to act as active defenders who possess the courage and skills to assist bullying victims. However, in reality, students still tend to act as passive bystanders, neither supporting the perpetrator nor daring to intervene. This gap indicates that the problem lies not solely in cognitive aspects but in limitations within affective and conative aspects, particularly regarding moral courage, self-efficacy, and social skills in handling complex situations.

In the context of guidance and counseling, this situation is a major concern because it indicates unmet service needs. Until now, interventions addressing bullying have tended to focus on the perpetrators and victims, while the potential of bystanders as agents of change has not been fully utilized. In fact, strengthening the role of bystanders through guidance and counseling services can serve as an effective preventive strategy in creating a safe and supportive school environment (Jungert et al., 2025; Polanin et al., 2012). Therefore, a more systematic approach through need assessment is required to specifically identify students' needs in responding to

bullying situations.

Need assessment in guidance and counseling serves to map the gap between actual conditions and desired conditions, thereby providing a foundation for designing targeted service programs. In this study, need assessment was used to identify trends in students' bystander behavior and to uncover the factors that hinder their active involvement. Thus, this study is not only descriptive but also offers practical contributions to the development of needs-based guidance and counseling services.

Based on the discussion above, this study aims to identify students' behavior as bystanders in bullying cases and to analyze the need for guidance and counseling services based on these findings. This study is expected to provide an empirical foundation for designing services that can reduce the tendency toward passive bystander behavior and encourage students to act as active defenders in the school environment.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach using a survey design in the form of a needs assessment. It aimed to describe students' behavioral tendencies as bystanders in bullying situations. These tendencies were examined across three dimensions: defender, passive bystander, and reinforcer. The findings were used to identify students' needs and inform the development of appropriate guidance and counseling services. The participants were 130 students aged 13–15 years from Singaraja City, Bali. They were recruited through convenience sampling based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the study. Students within this age range regularly engage in school-based social interactions in which they may witness bullying and display different forms of bystander behavior.

Data were collected using a 48-item Likert-scale questionnaire designed to measure students' behavioral tendencies as bystanders in bullying situations. The questionnaire covered three dimensions: defender, passive bystander, and reinforcer. Each item was presented with four response options: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Responses were scored on a four-point scale according to the direction of each item. The resulting scores were used to describe participants' behavioral tendencies across the three dimensions.

Data were collected online using Google Forms. The questionnaire link was distributed to students in Singaraja City, Bali, through school networks and available communication channels. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the completion procedures, and the confidentiality of their data. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire independently based on their experiences and perceptions when witnessing or encountering bullying situations. The collected responses were subsequently screened for completeness and consistency before being included in the analysis. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in three stages. First, responses to each questionnaire item were coded on a four-point scale according to the scoring direction of the item. The collected responses were then screened for completeness and consistency before analysis. Second, the mean score for each item was calculated by dividing the total score obtained for the item by the number of participants. The mean score for each dimension defender, passive bystander, and reinforcer was subsequently calculated by dividing the total score of all items within the respective dimension by the number of items in that dimension.

Third, the mean scores of the three dimensions were compared and ranked from highest to lowest. The dimension with the highest mean score was interpreted as the most prominent bystander tendency among the participants. Higher scores indicated a stronger tendency toward the behavior represented by the respective dimension. The results were examined at both the item and dimension levels to identify behavioral tendencies requiring attention. Because the study aimed to describe students' bystander tendencies as part of a needs assessment, no inferential statistical analysis was performed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

I. Overview of Bystander Behavior

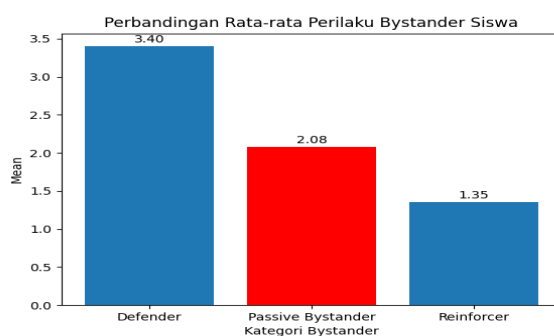


Figure 1. Comparison of Average Bystander Behavior Among Students

The results of the analysis show that students' behavior as witnesses can be grouped into three main categories: defenders, supporters, and passive witnesses. Behavior as defenders falls into the moderate-to-high category, behavior as supporters falls into the low category, while behavior as passive witnesses is still observed in several indicators, suggesting a tendency among students not to actively intervene in bullying situations.

Table I. Defending Behavior in Students

No	Statement	Mean
1	Reporting to a teacher	3.57
2	Believing that bullying is wrong	3.53
3	Seeking help from an adult	3.40
4	Continuing to help despite fear	3.38
5	Willing to act when witnessing bullying	3.37
6	Staying with the victim	3.36
7	Providing assistance	3.35
8	Showing empathy	3.31
9	Ensuring the victim is safe	3.27
10	Confronting the bully	3.25

The results of the analysis indicate that defending behavior falls into the moderate-to-high category, with average scores ranging from $M = 3.25$ to 3.57 . The indicators with the highest scores include reporting incidents to teachers, believing that bullying is wrong, and seeking help from adults. Additionally, students also showed a tendency to continue helping even when feeling afraid, intervening when witnessing bullying, accompanying the victim and providing assistance. Empathy indicators were also in the fairly high category, including ensuring the victim's safety and reprimanding the perpetrator.

Table II. Reinforcer Behavior in Students

No	Statement	Mean
1	Treating bullying as a joke	1.41
2	Joining in on mocking the victim	1.40
3	Giving the bully ideas	1.39
4	Supporting the bully (smiling/nodding)	1.38
5	Joining in on attacking the victim	1.37
6	Cheering for the bully	1.37
7	Laughing while bullying occurs	1.37
8	Spilling the victim's secrets	1.32
9	Thinking the victim deserves to be bullied	1.30

As shown in Table II, the mean scores for reinforcer tendencies ranged from 1.30 to 1.41. Treating bullying as a joke had the highest mean score within this dimension ($M = 1.41$), followed by joining in mocking the victim ($M = 1.40$) and giving the perpetrator ideas ($M = 1.39$). The remaining items also had relatively low mean scores, including supporting the perpetrator through smiling or nodding ($M = 1.38$), joining in attacking the victim ($M = 1.37$), cheering for the perpetrator ($M = 1.37$), and laughing during bullying incidents ($M = 1.37$). These results suggest that the participants reported comparatively weak tendencies to reinforce bullying.

Table III. Passive Bystander Behavior in Students

No	Statement	Mean
1	Unsure of what to do	2.76
2	Avoiding involvement	1.79
3	Choosing to remain silent	1.78
4	Avoiding the victim	1.77
5	Remaining silent out of fear	1.73
6	Remaining silent for fear of retaliation	1.72
7	Staying put	1.71

Table III presents the item-level results for passive bystander tendencies. Uncertainty about what to do had the highest mean score ($M = 2.76$), making it the most prominent passive response reported by the participants. Other passive responses included avoiding involvement ($M = 1.79$), choosing to remain silent ($M = 1.78$), avoiding the victim ($M = 1.77$), remaining silent because of fear

($M = 1.73$), remaining silent because of possible retaliation ($M = 1.72$), and staying at the scene without taking action ($M = 1.71$). Overall, the participants reported stronger defender tendencies and relatively weak reinforcer tendencies. However, uncertainty, silence, fear, and avoidance remained evident in their responses. This pattern indicates that positive tendencies toward defending victims may coexist with difficulties in determining how to intervene in bullying situations.

Discussion

The research findings reveal a consistent pattern: a high tendency toward defender behavior in the moderate to high range ($M = 3.25\text{--}3.57$), as well as low levels of reinforcer behavior ($M \approx 1.30\text{--}1.41$). Specifically, indicators such as reporting to a teacher ($M = 3.57$), believing that bullying is wrong ($M = 3.53$), and seeking help from adults ($M = 3.40$) indicate that students have a clear value orientation in rejecting bullying. Additionally, the empathy aspect also appears quite strong ($M = 3.31$), indicating that students are emotionally capable of understanding the victim's situation.

However, these findings do not correlate linearly with students' actual behavior. The data also reveal a tendency toward passive bystander behavior, particularly in the indicator of confusion regarding appropriate actions ($M = 2.76$), as well as behaviors of silence and avoidance ($M \approx 1.71\text{--}1.79$). This pattern suggests that although students exhibit relatively strong anti-bullying attitudes, they have not yet fully translated these into concrete actions when faced with bullying situations.

This situation reflects the gap between attitudes and behavior, which lies at the heart of this study's findings. The students do not support the perpetrators, yet they have not fully assumed the role of active defenders either.

This finding aligns with Christina Salmivalli's perspective, which positions bystanders as an integral part of the social dynamics of bullying. Within this framework, every bystander response, whether active or passive has consequences for the continuation of bullying behavior. When bystanders do not intervene, the situation indirectly allows the perpetrator to continue their actions (Cheon et al., 2025; García-Carrera et al., 2025; Jungert et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the tendency toward passive bystander behavior in this study can be explained through the bystander effect concept proposed by Robert Thornberg and Tomas Jungert. High scores on the confusion indicator ($M = 2.76$) indicate uncertainty in decision-making, while the indicators of remaining silent out of fear and avoiding involvement reflect the diffusion of responsibility as well as social pressure from peers. These conditions reinforce students' tendency not to act, even though cognitively they know that bullying is wrong.

Another key finding is the disconnect between empathy and action. Although students demonstrated relatively high empathy toward victims, this empathy has not yet been translated into concrete behavior. This suggests that empathy, as an affective aspect, has not been integrated with the conative aspect that is, the readiness to act. In other words, students do not lack empathy, but face obstacles in translating that empathy into tangible action. These obstacles are related to low moral courage as well as limited social skills in dealing with socially risky situations.

In this context, the silence exhibited by bystanders cannot be interpreted as neutral. On the contrary, silence carries significant social implications, as it can be interpreted by the perpetrator as a form of acceptance or social legitimization. In line with the title of this study, "Silence Is Not Neutral," a passive attitude actually has the potential to reinforce the persistence of bullying through the absence of social control from the peer group.

Furthermore, the dominance of passive bystanders within a social environment can also foster group norms that are permissive toward bullying. When the majority of students choose not to act, bullying may be perceived as a normal phenomenon or one that does not require intervention. This situation indicates that the issue of bullying is not merely an individual matter but is also intertwined with the social and cultural dynamics of the school.

In the context of guidance and counseling, these findings have significant implications. The research results indicate that students' primary needs do not lie in improving knowledge or attitudes, but rather in strengthening their ability to take action. Therefore, guidance and counseling services should be directed toward developing practical skills for responding to bullying, fostering moral courage, and boosting students' self-confidence to act in complex social situations.

Interventions that can be developed include group guidance focused on strengthening empathy and the courage to act, psychoeducation regarding the role of bystanders, and training in concrete skills such as how to help victims safely and effectively. Thus, students not only understand that bullying is wrong behavior, but also have the readiness and ability to act appropriately.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that students reported stronger defender tendencies than passive bystander and reinforcer tendencies in bullying situations. However, uncertainty about what to do, silence, fear of retaliation, and avoidance remained evident. These findings suggest that a positive orientation toward helping victims does not always ensure that students feel prepared to select and perform an appropriate response. Guidance and counseling services should therefore focus on strengthening students' practical readiness to respond to bullying. Services may emphasize safe intervention strategies, decision-making, assertive communication, help-

seeking, and reporting procedures. Because the findings were obtained through a descriptive survey using convenience sampling, they should be interpreted as a needs assessment of the participating students rather than generalized to all adolescents.

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