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Factors Influencing Bystander Behavior in School Bullying: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstrak

Saksi memiliki peran penting dalam memperkuat maupun mereduksi peristiwa perundungan di sekolah. Namun, faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi perilaku saksi masih tersebar dalam berbagai temuan penelitian dan belum banyak disintesis berdasarkan kerangka peran partisipan yang dikemukakan oleh Salmivalli. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis faktor internal, faktor eksternal, serta mekanisme mediasi dan moderasi yang memengaruhi perilaku saksi dalam perundungan di sekolah. Penelitian menggunakan metode *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR) dengan mengikuti pedoman *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA). Sebanyak 25 artikel penelitian empiris yang diterbitkan pada periode 2021–2026 dari sepuluh negara dianalisis melalui proses seleksi dan sintesis literatur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa efikasi diri untuk membela korban (*defender self-efficacy*) merupakan faktor internal yang secara konsisten berasosiasi positif dengan perilaku pembelaan terhadap korban. Sementara itu, konteks hubungan guru dan siswa menunjukkan hubungan yang relatif kuat dengan perilaku pembelaan, meskipun masih terbatas dikaji. Interaksi antara pelepasan tanggung jawab moral (*moral disengagement*) dan efikasi diri untuk membela korban menunjukkan bahwa pengaruh protektif efikasi diri bersifat kondisional. Selain itu, peran *assistant* dan *reinforcer* belum dapat dibedakan secara empiris melalui pengujian statistik dalam literatur yang ditinjau. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya pengembangan intervensi pencegahan perundungan yang mengintegrasikan penguatan efikasi diri, kesadaran moral, dan kualitas lingkungan sosial sekolah.

Kata Kunci: Perilaku saksi, Perundungan, Siswa, Kajian Literatur Sistemati.

Abstract

Bystanders play a decisive role in escalating or de-escalating school bullying incidents, yet the factors shaping their behavior remain fragmented across the literature and rarely synthesized according to Salmivalli's participant role framework. This study employed a systematic literature review following PRISMA guidelines, drawing on 25 studies published between 2021 and 2026 across ten countries, to identify internal factors, external factors, mediators, and moderators influencing bystander behavior in school bullying. Results show that defender self-efficacy was the most consistent positive association with defender across the studies that examined it. Teacher context, though understudied, produced the highest reported effect size in the corpus. The interaction between moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy indicated that self-efficacy's protective effect is conditional rather than universal, with Assistant and Reinforcer roles remaining statistically undifferentiated throughout the reviewed literature, highlighting priorities for future bullying research and intervention.

Keywords: *Bystander behavior, Bullying, Students, Systematic Literature Review*

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying has become a serious problem in schools around the world and has drawn the attention of educators, researchers, and policymakers (Gaffney et al., 2021). The effects of bullying at school are not only physical and emotional for the victims but also affect their academic performance, mental health, and well-being (Han, 2024). In Indonesia, data from the National Research Center of the Indonesian National Police's Criminal Investigation Agency (Bareskrim) (2025) shows an 18% increase in the number of bullying victims from 2024 to 14,512 in 2025. Combined data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) and the Indonesian Education Monitoring Network (JPPI) (2025) report that the most common form of bullying is physical bullying at 55.5%, followed by verbal or psychological bullying at 29.3%, indicating that conventional bullying is the most pressing form of bullying among adolescents.

In the dynamics of bullying, the roles associated with bullying behavior are referred to as "bullying participant roles," which involve social roles such as the bully, the victim, and the witness also known as a bystander (Salmivalli et al., 1996). A bystander is someone who does not actively intervene in a situation where another person needs help (Latané & Darley, 1970). Salmivalli et al, (1996) classify bystanders into four types: "assistants," who actively participate in bullying by following the bully's instructions without initiating the attack, "reinforcers," who encourage bullying through attention, laughter, or cheering, "outsiders," who witness bullying but remain uninvolved and do not take action and "defenders," who support the victim and attempt to stop the bullying.

Research shows that more than 80% of students act as bystanders in bullying situations (O'Connell et al., 1999; Polanin et al., 2012). However, most bystanders tend to be passive: about 55% do not intervene, while only 20-38% act as defenders, and a small proportion actually support the perpetrator (Eijigu & Teketel, 2021). Salmivalli, (2014) argues that one of the most effective ways to reduce bullying is to focus on increasing positive bystander intervention. When students support one another, they foster a positive school climate and establish a norm that rejects bullying, encouraging perpetrators to stop due to negative consequences. (Leeth, 2023).

In bullying situations, bystanders often fail to intervene because they assume that someone else will step in. This phenomenon is known as the bystander effect the tendency for people not to help when others are present because they feel the responsibility is shared (Latané & Darley, 1970). The more witnesses there are, the less likely an individual is to intervene and offer assistance. In social psychology, Latané & Darley (1970) formulated the Bystander Intervention Model (BIM), which explains why people who are near the scene of an incident sometimes provide assistance and sometimes do not. The Bystander Intervention Model (BIM) consists of five stages: (stage 1) noticing the event, (stage 2) recognizing or interpreting it as an emergency, (stage 3) taking responsibility for helping, (stage 4) knowing how to provide help, (stage 5) providing help. At each stage in this

model, a "no" response results in no assistance being provided, while a "yes" response brings a person closer to providing assistance.

Several previous empirical studies have also shown that bystander behavior is influenced by various factors and their interactions with mediating and moderating factors. Internal factors such as empathy (Zhang et al., 2025) and self-efficacy (Adewoye & du Plessis, 2021) are associated with defender. Meanwhile, factors such as a high level of moral disengagement (Sjögren et al., 2024) are consistently associated with pro-bullying tendencies, such as assistant and reinforcers. At the external level, factors such as peer norms (Wu et al., 2024), relationships with teachers, family support, and school climate also influence bystander behavior when witnessing bullying (Waasdorp et al., 2022a).

By taking into account the bystander effect, BIM, and various factors that influence or hinder bystander intervention behavior, counselors can design more effective programs to foster defensive behavior among students. Such programs should focus on increasing students knowledge and awareness of the forms of bullying and their impact on victims, fostering a culture of mutual support among peers, and equipping students with the strategies and skills needed to intervene safely when witnessing bullying (Leeth, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the predictive factors of bystander behavior in bullying situations and the underlying mechanisms (Zych et al., 2019).

Although systematic reviews of bystander behavior in bullying have been conducted previously such as the review by Irahatunnufus et al. (2025), which identified internal and external factors influencing bystander behavior among students based on nine studies sourced from Google Scholar, there has been no systematic review that integrates the mediating and moderating mechanisms underpinning such behavior, nor one that organizes findings based on Salmivalli's (1996) framework of the four participant roles.

Furthermore, no synthesis has examined the extent to which the roles of "Assistant" and "Reinforcer" though conceptually distinct have been empirically differentiated in the primary literature. This gap is significant because interventions that target "pro-bullying" behavior as a single construct risk overlooking role-specific mechanisms that require different intervention strategies. Given these gaps, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to address the following research questions: (1) What internal factors influence bystander behavior in cases of school bullying? (2) What external factors influence bystander behavior in cases of school bullying? and (3) What mediating and moderating factors influence the relationship between these factors and bystander behavior in cases of school bullying?

METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design, which is a structured secondary research method used to identify, evaluate, and synthesize all relevant scientific evidence in order to answer the research questions comprehensively and transparently (Kitchenham, 2007; Tranfield et al., 2003). The SLR approach was chosen because it minimizes selection bias through an explicit search protocol and standardized inclusion and exclusion criteria (Moher et al., 2009).

Literature searches were conducted using Scopus, selected for its broad and reputable scholarly coverage, which supports systematic identification of relevant and high quality articles, with metadata retrieved from on April 25, 2026. The search employed the keyword ("Bystander Behavior" AND "Bullying" AND "Factor" AND "School."). The results were then screened based on inclusion and exclusion criteria established prior to the search process as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion

Inclusion	Exclusion
Empirical articles published in peer-reviewed journals	Review articles, book chapters, conference abstracts, editorials, letters, and retracted papers
Published between 2021 and 2026	Published before 2021
Konventional bullying	Cyber-bullying
School context	Not in a school context
In English	In language other than English

The selection process followed the 2020 PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol developed by (Page et al., 2021). This protocol consists of four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. During the full-text review, studies were evaluated based on their research objectives, participants, types of bullying, types of bystander and the methods.

The results were then presented in a PRISMA flow diagram to transparently document the stages. The studies obtained were analyzed and synthesized into three main findings: (1) internal factors, (2) external factors, and (3) mediators and moderators that influence bystander behavior. The synthesis process yielded an understanding of the factors that influence bystander behavior, as well as the roles of mediators and moderators in the relationship between those factors and bystander behavior

RESULTS

The initial search of Scopus yielded 146 records. Following the removal of records published before 2021 (n=83), 63 records were screened by title and abstract, of which 31 were excluded based on the criteria presented in Table 1, including irrelevance to the review scope, non-English language, or classification as review articles or book chapters. The remaining 32 reports were sought for full-text retrieval and 5 could not be accessed. Of the 27 reports assessed for eligibility, two were excluded for not adequately addressing the research questions, resulting in a final sample of 25 studies included in this review, see Figure 1.

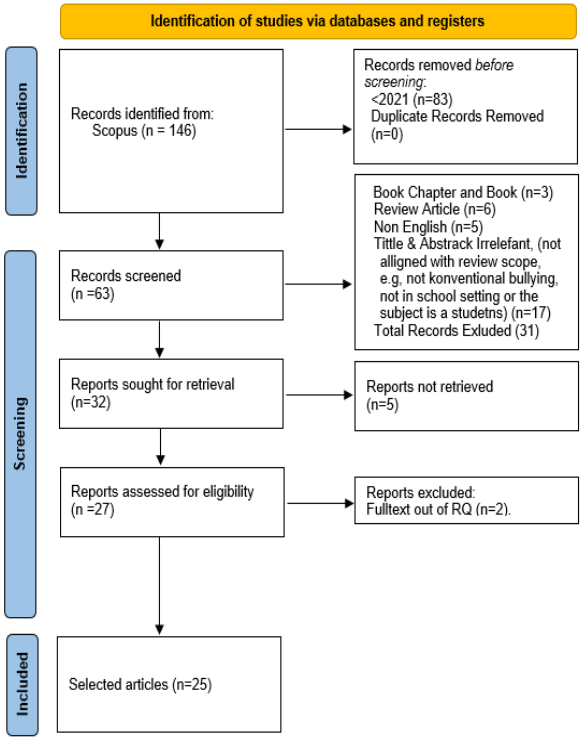


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Overall, 25 studies were published between 2021 and 2026. The largest number of studies were from 2024, followed by 2021, 2025, 2023, 2026, and 2022. The studies were conducted in 10 countries, predominantly in China (n=11) and the United States (n=6). Sample sizes varied widely, ranging from N=10 to N=64,670, with the majority of studies (n=14) focusing on junior high school students. The cross-sectional design was the most commonly used (n=14), followed by longitudinal (n=5), experimental (n=3), and one study each using mixed methods, qualitative, and person-centered approaches.

The included studies varied in how they classified bystander roles. Some studies examined only one or a few specific determinants. Some used Salmivalli's classification, while others combined the roles of reinforcer and assistant into a single group called "pro-bullying." Defender was the most frequently studied role, appearing as the primary or secondary outcome in 21 of the 25 studies. Of these, five studies examined only defender behavior. Outsider was examined in 14 studies, most often alongside defender role as two outcomes measured side by side and only one study examined outsider role exclusively.

The roles of assistant and reinforce are rarely distinguished from one another. A total of 13 studies examining pro-bullying behavior combined these two roles into a single composite measure, while only one study from Pečjak et al. (2024) distinguished between them using peer nominations and cluster based proportion comparisons (rather than inferential tests). Four studies used a general bystander classification, measuring bystander behavior in general without distinguishing between roles. Five studies measured intentions or willingness to act, rather than actual behavior or behavior as assessed by peers.

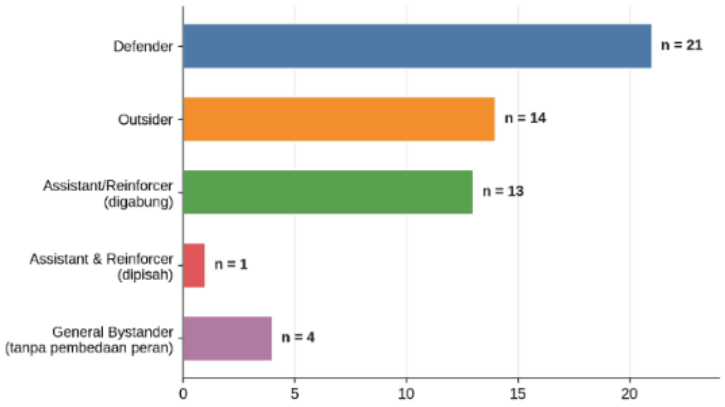


Figure 2. Frequency of Bystander Types in the Study

Internal Factor

Internal factors were identified in 18 of the 25 studies. The results of the review indicate that defender self-efficacy was examined in four studies, all of which showed a positive association with defending and a negative association with outsider and assistant/reinforcer roles. Moral disengagement was the most frequently examined internal factor (6 studies), with four showing a positive association with the assistant/reinforcer role and two showing no clear differences across roles. The construct of empathy was examined in five studies, with affective empathy showing a more consistent positive relationship with defending than cognitive empathy. Cognitive distortions, dehumanization, and moral judgment of exclusion showed negative relationships with defending, while anger and teacher rejection sensitivity were positively related. Social status and motivational orientation showed the most inconsistent results, while experiences of victimization, social harmony values, internalizing/externalizing problems, attitudes toward bullying, and individual perceptions were examined in five studies.

External Factor

External factors were identified in 20 of the 25 studies. The school context was the most frequently studied (9 studies), covering school climate, school connectedness, school collective efficacy and school racial ethnic diversity, with the majority showing a positive association with defender and a negative association with outsider and assistant/reinforcer. The teacher context was examined in three studies and included the quality of student teacher relationships, which showed a relatively strong standardized association with defending (β=0.32). The family context was examined in three studies and included parental support, all of which were positively associated with defender. The peer context was examined in six studies, covering peer support and peer norms, although one study found that perceived peer support was positively associated with assistant/reinforcer.

Table 2. Data Extraction

Author	Design	Sample	Type	Factors	Main Finding
Censur & Gönültas (2025)	Cross-sectional	388 students (age 14-17)	Internal	Affective empathy	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Cognitive empathy	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Dehumanization	Negatively associated with defender
			External	Repeated bullying exposure	Positively associated with defender
Adewoye & du Plessis (2021)	Qualitative phenomenological	10 students (age 11-12)	Internal	Cognitive distortion	Cognitive distortions and moral disengagement are the main factors that hinder intervention. Fear of victimization and low defender self-efficacy encourage outsider behavior.
			Internal	Moral disengagement	
			Internal	Fear of victimisation	
			Internal	Defender self-efficacy	

Wang et al. (2024a)	Cross-sectional	2,113 students, Grade 7-12	Internal	Being bullied	The association with general bystander intervention was fully mediated and the direct association was not significant
			Internal	Moral disengagement	Positively associated with pro-bullying
Nickerson et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional	788 students (13-18)	Internal	Individual factor composite	Positively associated with general bystander
			External	Contextual factor composite	Positively associated with general bystander just negatively on “accept responsibility” stage
Iotti et al. (2023)	Cross-sectional	578 students (10-14)	Internal	Reactance	Partially mediated the association with defender
			External	Autonomy supportive parenting	Positively associated with defender
Bao & Yu (2025)	Longitudinal	885 students, Grade 7-12	Internal	Moral disengagement	Positively associated with pro-bullying
			External	Parental attachment	Negative association with pro-bullying through moral disengagement
Sjögren et al. (2024)	Longitudinal	1,346 students, Grade 7-8	Internal	Moral disengagement	No significant difference across roles
			Internal	Defender self-efficacy	Positively associated with defending, negatively associated with pro-bullying and outsider
Jia et al. (2023)	Longitudinal	445 students, Grade 7	Internal	Social harmony values	Mediated the relationship with defender and outsider
			External	Parental support	Positively associated with defender and outsider
Zhang et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional	419 students, Grade 8-11	Internal	Perceived peer pressure for intervention	Positively associated with defender and negatively associated with outsider
			External	Perceived popularity	No significant main effect and significant as a moderator
Pečjak et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional	5,148 students, Grade 8-9	Internal	Moral disengagement	No significant difference across roles
			Internal	Popularity goals	Positively associated with pro-bullying
			Internal	Social preference goals	Mixed associations across person centered profiles
			Internal	Social status insecurity	The association with outsider behavior was inconclusive
			External	Perceived peer support	Positive but paradoxical association with pro-bullying
Mulvey et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional	896 students, Grade 6 & 9	Internal	Teacher rejection sensitivity-anxious	Positively associated with defender and negatively associated with outsider
			Internal	Teacher rejection sensitivity-angry	Positively associated with outside and negatively associated with defender
			Internal	Moral judgment of exclusion	Negatively associated with defender
			External	Positive student teacher relationship	Positively associated with defender
			External	Teacher discrimination	Positive associated with defender and outsider (paradoxical for outsider)
			External	Perceived exclusion/differential treatment	Possitively associated with outsider
			External	School connectedness	No significant association with outsider
			External	Peer discrimination	No significant association with outsider
Wang et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional	11,734 students	Internal	None	Not tested as direct predictor
Waasdorp et al. (2022)	Cross-sectional	64,670 students, Grade 6–12	Internal	Academic engagement	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Whole school connectedness	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Culture of equity and fairness	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Parent involvement (perceived)	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Physical safety perception	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Student connectedness	Positively associated with defender
			External	School-level safety/engagement/environment	Positively associated with defender, negative association with outsider and pro-bullying
			External	School racial-ethnic diversity	Positively associated with defender, negatively associated with outsider and pro-bullying
			External	Teacher connectedness	Negatively associated with pro-bullying
Giovazolias et al. (2026)	Cross-sectional	16,639 students, Grade 5-9	External	School climate	Associations differed across bystander roles
			External	Teacher willingness to intervene	No significant association
Reyes-Rodríguez et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional	600 students (12-16)	External	School collective efficacy	No significant direct association with outsider, indirect association through the mediator
Feng et al. (2022)	Cross-sectional	808 students, Grade 7	Internal	Sympathy	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Attitude toward bullying	Positively associated with defender through mediation
			External	School connectedness	Moderated the association with defender
Zhu et al. (2025)	Cross-sectional	478 students, Grade 7-11	Internal	Affective empathy	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Cognitive empathy	No significant association with defender
			Internal	Defender self-efficacy	Positively associated with defender behavior, negatively associated with outsider and pro-bullying
			Internal	Moral disengagement	Negatively associated with defender, positively associated with outsider and pro-bullying
			External	School-family consistency	Positively associated with defender and moderated the association with defender
Lin et al. (2024)	Mixed-methods	923 students, Grade 4-6	Internal	Moral disengagement	Possitively associatioted with pro-bullying
			External	School climate	Positively associated with defender and negatively associated with pro-bullying
Wu et al. (2024)	Experimental	325 students, Grade 10	External	Bullying type	Functioned as a moderator of the association with defender
			External	Descriptive norms	No significant association
			External	Injunctive norms	No significant association
Zhang et al. (2025)	Experimental	277 students, Grade 7	Internal	Bystander popularity	Positively associated with defender
			External	Peer status relative to bullies	Moderated the association with defender only
Zhang et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional	333 students, Grade 7	Internal	Social status insecurity	Associated with defender through popularity goals.
			Internal	Popularity goals	Fully mediated the association with defender
Liu et al. (2023)	Mixed-methods	229 students, Grade 8	Internal	Anger	Positively associated with defender
			Internal	Defender self-efficacy	Positively associated with defendder and negatively associated with pro-bullying
			Internal	Affective empathy	No significant association
			Internal	Fear	No significant association
			Internal	Excitement	No significant association

			External	Presentation mode (VR vs text)	Positively associated with defender, negatively associated with outsider and pro-bullying
Peng & Low (2026)	Longitudinal	4,718 students, Grade 6-8	External	School connectedness	Positively associated with general bystander within individuals over time
			External	Anti-bullying climate	Positively associated with general bystander at the between person level only
Landers et al. (2026)	Cross-sectional	716 bystanders, Grade 6-12	External	Friendship with target	Positively associated with defender
			External	Type of bullying witnessed	Positively associated with defender
			External	Racial alignment (bystander to target)	Positively associated with defender with low confidence
Clark et al. (2022)	Longitudinal	1,139 students, Grade 5 to 6	Internal	Internalizing problems	Positively associated with defender showing a counterintuitive pattern
			Internal	Externalizing problems	Possitevely associated with pro-bullying
			External	School transition context	Structural variable

Mediator

Nine studies examined mediating mechanisms. Moral disengagement was the only mediator tested in more than one study (Bao & Yu, 2025; Lin et al., 2024; D. Wang et al., 2024). While each of the other six mediators was supported by only one study.

Moderator

Ten studies examined moderation. Gender was the most frequently tested moderator, of the four studies, only one showed a significant effect the study by (Bao & Yu, 2025). The interaction between moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy (Sjögren et al., 2024) was significant for two of the three outcomes tested. Meanwhile, Waasdorp et al. (2022) contributed seven interactions at once, with the majority reported as significant, although the details for each interaction were not specified separately in the original report.

DISCUSSION

Defender

Defender is the role supported by the richest body of evidence in this corpus, appearing in 21 of 25 studies. Defender self-efficacy was consistently and positively associated with defender in the four studies that examined it, representing the most frequently replicated internal factor with fully consistent directionality in this review (Adewoye & du Plessis, 2021; Liu et al., 2023; Sjögren et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2025). This findings align with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which identifies belief in one's own abilities as a key determinant in motivating individuals to act. Within the framework of the Bystander Intervention Model (BIM) (Latané & Darley, 1970), this construct is directly related to the "knowing how to help" stage. However, the four studies differed in methodological design, the consistent association between defender self-efficacy and defender should not be interpreted uniformly as causal evidence.

Affective empathy was also positively associated with defender in the majority of studies examining it as a distinct dimension, whereas cognitive empathy shows a weaker association and less consistent association (Censur & Gönültaş, 2025; Zhu et al., 2025). Notably, Liu et al. (2023) found that affective empathy was not significantly associated with defending behavior in a virtual reality simulation, with anger instead emerging as the strongest reported predictor in that study. This divergence is plausibly attributable to the study's stimulus design, in which the victim's face was concealed, potentially limiting the emotional cues that typically activate affective empathy. Cognitive distortion,

dehumanization, and moral judgment of exclusion were each negatively associated with defender (Adewoye & du Plessis., 2021; Censur & Gönültaş, 2025; Mulvey et al., 2021).

Regarding the emotional reactivity factor, the anxious subtype of teacher rejection sensitivity is positively associated with defender, whereas the angry subtype shows the opposite (Mulvey et al., 2021). This pattern must be interpreted with caution because it contradicts the common assumption that anger can motivate individuals to take action. Victimization experience was found to influence bystander intervention entirely through the mediating pathway of moral disengagement (Wang et al., 2024). Furthermore, internalizing problems were counterintuitively, positively associated with defender (Clark et al., 2022), suggesting that anxiety or internal difficulties do not always lead to passive attitudes.

Regarding external factors, positive school climate and school connectedness were generally associated with more frequent defender (Feng et al., 2022; Giovazolias et al., 2026; Lin et al., 2024; Peng & Low, 2026). Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977), which positions the school environment as a crucial context in shaping individual behavior. However, Nickerson et al. (2024) reported a negative association between a composite external factor and "assuming responsibility" stage of the Bystander Intervention Model (BIM), while the same composite did not show this negative pattern at other stages, plausibly reflecting a diffusion of responsibility.

Among external factors, student teacher relationship quality showed a relatively strong standardized association with defender, atough teacher context were examined in only three studies $\beta=0.32$ (Mulvey et al., 2021). This findings consistent with attachment theoretic accounts in which secure relationships with authority figures may serve as a secure base for social risk taking, including standing up for victims of bullying. Family context factors (autonomy supportive parenting, parental attachment, and parental support) were consistently associated with defender across three studies conducted in different countries (Bao & Yu, 2025; Iotti et al., 2023; Jia et al., 2023). The consistency of findings across different cultural contexts suggests that family support may be a relatively stable factor in promoting defending behavior, although this inference remains tentative given the small number of studies.

Repeated bullying exposure, racial alignment between bystanders and victims were also positively associated with defender (Censur & Gönültaş, 2025; Landers et al., 2026). Study by Liu et al. (2023) assessed with lower confidence in role mapping, as it did not employ Salmivalli's typology, and VR presentation was associated with more defender than text based. This finding raises the possibility that text-based vignette designs may underestimate students' intention to defend compared with more immersive formats such as virtual reality. Several additional factors with more limited evidence were also identified, including sympathy and attitude toward bullying, reactance, bystander popularity, social harmony values, individual perception and external factors such as racial ethnic diversity, teacher discrimination, school family consistency, and situational social norms.

Outsider

Outsiders were examined in 14 studies, generally showing patterns opposite to those observed for defender on the same factors. Defender self-efficacy was consistently

negatively associated with outsider (Liu et al., 2023; Sjögren et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2025). Moral disengagement showed mixed results for outsider, with two of three studies reporting a significant association and one reporting none (Lin et al., 2024; Sjögren et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2025). Regarding external factors, positive school and environmental climate were consistently associated with a lower tendency to become an outsider (Waasdorp et al., 2022), while perceived exclusion or differential treatment was positively associated with outsider (Mulvey et al., 2021). School collective efficacy showed has no direct effect but exerts an indirect effect through school equity and a sense of belonging as mediators (Reyes-Rodríguez et al., 2024). This findings indicating that contextual factors can influence outsider behavior through mediating pathways. Other factors include sensitivity to teacher rejection, the desire for popularity, social status insecurity and peer discrimination.

Assistant/Reinforcer

A total of 13 out of 25 studies in the corpus combined assistant and reinforcer into a single category of pro-bullying behavior. Therefore, all of the following findings should be interpreted as combined evidence and cannot be generalized separately to the roles of assistant or reinforcer. Moral disengagement was the most consistently examined internal factor for this role with four of the six studies examining it reported a positive association (Bao & Yu, 2025; Lin et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2025), consistent with Bandura's (1999) theory that this mechanism allows individuals to deactivate internal moral control over harmful behavior. Moral disengagement also emerged as a mediator linking several distinct antecedents such as victimization experiences, parental attachment, and school climate to pro-bullying behavior (Bao & Yu, 2025; Lin et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Externalizing problems were also positively associated with this role (Clark et al., 2022), while defender self-efficacy remained protective, consistent with its function across other roles.

Among external factors, positive school climate and teacher connectedness were consistently protective against pro-bullying behavior (Giovazolias et al., 2026; Lin et al., 2024; Waasdorp et al., 2022). However, Pečjak et al. (2024) reported a pattern requiring cautious interpretation wich is higher perceived peer support was associated with more rather than less pro-bullying behavior, contrary to the common assumption that social support is uniformly protective. A more adequate explanation may lie in the normative content accompanying such support, peer support is likely protective only when the underlying group norms are prosocial. Though this study did not measure the direction of group norms explicitly, so this explanation remains to be tested in future research.

General Bystander

Four studies did not distinguish specific bystander roles and measured bystander behavior in general. Victimization experience was associated with general bystander intervention entirely through the mediating pathway of moral disengagement (Wang et al., 2024). This pattern reinforcing the pattern observed elsewhere in this review that moral disengagement functions as a central mechanism across multiple roles. A composite external factor was negatively associated with "assuming responsibility" stage in the Bystander Intervention Model (Nickerson et al., 2024). School connectedness and anti-bullying climate

also showed different patterns over time: the former changed within individuals, whereas the latter reflected stable differences between individuals (Peng & Low, 2026). This suggests that the two constructs should not be treated as equivalent. Given the varied findings and limited evidence, conclusions about this role should be interpreted with caution.

Cross Role Mechanism

Two findings extend across more than one role and are therefore discussed separately from the role specific sections above. Moral disengagement functioned as the only mediator replicated across more than one study, linking victimization experience, parental attachment, and school climate three distinct antecedents to pro-bullying and outsider behavior (Bao & Yu, 2025; Lin et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). This convergence from different starting points toward a single mechanism is consistent with Bandura's (1999) original conceptualization of moral disengagement as a mediating mechanism rather than an independent trait. The remaining six mediation mechanisms identified in this review were each supported by only a single study, indicating that mediation research in this domain remains largely exploratory.

The interaction between moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy (Sjögren et al., 2024) represents the most theoretically generative finding in this review, as it affects more than one role simultaneously significant for assistant/reinforcer and outsider outcomes, though not for defender. These findings help explain why defender self-efficacy does not always exhibit a universal protective effect. Conceptually, the capacity to act and moral control appear to be two distinct systems, yet they interact with one another in shaping bystander responses. In other words, the belief that one is capable of helping does not necessarily result in defending behavior when the individual simultaneously exhibits a high level of moral disengagement. Because this interaction has only been examined in a single study conducted in Sweden, its generalizability across cultural contexts remains untested. Gender was tested as a moderator in four models but was significant in only one (Bao & Yu, 2025). This difference may reflect the more complex longitudinal mediation model used in that study rather than indicating that gender is irrelevant in the other models. Moderation evidence was heterogeneous. Several studies examined contextual or demographic moderators, including gender, school connectedness, bullying type, school-family consistency, perceived popularity, and peer status. However, most moderation effects were reported in single studies, limiting conclusions about their generalizability.

These findings both support and extend several major theoretical frameworks. Salmivalli's (1996) Participant Role Theory receives partial support, as defender and outsider show clearly distinguishable predictor profiles. Though the assumption that all four roles can be empirically differentiated remains largely untested given that more than half of the reviewed studies combined assistant and reinforcer into a single construct. The Bystander Intervention Model is both supported and extend, as positive external factors were found to reduce individuals' tendency to accept responsibility at one specific stage while supporting other stages within the same process indicating the intervention pathway does not always proceed linearly. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory received the most consistent support,

both through direct associations and through moral disengagement's role as a mediating mechanism across multiple forms of bystander behavior.

Practically, these findings suggest that strengthening student-teacher relationship quality and providing concrete defender-skill training may be worthwhile priorities for school-based bullying prevention. programs relying on peer support should ensure underlying group norms are prosocial, and efforts to build students' confidence to defend victims should be paired with cultivating moral awareness, given that behavioral capacity without moral restraint may be directed toward undesired outcomes. These implications should nonetheless be considered alongside several limitations. The search was restricted to a single database and no formal quality appraisal or risk of bias assessment was applied given the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies, which may have excluded relevant literature or overlooked methodological weaknesses within individual studies. No study in the reviewed corpus statistically differentiated assistant and reinforcer using inferential tests across the reviewed corpus and evidence on teacher context and race/ethnicity remains scarce despite indications of substantial influence. The predominance of cross-sectional designs further limits causal inference, so associations reported throughout this review including those described as consistent should be interpreted as correlational rather than directional. Future research should prioritize multi database searches with standardized appraisal tools, peer nomination methods capable of separating reinforcer from assistant, experimental designs manipulating internal psychological factors directly, and broader geographic and ethnic representation beyond the current concentration of studies in China and the United States.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review indicates that bystander behavior in school bullying is not shaped by a single factor, but rather results from the interplay between individual and external factors, as well as mediators and moderators that influence each participant’s role. Furthermore, no empirical evidence has been found to statistically distinguish between the roles of assistant and Reinforcer consequently, the two are still often treated as a single construct even though they have conceptually distinct functions. These findings also imply that bullying prevention efforts should not only focus on enhancing individuals’ ability to defend victims but also on fostering a school environment that supports positive relationships between students and teachers, reinforces anti-bullying norms, and reduces tendencies toward moral disengagement. For school counselors, these results can serve as a foundation for designing interventions that develop defender self-efficacy and moral awareness while strengthening social support within the school environment. Future research should involve peer nominations to empirically distinguish between assistants and reinforcers, as well as expand the geographic and social representation so that understanding of bystander behavior is not limited to the contexts that have dominated the literature thus far.

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