

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****WHY DIDN'T YOU HELP? DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF EMPATHY AND BYSTANDER BEHAVIOR AMONG YOUTH****Rahmi<sup>1</sup>, Lisfarika Napitupulu<sup>2\*</sup>, Nindy Amita<sup>3</sup>, Bahril Hidayat<sup>3</sup>**<sup>1,2,4</sup>Universitas Islam Riau, Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia<sup>3</sup>Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia**Article History**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the relationship between empathy and the bystander effect among adolescents. The increasing prevalence of passive observer behavior, particularly in emergency or distressing situations involving youth, underscores the importance of examining psychological factors such as empathy. Using a quantitative correlational design, this study collected data from 320 adolescents aged 15–21 in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. Participants completed standardized Likert-scale questionnaires measuring empathy and bystander effect tendencies. The data were analyzed using simple linear regression. The findings reveal a significant negative correlation between empathy and the bystander effect. Specifically, higher levels of empathy are associated with a lower tendency to engage in passive bystander behavior. These results support theoretical perspectives that emphasize the emotional and cognitive dimensions of empathy as crucial mechanisms in promoting prosocial action. The study suggests that enhancing empathy through targeted interventions could reduce passive behaviors in emergency situations and promote greater social responsibility among adolescents. Beyond statistical findings, this study has clear implications for character education and school-based interventions. Educators can integrate empathy-building activities into the curriculum through narrative exercises, role-play, and collaborative discussions that help students articulate moral reasoning. Teachers play a vital role in reshaping discourse patterns by encouraging students to critically examine common justifications for inaction, such as “someone else will help” or “I didn’t want to stand out.” By fostering reflective language and scenario-based discussions, schools can cultivate not only emotional competence but also discursive awareness that promotes social responsibility and civic courage among youth.

**Introduction**

Adolescents, as social beings in a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, are often expected to exhibit prosocial behaviors such as helping others during emergencies. However, the reality shows a frequent failure to act, especially when others are present, a phenomenon known as the bystander effect. Originally introduced by (Darley & Latane, 1968), the bystander effect refers to the decreased likelihood of an individual offering help in emergencies when other people are also present. This reluctance stems from a diffusion of responsibility and social influence, where individuals assume that someone else will act. In the digital era, this phenomenon has manifested beyond physical interactions into online spaces such as group chats or social media platforms, where users often ignore pleas for help until someone initiates a response. Such behaviors highlight a critical decline in social sensitivity among youth, potentially leading to long-term emotional disengagement and reduced civic responsibility.

The urgency of addressing this issue is clearly reflected in a growing number of real-world incidents that highlight the deterioration of empathy, social responsibility, and moral courage among adolescents. One notable example comes from Duri, Riau, where a video circulated widely on social media showing a violent fight between two teenage girls. What is particularly concerning about this incident is not only the aggression displayed but also the passive role of the surrounding crowd. Dozens of their peers stood by, choosing to record the altercation on their mobile phones rather than intervening to stop the violence or assist the

victims. This reflects a worrying trend of desensitization and a preference for digital spectatorship over direct action when witnessing acts of aggression.

A similar pattern is seen in a recent case of bullying in a school environment, where a student was physically and verbally harassed by peers. Alarming, the incident occurred in the presence of a teacher, yet no immediate action was taken to defend the victim or de-escalate the situation. Such incidents expose significant gaps in both the moral education of students and the institutional readiness to handle conflict in educational settings. The failure to intervene—whether by peers or educators—not only exacerbates the trauma experienced by victims but also normalizes violence and passive bystander behavior within the school community.

These examples illustrate the pressing need for interventions that go beyond punitive measures and focus on rebuilding empathy, promoting active bystander behavior, and fostering a culture of accountability among adolescents. They also highlight the critical role that educational institutions, families, and digital literacy programs must play in equipping young people with the social-emotional competencies needed to respond appropriately to conflict situations. Without addressing these underlying social and cultural dynamics, incidents like those in Duri and other communities will likely continue, undermining efforts to create safe, respectful environments for youth development. These cases emphasize the need to investigate the psychological mechanisms contributing to passive bystander behavior among adolescents (Eijigu & Teketel, 2021; Mulvey et al., 2021).

In addition to psychological influences, the language adolescents adopt—both in face-to-face interactions and within digital spaces—profoundly shapes how they perceive and rationalize their responses to social situations, particularly those involving conflict or injustice. The use of expressions such as *“That’s not my problem,”* *“I don’t want to get involved,”* or dismissive remarks like *“Drama, not my scene”* is more than mere conversation; it reflects deeply embedded social norms that discourage proactive intervention. These linguistic patterns subtly promote disengagement and passivity, signaling to peers that maintaining distance is preferable to confronting uncomfortable situations.

Within peer groups, this language acts as a social shield, protecting individuals from becoming targets of ridicule or social exclusion themselves. Adolescents often face intense pressure to conform to group expectations, and speaking out against bullying, violence, or exclusion carries the risk of damaging their social standing. Consequently, phrases that discourage involvement become internalized as acceptable, even smart, responses to conflict. In digital spaces, particularly on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or WhatsApp groups, these narratives are amplified. Sarcasm, memes, or comment threads frequently turn serious incidents into entertainment, further eroding empathy and reinforcing the idea that observation—not intervention is the norm.

Moreover, this discursive environment extends beyond passive spectatorship; it contributes to a cycle where language not only reflects but also reproduces social apathy. Adolescents witnessing bullying or aggression may rationalize their silence through the normalized phrases circulating within their peer culture. Over time, this creates a shared vocabulary that frames inaction as logical, safe, and socially acceptable, while portraying intervention as risky or naïve. Thus, language becomes a powerful tool in maintaining disengaged behaviors, subtly legitimizing avoidance and detachment in both physical and virtual communities. Addressing this requires not only educating youth about moral responsibility but also consciously reshaping the linguistic norms that influence their choices.

Among various influencing factors, empathy is believed to play a significant role (Deng et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2023). Defined as the capacity to understand and share the feelings of others (The Ethics of Care and Empathy. Routledge, n.d.), empathy has both cognitive and affective components that can drive an individual toward prosocial actions (Ishtiyak et al., 2024). When individuals can emotionally connect with others’ distress, they are more likely to intervene, overcoming the inertia caused by the presence of other observers (Hortensius & de Gelder, 2018).

Previous studies support this assertion. (Syaf et al., 2023) a negative relationship between empathy and the bystander effect—individuals with high empathy were less likely to act passively. In contrast, other findings show inconsistencies (Fredrick et al., 2020; Putri et al., 2024) comparing Indonesian and Malaysian adolescents, reported that empathy did not always predict bystander behavior, suggesting cultural norms,

social expectations, and situational ambiguity may moderate this relationship. Furthermore, (Hortensius & de Gelder, 2018) differentiated between sympathy, which facilitates helping behavior, and personal distress, which may hinder intervention due to self-focused emotional discomfort. These nuances imply that empathy's influence on the bystander effect is complex and context-dependent.

In the Indonesian context, where collectivist values and communal expectations are emphasized, the failure of adolescents to help others in need reflects a concerning mismatch between cultural ideals and actual behavior (Jamain et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2022; Shukla et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding the role of empathy in shaping bystander behavior is essential for informing educational interventions aimed at fostering socially responsible youth. This study aims to examine the influence of empathy on the bystander effect among adolescents. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the growing literature on youth social behavior and to provide empirical insights for educators, parents, and policymakers who strive to cultivate empathy and prosocial responsibility in young individuals.

## Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative correlational approach to examine the relationship between empathy and the bystander effect among adolescents. The research was designed to determine whether variations in empathy levels significantly influence the likelihood of engaging in passive observer behavior during emergency or distressing social situations. This approach was selected to allow for statistical measurement of the predictive relationship between the two psychological constructs and to contribute empirical evidence to existing social psychological theories (Fadhilah, 2022). The methodological design followed principles outlined by Bickman and Rog (2009), who emphasize the importance of aligning statistical procedures with the theoretical goals of applied social research. Their framework supports the use of correlational design, validated instruments, and regression analysis when examining psychological constructs in naturalistic settings, making it suitable for the present study's aims (Bickman, L., & Rog, 2009).

The population in this study consisted of adolescents aged 15 to 21 years residing in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. The selection of this age range was based on the developmental stage characterized by heightened social engagement and moral exploration, making them particularly relevant for studying prosocial behavior. According to the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Pekanbaru, the adolescent population in this range totaled 115,521 individuals. A sample of 320 adolescents was obtained using purposive sampling techniques, which involved selecting participants who met specific inclusion criteria: residing in Pekanbaru, aged between 15–21, and willing to participate voluntarily.

Purposive sampling was chosen because it allows researchers to deliberately select information-rich cases that align closely with the study's objectives (Yoon et al., 2012). This approach ensures that all participants share the critical characteristics (age, residency, voluntary participation) required to validly explore the relationship between empathy and bystander behavior. While non-random, this method is particularly effective when the research focus requires depth over statistical representativeness and when contextual knowledge drives sampling decisions. The sample size of 320 exceeded the minimum requirement calculated using the Slovin's formula with a 10% margin of error ( $n = N / [1 + Ne^2]$ ), which is commonly used in large-population survey research to ensure adequate statistical precision, (Conroy, 2018). This sample size was chosen to balance feasibility and statistical confidence.

Data collection was conducted through self-report questionnaires distributed both in person and online using Google Forms. This data collection method is particularly appropriate for social research because it allows researchers to systematically capture internal variables such as attitudes, empathy, and behavioral intentions that are central to understanding social phenomena. Self-report questionnaires enable individuals to reflect on their own thoughts and experiences, providing access to subjective dimensions of social behavior that cannot be directly observed. Additionally, the standardized format ensures consistency across respondents, while the option of anonymity encourages honesty, especially when addressing sensitive topics like prosocial behavior or moral disengagement. Given these strengths, this method aligns well with the study's objective to examine psychological mechanisms underlying adolescents' bystander responses in social situations (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007).

Although this study employed quantitative methods, the pattern of responses to specific items—such as agreement with statements that reflect emotional distancing or deferral of responsibility—provides insight into the discursive frames adolescents use to justify their behavior. For example, strong agreement with items like “I didn't help because others were there” can be interpreted as a reflection of internalized social narratives, enabling researchers to infer how respondents construct meaning around helping behavior within their peer and cultural context.

Two instruments were used in this study: the Empathy Scale and the Bystander Effect Scale. The Empathy Scale was adapted from (The Ethics of Care and Empathy. Routledge, n.d.) dimensional model, encompassing five components: perceptual or temporal immediacy, family connection, shared experiences, mediated empathy, and projective empathy. The instrument consisted of 60 items, with responses recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). After item analysis through validity and reliability testing, 12 items were removed due to low item-total correlation ( $p > 0.05$ ). The final Empathy Scale demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.905.

The Bystander Effect Scale was developed based on (Sanderson, 2020) framework, comprising four dimensions: diffusion of responsibility, situational ambiguity, cost-benefit evaluation, and public self-awareness. The original scale consisted of 32 items, also scored using a 5-point Likert scale. Following pilot testing with 60 adolescents, 7 items were excluded for failing to meet validity criteria, resulting in 25 valid items with a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.800. Both instruments were reviewed and validated by a licensed psychologist to ensure content relevance and cultural appropriateness for Indonesian adolescents.

The data analysis procedure involved several statistical steps using SPSS version 25. First, normality of the data distribution was tested using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, yielding a significance value above 0.05, indicating normal distribution (Tsagris & Pandis, 2021). Second, a linearity test confirmed the linear relationship between empathy and bystander effect (deviation from linearity  $p > 0.05$ ). Finally, a simple linear regression analysis was performed to test the research hypothesis. The regression model was used to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between empathy (independent variable) and bystander effect (dependent variable), with a significance threshold set at  $p < 0.05$ . These procedures were selected to meet the fundamental assumptions of parametric statistical testing, thereby ensuring the validity of the inferential results.

Normality and linearity checks are essential when applying linear regression, as violations can lead to biased estimates or incorrect conclusions. The use of simple linear regression aligns with the study's correlational framework, allowing for precise estimation of the predictive value of empathy on passive bystander behavior. SPSS was employed to manage these analyses efficiently and accurately, following best practices in psychological and social research (Williams et al., 2013). All procedures adhered to ethical research principles. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, ensured of confidentiality, and gave informed consent prior to data collection. The research process followed a standard empirical framework to ensure transparency, validity, and replicability of results.

## Results and Discussion

This study sought to investigate the extent to which empathy serves as a significant predictor of the bystander effect among adolescents, a phenomenon where individuals are less likely to intervene in emergencies or social conflicts when others are present. Understanding this relationship is particularly relevant during adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer influence and social dynamics. The research involved 320 adolescents aged 15 to 21 years, all residing in the city of Pekanbaru, Indonesia. The sample was diverse in terms of gender, with 118 male participants (29.4%) and 202 female participants (50.4%), reflecting a balanced representation that allowed for a comprehensive analysis of behavioral patterns across genders.

The age distribution of participants revealed that the majority were 16 years old, a critical age where social identity formation and peer group dynamics are especially pronounced. Most participants were actively enrolled as students at the time of the study, providing a relevant context for examining the bystander effect, which often manifests in school environments, public spaces, and social media interactions among youth.

To accurately assess the relationship between empathy and the bystander effect, the researchers employed two psychometrically sound measurement tools. The empathy scale consisted of 60 items designed to capture both cognitive and emotional dimensions of empathy, such as perspective-taking, emotional resonance, and concern for others' welfare. Following rigorous item analysis and validation by a psychological measurement expert, the empathy scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.905, ensuring the reliability of the instrument.

Similarly, the bystander effect scale initially comprised 32 items, which assessed the likelihood of participants intervening or remaining passive in various social situations. After eliminating 7 items that did not meet validity criteria, the final 25-item scale exhibited strong reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.800. The high reliability coefficients for both instruments ensured that the study's findings were based on robust, trustworthy data. Through this methodological rigor, the research provided valuable insights into how empathy levels among adolescents may influence their likelihood of engaging in prosocial behavior or succumbing to bystander inaction in social situations. The descriptive statistical analysis provides valuable insights into the overall tendencies of empathy and the bystander effect among adolescents in this study. The empirical mean score for empathy was 172.88, with a standard deviation of 20.10, and individual scores ranged from 109 to 225. Given that the theoretical maximum score was 240, these results indicate that participants, on average, possessed a moderately high level of empathy. This suggests that most adolescents in the sample demonstrated a reasonable capacity for understanding others' feelings, emotional perspective taking, and compassionate responses in social situations.

Similarly, the bystander effect variable yielded an empirical mean of 73.57, with a standard deviation of 8.16, and observed scores ranged from 41 to 94. Considering the maximum possible score was 96, this finding reflects a moderate to high prevalence of bystander effect tendencies among the participants. In practical terms, this suggests that despite their moderate levels of empathy, many adolescents still experienced hesitation or reluctance to intervene in situations requiring prosocial action, particularly in the presence of peers or ambiguous social cues. Further categorization of the data revealed that approximately 30.4% of respondents fell within the medium category for both empathy and the bystander effect. This overlapping distribution is particularly noteworthy, as it highlights that a substantial proportion of adolescents demonstrate average levels of emotional sensitivity while simultaneously exhibiting bystander tendencies. This reinforces the complex relationship between empathy and bystander behavior, where higher empathy does not necessarily guarantee active intervention, especially within the nuanced social environment of adolescence.

These findings imply that while many adolescents possess the emotional capacity to empathize, external factors such as peer influence, fear of social judgment, or unclear situational cues may still inhibit them from translating empathetic feelings into concrete prosocial actions. This emphasizes the need for targeted interventions within educational settings, focusing not only on cultivating empathy but also on empowering adolescents with the confidence and skills to act when witnessing social conflict or distress.

This pattern indicates that a substantial number of adolescents simultaneously possess empathic traits and a tendency to remain passive in social situations. This may reflect a psychological tension between emotional awareness and behavioral inhibition (Fredrick et al., 2020). For instance, adolescents might feel concerned about others, but social scripts such as "It's not my place" or "I didn't want to get involved" override the impulse to act. This dual presence suggests that empathy alone does not automatically translate into intervention, particularly when peer norms discourage assertive action (Gönültaş et al., 2024).

Variable	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Empirical Mean	Standard Deviation
Empathy	109	225	172.88	20.10
Bystander Effect	41	94	73.57	8.16

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Normality testing was carried out using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov method on the residuals of the regression model. The test yielded a significance value of 0.200, indicating that the data were normally distributed and met the assumptions for parametric testing. Additionally, a linearity test confirmed that the relationship

between empathy and the bystander effect was linear, with a deviation from linearity value of 0.100 ( $p > 0.05$ ).

To test the hypothesis, a simple linear regression analysis was performed. The ANOVA output showed an F-value of 25.949 with a significance level of 0.000, indicating that the regression model was statistically significant. The regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) for empathy was -0.158, with a t-value of -5.094 and a significance level of 0.000. This finding supports the hypothesis that empathy significantly and negatively predicts the bystander effect in adolescents. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was 0.076, meaning that empathy accounted for approximately 7.6% of the variance in bystander effect scores. In practical terms, this indicates that while empathy has a statistically significant influence, its explanatory power is relatively small. Most of the variance in bystander effect behavior is influenced by other factors not included in this model, such as social norms, situational ambiguity, peer influence, or personal distress (Hortensius & de Gelder, 2018; Mainwaring et al., 2023).

The modest value of  $R^2$  (7.6%) suggests that although empathy contributes meaningfully to predicting bystander behavior, adolescents' actions are shaped by more complex social dynamics. Many adolescents may rationalize their inaction using phrases such as "I thought someone else would step in," "I wasn't sure what to do," or "I didn't want to look weird." These statements reveal embedded social narratives that prioritize self-image or conformity over moral agency (Beyer et al., 2017). Thus, regression results not only confirm a statistical trend but also highlight a discursive pattern: adolescents often construct justifications that relieve personal responsibility. Understanding this helps educators develop interventions that target both emotional development and the restructuring of peer-driven discourse (Sahi et al., 2023).

Predictor Variable	$\beta$ Coefficient	t-value	Sig. (p)	$R^2$	F-value	Sig. F
Empathy	-0.158	-5.094	0.000	0.076	25.949	0.000

**Table 2.** Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis

These findings highlight that while empathy does have a meaningful influence in reducing passive bystander behavior, other psychological and contextual variables likely play a substantial role and should be considered in future research (Deng et al., 2021; Mainwaring et al., 2023). The results summarized in the table provide an overview of the simple linear regression analysis conducted to examine the relationship between empathy and the bystander effect among adolescents. The  $\beta$  coefficient for empathy is recorded as -0.158, which indicates a negative relationship between the two variables. In practical terms, this means that as adolescents' empathy levels increase, their tendency to exhibit the bystander effect decreases. In other words, higher empathy is associated with a reduced likelihood of passively observing a problematic situation without intervening.

The t-value of -5.094, coupled with a significance value (p) of 0.000, demonstrates that the relationship between empathy and the bystander effect is statistically significant. With a p-value well below the conventional threshold of 0.05, the findings confirm that empathy is a significant predictor of adolescents' bystander behavior. This implies that fostering empathy could be an effective strategy for minimizing passive or disengaged responses in social situations where intervention is needed. However, the  $R^2$  value of 0.076 suggests that empathy explains only about 7.6% of the variance in bystander effect tendencies among adolescents. Although this contribution is statistically significant, it remains relatively modest, implying that other factors such as peer dynamics, situational ambiguity, fear of judgment, or personality traits likely play an important role in shaping adolescents' responses in bystander situations. This interpretation is reinforced by the F-value of 25.949, with a significance level of 0.000, indicating that the regression model as a whole is statistically reliable.

Overall, these results emphasize that while empathy significantly contributes to reducing bystander passivity, it is not the sole determining factor. This aligns with previous research (Deng et al., 2021; Mainwaring et al., 2023), which highlights the multifaceted nature of bystander behavior, suggesting the need for future studies to explore additional psychological, social, and environmental variables that interact with empathy in shaping adolescents' real-world responses to social conflicts or emergencies.

## Discussion

The findings of this study revealed a significant negative relationship between empathy and the bystander effect among adolescents. The simple linear regression analysis showed that empathy was a statistically significant predictor of the bystander effect ( $F = 25.949$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a negative regression coefficient ( $\beta = -0.111$ ), indicating that higher empathy corresponds to lower levels of passive bystander behavior. These results support the hypothesis that empathy serves as a protective factor against social disengagement in emergency contexts, reinforcing the theoretical frameworks proposed by (Darley & Latane, 1968; Davis, 2015; Slote, 2007).

Empirical evidence from a large-scale meta-analysis shows that affective empathy significantly predicts prosocial defending behavior in adolescents ( $r \approx 0.27$ ) (Deng et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2023). The simple linear regression analysis showed that empathy was a statistically significant predictor of the bystander effect ( $F = 25.949$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a negative regression coefficient ( $\beta = -0.158$ ), indicating that higher levels of empathy are associated with lower levels of passive bystander behavior. These findings align with recent empirical studies indicating that individuals with high levels of empathy are less likely to remain passive observers. For instance, a 2024 study showed that adolescents with greater compassion and empathic sensitivity exhibited significantly more defending behaviors and reduced passive bystanding in bullying scenarios (Steinvik et al., 2025). Similarly, research in the domain of cyberbullying involving 919 adolescents found a strong positive correlation between empathy and active helping, highlighting how empathy promotes intervention over inaction (Hu et al., 2023).

This result supports the hypothesis that empathy serves as a protective factor against social disengagement in situations requiring moral action (Falla et al., 2021; Palacio, 2020). Adolescents who score high in empathy are more likely to experience emotional resonance and perspective-taking, which reduces psychological distance and increases their likelihood of intervening or helping in emergency contexts (Xiao et al., 2021). This aligns with social psychological theories such as Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis, which posits that empathic concern can motivate prosocial action, even in situations with diffusion of responsibility (Schroeder et al., 2014).

However, it is also important to interpret the  $\beta$  coefficient and  $R^2$  in tandem. While the statistical relationship is significant, the effect size is modest—with empathy explaining only 7.6% of the variance in bystander effect behavior. This underscores that adolescent decisions to intervene (or not) in emergency or ambiguous situations are multifactorial (Deng et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2023). Psychological models such as the Decision Model of Bystander Intervention (Latane & Darley, 1970) suggest that other elements like perceived danger, social norms, fear of judgment, and the presence of others also play crucial roles.

The current findings, when viewed through the lens of adolescent discourse patterns, reveal a deeper complexity behind the relationship between empathy and bystander behavior. While statistical results confirm that empathy negatively predicts the bystander effect, the persistence of passive bystander behavior suggests that individual emotional capacity is often overridden by socially constructed narratives that discourage intervention. Phrases like "I don't know what to do" are not merely expressions of confusion, but linguistic manifestations of a shared cultural script that normalizes disengagement, particularly in peer group settings.

Adolescents are at a developmental stage where peer approval, fear of social exclusion, and sensitivity to group dynamics heavily influence behavior. In such environments, language serves as both a reflection and reinforcement of group norms. The normalization of passivity is perpetuated through everyday conversations, social media comments, and even in formal educational settings, subtly framing intervention as risky or inappropriate. This discursive environment can create cognitive dissonance for empathetic adolescents, who may feel internal distress witnessing harmful situations, yet refrain from acting due to perceived social consequences. Moreover, research in discursive psychology and sociolinguistics (Rahardi et al., 2024; Rahmat et al., 2023) underscores how language shapes behavioral norms. In the context of the bystander effect, language choices among adolescents construct a narrative where inaction is seen as self-preservation, while action is often associated with unwanted attention or ridicule. This highlights that empathy alone is insufficient to drive prosocial behavior unless the surrounding discursive environment also supports and legitimizes intervention.



Thus, beyond enhancing individual empathy, interventions aimed at reducing the bystander effect must strategically target these shared narratives. Educational programs, peer-led discussions, and media campaigns could be designed to reshape the linguistic and social scripts that currently normalize passivity. By altering the way adolescents talk about and interpret bystander situations, it becomes possible to bridge the gap between internal empathetic responses and actual prosocial actions in real-world settings (Forsberg et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the moderate presence of bystander tendencies despite high empathy scores (as shown by mean scores falling into the medium-to-high range) could indicate a disconnect between affective empathy and behavioral response, especially under social pressure or in ambiguous situations (Deng et al., 2021). This aligns with research showing that personal distress, a component of empathy, may actually inhibit helping behavior due to avoidance or self-oriented fear (Pang et al., 2022). Overall, while empathy is a valuable emotional competence that reduces passive bystander behavior, the findings emphasize the need for multi-pronged interventions. Programs aimed at reducing bystander effect among adolescents should not only cultivate empathy but also target situational awareness, assertiveness training, and social responsibility, especially in peer-dominated environments where conformity pressures are strong (MICHA, 2017). To deepen the understanding of this relationship, dimensional analyses were conducted for both constructs. The empathy scale consisted of five dimensions, and the bystander effect scale included four dimensions. Each dimension contributed differently to the constructs' overall influence on adolescent behavior.

### Empathy Dimensions

Empathy is a multifaceted psychological construct that enables individuals to perceive, understand, and emotionally resonate with the experiences of others. However, empathy is not a singular, uniform process; it operates across multiple dimensions that reflect both personal and contextual factors influencing how empathy is experienced and expressed. Understanding these dimensions provides critical insight into the complexity of empathetic behavior, particularly in adolescent populations where empathy development is closely tied to social, cognitive, and emotional growth. This study conceptualizes empathy across five key dimensions: Shared Experiences, Family Connection, Projective Empathy, Mediated Empathy, and Perceptual/Temporal Immediacy. Each dimension reflects a distinct but interrelated aspect of how individuals connect emotionally with others, either through direct experiences, social relationships, imagined scenarios, mediated environments, or situational immediacy. These dimensions help explain the variability in empathetic responses among adolescents, particularly in social situations that require moral judgment or intervention, such as witnessing peer conflict or bullying. By exploring these five dimensions, the study aims to capture the nuanced ways in which empathy operates beyond simplistic emotional contagion. Recognizing these layers is essential to understanding how empathy influences prosocial behavior or, conversely, how it may fail to translate into action due to social or psychological barriers. The following sections describe each dimension in detail, highlighting their relevance to adolescent development and their potential role in moderating bystander behavior.

Empathy Dimension	Mean	SD
Shared Experiences	23.0	3.9
Family Connection	22.3	4.1
Projective Empathy	22.2	4.3
Mediated Empathy	21.8	4.2
Perceptual/Temporal Immediacy	21.5	4.5

**Table 4.** Presents the mean and standard deviation of each empathy dimension.

The highest-rated dimension was 'Shared Experiences with Friends or Life Partners,' followed by 'Family Connection' and 'Projective Empathy.' These dimensions reflect close emotional bonding and imaginative perspective-taking, which may serve as strong emotional motivators to act in prosocial ways. In contrast, 'Mediated Empathy' and 'Perceptual/Temporal Immediacy' received comparatively lower scores, indicating that empathy triggered by abstract or distant stimuli might have less behavioral influence. These findings



highlight that while empathy does have a meaningful influence in reducing passive bystander behavior, other psychological and contextual variables likely play a substantial role and should be considered in future research (Hikmat et al., 2024).

Additional analysis of the empathy dimensions revealed meaningful variation in how adolescents relate to different sources of empathic engagement. The highest mean score was found in the dimension of ‘Shared Experiences with Friends or Life Partners’ ( $M = 23.0$ ,  $SD = 3.9$ ), followed closely by ‘Family Connection’ ( $M = 22.3$ ,  $SD = 4.1$ ) and ‘Projective Empathy’ ( $M = 22.2$ ,  $SD = 4.3$ ). These findings suggest that emotional closeness and the ability to imaginatively adopt another’s perspective are especially salient in driving empathic responses among adolescents (Falla et al., 2021; Mu et al., 2025). In contrast, lower mean scores were observed in ‘Mediated Empathy’ ( $M = 21.8$ ,  $SD = 4.2$ ) and ‘Perceptual/Temporal Immediacy’ ( $M = 21.5$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ). These two dimensions reflect more abstract or indirect forms of empathy—such as empathizing with distant or unfamiliar individuals or situations. The lower scores in these areas imply that empathy activated by emotionally or contextually distant stimuli may be less influential in shaping behavior, especially in high-pressure social environments typical of adolescence (Steinvik et al., 2025).

This pattern highlights the importance of proximity—both emotional and situational—in activating meaningful empathic engagement. Interventions that seek to reduce bystander passivity and increase social responsibility may benefit from incorporating strategies such as peer-based role-play, shared storytelling, and guided exercises in imaginative perspective-taking (Wolgast et al., 2023). These approaches can strengthen the more actionable forms of empathy that are grounded in personal connection and shared experience.

### Bystander Effect Dimensions

The bystander effect refers to a social psychological phenomenon where individuals are less likely to offer help in emergency or problematic situations when others are present. While traditionally conceptualized as a generalized inaction in group settings, recent research suggests that the bystander effect is a multidimensional construct influenced by cognitive, emotional, and social factors. These dimensions help explain the varying degrees and forms of passive behavior exhibited by individuals, particularly adolescents, across different social contexts.

Understanding the bystander effect as a multidimensional construct allows for a more comprehensive examination of the barriers to prosocial action, especially among adolescents, whose behavior is heavily shaped by peer influence and social perception. Exploring these dimensions provides insight into how passive bystander behavior is maintained and reinforced within adolescent groups, despite individual differences in empathy or moral reasoning.

The following sections elaborate on each bystander effect dimension, highlighting their relevance in adolescent social interactions and their role in perpetuating inaction during critical situations. By dissecting these factors, the study offers a deeper understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms underlying the bystander effect, with implications for designing interventions that foster proactive, empathetic responses.

Bystander Effect Dimension	Mean	SD
Diffusion of Responsibility	19.5	2.5
Situational Ambiguity	18.8	2.8
Cost and Benefit Analysis	17.9	3.1
Public Self-Awareness	17.4	3.4

**Table 5.** Dimension of Bystander Effect

Further analysis of the bystander effect dimensions revealed distinct psychological tendencies underlying adolescents’ reluctance to intervene in social situations. The highest mean score was observed in the dimension of ‘Diffusion of Responsibility’ ( $M = 19.5$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ), which aligns with classical social psychology theories proposed by Darley and Latané (1968). This suggests that adolescents tend to believe that someone else will take responsibility in emergency or ambiguous situations, thereby diminishing their own perceived obligation to act (Ai et al., 2024).

The second-highest score, 'Situational Ambiguity' ( $M = 18.8$ ,  $SD = 2.8$ ), indicates that unclear social cues or uncertainty about the seriousness of the situation further delay or inhibit helping behavior. Adolescents often hesitate to intervene when they are unsure about the nature of the emergency or whether help is truly needed. This supports the notion that clarity in social roles and expectations is essential for encouraging prosocial behavior (Mulvey et al., 2021). The dimensions of 'Cost and Benefit Analysis' ( $M = 17.9$ ,  $SD = 3.1$ ) and 'Public Self-Awareness' ( $M = 17.4$ ,  $SD = 3.4$ ) scored slightly lower but remain notable. These dimensions highlight adolescents' tendency to weigh personal consequences before acting, including fear of embarrassment, concern over making the wrong move, or reluctance to stand out from peers. Public self-awareness, in particular, reveals that image management and peer judgment are considerable factors in adolescent decision-making (Chávez et al., 2024).

Collectively, these findings underscore that the bystander effect is not driven by a single psychological factor but rather a combination of cognitive, emotional, and social processes. Interventions aiming to mitigate bystander passivity should therefore take a multidimensional approach—targeting not only empathy but also social cognitive training. Scenario-based learning, role-play in ambiguous contexts, and the development of assertiveness skills can help reduce situational ambiguity and challenge the tendency to defer responsibility to others. Emphasizing individual agency and the moral importance of immediate action may foster more decisive behavior in real-life situations.

When evaluated through relative comparisons of mean scores and standard deviations across the four bystander effect dimensions, distinct patterns emerged that reflect different levels of cognitive and emotional influence. The dimension 'Diffusion of Responsibility' had the highest mean score ( $M = 19.5$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ), indicating that this was the most prominent reason for adolescents' inaction in social situations. Despite not reaching the theoretical midpoint of the scale (which would suggest high intensity), this dimension stood out relative to the others. Its low standard deviation further suggests consistency across respondents in experiencing this form of social disengagement. 'Situational Ambiguity' ( $M = 18.8$ ,  $SD = 2.8$ ) ranked second and reflects a moderate category of influence. It reveals that uncertainty in interpreting social situations is another core barrier to prosocial action, especially when adolescents lack clear cues or contextual understanding. 'Cost and Benefit Analysis' ( $M = 17.9$ ,  $SD = 3.1$ ) and 'Public Self-Awareness' ( $M = 17.4$ ,  $SD = 3.4$ ) fall into the lower categories, both in terms of mean score and relative influence. However, their higher standard deviations suggest greater individual variation—some adolescents are more concerned about personal risk or social image than others (Andrews et al., 2020). These category-based conclusions imply that interventions should prioritize reducing diffusion of responsibility and clarifying situational cues, as these are the most consistently endorsed barriers to helping behavior. Meanwhile, training that enhances individual confidence and reduces image sensitivity may help address variability in the lower-ranking dimensions.

### **Integrated Interpretation**

Disaggregating both constructs into their respective dimensions provides a more nuanced understanding of how adolescents cognitively and emotionally process social emergencies. While empathy dimensions rooted in emotional closeness (e.g., shared experiences, family connection) contribute positively to intervention motivation, bystander effect dimensions like responsibility diffusion and ambiguity hinder action. The intersection of these findings illustrates the need for holistic educational approaches combining emotional development with cognitive reframing.

### **Implications and Future Research**

This study contributes to a more culturally specific understanding of how empathy interacts with bystander behavior, particularly in the Indonesian adolescent context where social harmony, group affiliation, and peer acceptance are highly emphasized. While the bystander effect has been extensively studied in Western contexts, this research highlights that even within collectivist cultures, individual traits such as empathy can serve as protective factors that encourage prosocial action. In settings where peer conformity often shapes behavior, adolescents with higher empathy levels may be more willing to break social passivity and intervene during critical situations, challenging the dominant narrative of disengagement.

The unique contribution of this study lies in its detailed quantification of both empathy and bystander effect dimensions. By identifying specific subcomponents such as Projective Empathy or Perceptual Immediacy that show the strongest predictive value, educators, psychologists, and policymakers can design more targeted intervention strategies. For example, empathy training programs in schools can move beyond general awareness to focus on developing adolescents' ability to project themselves into others' experiences or to respond quickly in situations that demand immediate action. Public awareness campaigns can also leverage these findings by reframing inaction as socially undesirable and promoting alternative discourses that valorize intervention.

From a methodological standpoint, future research should adopt longitudinal and experimental designs to assess the long-term impact of empathy-building interventions on reducing bystander apathy. Furthermore, comparative studies across different cultural contexts, particularly between collectivist societies like Indonesia and more individualistic cultures, would provide valuable insights into the universality or variability of these psychological processes. Such comparative research could contribute to the development of culturally responsive models for promoting prosocial behavior among youth, ensuring that interventions are both effective and contextually appropriate. In conclusion, empathy, especially when grounded in close emotional connections and perspective-taking can counteract passive bystander behavior in adolescents (Deng et al., 2021). Educational and psychological interventions that target both emotional resonance and cognitive role clarity may be most effective in cultivating a responsive, prosocial youth generation (Mesurado et al., 2019; MICHA, 2017).

## Conclusions

This study concludes that empathy has a significant negative effect on the bystander effect among adolescents in Pekanbaru. The regression analysis demonstrated that higher levels of empathy significantly predict a lower tendency for passive bystander behavior in emergency or socially distressing situations. Dimensional analysis further revealed that empathy rooted in shared experiences, familial closeness, and perspective-taking had the strongest influence in motivating prosocial action. In contrast, dimensions such as mediated empathy or perceptual immediacy were less influential. On the bystander effect side, diffusion of responsibility and situational ambiguity emerged as dominant psychological barriers to action.

These findings confirm that not all aspects of empathy function equally in reducing bystander inaction, and not all inhibiting mechanisms of the bystander effect carry the same weight. Therefore, educational and psychological interventions should prioritize emotional bonding strategies and address group-based cognitive distortions such as responsibility diffusion and ambiguity. Practically, schools and educators should be encouraged to implement classroom-based interventions that challenge passive discourse among students. For example, teachers can guide students through simulated social scenarios where inaction is critically examined and reframed, in line with action-teaching strategies that foster empathy and assertive communication (Zhang et al., 2022). Students should be trained to recognize and verbally challenge common justifications like "It's not my problem" or "Someone else will help." Furthermore, discourse training modules can be embedded in character education programs to help students develop empathetic language and assertive communication. These activities will not only strengthen emotional competence but also reshape the narrative tools students use when confronted with moral dilemmas in peer settings.

Future research should explore how targeted interventions—such as empathy training focused on narrative-building and real-life simulations—can reduce bystander behavior over time. Longitudinal or experimental studies are also recommended to assess causality and the durability of intervention effects, particularly among different demographic groups or cultural contexts.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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