



Understanding Bystander Behaviour in School Bullying: Psychosocial Influences and Intervention Implications from a Vignette-Guided Qualitative Study with Chinese University Students

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Abstract

School bullying remains a persistent problem with serious consequences for students' mental health and academic development. Although bystanders are present in most bullying incidents, the psychosocial influences shaping their responses remain underexplored, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts. This study explored psychosocial influences on bystander behaviour in school bullying and identified strategies to support effective school-based interventions. Using a vignette-guided qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 Chinese university students, and data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Six interrelated psychosocial influences were identified as shaping bystander behaviour: (1) the emotional impact of previous bullying-related experiences, (2) self-efficacy and external support, (3) perceived responsibility within social contexts, (4) relationships and social influences, (5) perceived severity and cognitive judgements, and (6) perceived risk and self-protection. These influences interacted dynamically to facilitate or inhibit intervention decisions. While many findings aligned with existing bystander research, participants' accounts also reflected Chinese cultural values related to harmony, hierarchy, and collective responsibility. In addition, four strategies were identified to support school bullying interventions: (1) empowering student bystanders, (2) strengthening school accountability and safeguarding, (3) enhancing teacher capacity and motivation, and (4) engaging parents through home-school collaboration. These strategies address barriers to bystander intervention across multiple contexts and highlight the importance of coordinated and culturally responsive approaches to bullying prevention. Overall, the findings highlight the need to consider psychosocial influences alongside cultural context and shared responsibility when designing effective school-based anti-bullying interventions.

Keywords School bullying · Bystander behaviour · Bullying prevention · Qualitative research · Chinese cultural context

Introduction

School bullying is a persistent problem across Europe and Asia (Chudal et al., 2022). In China, a recent meta-analysis estimated that approximately 23% of school-aged students

had experienced bullying victimisation (Xing et al., 2023), highlighting its continued prevalence within the Chinese education system. School bullying is generally defined as repeated, intentional aggression characterised by a power imbalance and occurring within school contexts (Gaffney et al., 2021; Johansson et al., 2022; Olweus, 2013). It may take physical, verbal, and relational forms, such as hitting, name-calling, or social exclusion (Gong et al., 2024; Han et al., 2025). Research consistently links bullying to adverse mental health outcomes, including depression, loneliness, and suicidal ideation (Hasan et al., 2021; Källmén & Hallgren, 2021), as well as to poorer academic engagement and achievement (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022; Samara et al., 2021). These harms underscore the urgent need for

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effective, evidence-based bullying prevention and intervention strategies.

The Role of Bystanders in School Bullying

While early bullying research primarily focused on perpetrators and victims (e.g., Siddiqui et al., 2025), growing attention has turned to bystanders - peers who witness bullying incidents without being directly involved (Allison & Bussey, 2016; Leeth, 2023). Bystanders play a pivotal role in shaping whether bullying is reinforced or interrupted. Salmivalli et al. (1996) conceptualised four key bystander roles: defenders, outsiders, assistants, and reinforcers. Defenders attempt to stop the bullying or support the victim, whereas outsiders remain passive. Assistants and reinforcers actively or indirectly encourage the perpetrator, thereby sustaining bullying through social reinforcement.

Empirical research highlights the substantial protective potential of bystander intervention. Peer intervention has been shown to stop bullying episodes rapidly (Hawkins et al., 2001) and to mitigate victims' emotional distress and risk of further victimisation (Patterson et al., 2017; Sainio et al., 2011). Defending behaviours may also benefit bystanders themselves, enhancing moral satisfaction and self-evaluation (Salmivalli et al., 2021). Despite these benefits, bystander intervention remains relatively uncommon (Song & Oh, 2018), emphasising the need to understand the psychosocial factors that influence whether bystanders intervene or remain passive.

Theoretical Perspectives on Bystander Behaviours

Research has identified multiple factors shaping bystander behaviour, including self-efficacy, empathy, moral disengagement, perceived responsibility, social relationships, and judgements of incident severity (Eijigu & Teketel, 2023; Forsberg et al., 2018; Gao et al., 2024; Sjögren et al., 2024; Thornberg et al., 2018). One influential framework for understanding such processes is Latané and Darley's (1970) bystander intervention model. This model proposes that intervention involves a five-stage sequential decision-making process: noticing the incident, interpreting it as requiring intervention, assuming personal responsibility, knowing how to help, and deciding to act. Failure at any stage may inhibit intervention, a pattern supported by empirical studies in school bullying contexts (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2017; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013).

Moral disengagement theory further explains why bystanders may rationalise inaction by diffusing responsibility, deferring to authority figures, or attributing blame to victims (Bandura, 1999; Fissel & Bryson, 2024; Forsberg et al., 2018). Together, these theoretical frameworks help

explain why students may respond differently to similar bullying situations and offer valuable guidance for intervention development.

Limitations of Existing Research

Despite growing interest in bystander processes, several limitations remain in the current literature. Quantitative studies dominate the field, offering limited insight into the nuanced reasoning underpinning bystanders' decision-making (Choy, 2014). Although qualitative studies exist, many rely on participants' self-reflection about their own behaviour (e.g., Forsberg et al., 2018), raising concerns about social desirability bias (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; Piedmont, 2023). Vignette-based interviews offer an alternative approach by encouraging discussion of hypothetical scenarios rather than bystanders' personal conduct, potentially facilitating more candid reflection.

Moreover, existing research is heavily concentrated in Western contexts (Forsberg et al., 2018; Macaulay et al., 2019; Thornberg et al., 2022). Cultural norms and values may shape bystander behaviours in important ways, limiting the applicability of Western findings to non-Western contexts. Whereas Western societies often emphasise individualism and autonomy (Shulruf et al., 2011), many Asian cultures prioritise collectivism, social harmony and respect for hierarchy (Komisarof & Akaliyski, 2025). In China, cultural norms surrounding power distance and deference to authority figures may discourage students from challenging peers who hold higher social status (Chien, 2016). Consistent with this, Sittichai and Smith (2015) found that bystanders in non-Western societies were less likely to intervene when perpetrators were older or perceived as more powerful. These cultural considerations underscore the importance of examining bystander behaviour within the Chinese context to inform culturally responsive bullying prevention efforts.

Current Study

To address these gaps, the present study employed a vignette-guided qualitative design to explore Chinese university students' perceptions of the psychosocial influences on bystander behaviour in school bullying and their views on strategies to support bullying prevention and intervention. University students were selected for their capacity to reflect critically on prior school experiences (Fischer & Pruyne, 2003; Wood et al., 2018). The study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What psychosocial factors do Chinese university students perceive to shape bystander behaviour in school bullying?

RQ2: What are Chinese university students' perspectives on how school bullying interventions can be better supported?

Methodology

Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design informed by a relativist ontological position and a constructivist epistemological approach. From this perspective, reality is understood as socially constructed through individuals' experiences within specific cultural contexts, and knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between researchers and participants (Klakegg, 2016; Pretorius, 2024). These assumptions were well suited to exploring the multiple meanings participants attributed to bystander behaviour and bullying interventions within the Chinese sociocultural context. The study is reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist (Tong et al., 2007), provided as Supplementary Material 1.

Participants

Twelve university students (seven females, five males) from multiple universities in China participated in this study. Participants were aged between 23 and 29 years and included two undergraduates, eight master's students, and two doctoral students. Participant demographic characteristics and pseudonyms are presented in Table 1. Two additional students initially expressed interest but did not participate due to eligibility criteria or scheduling constraints.

A volunteer sampling approach was used to recruit individuals willing to share their perspectives on school bullying and bystander behaviour. Eligibility criteria required participants to be current university students who were born

in China and completed their primary and secondary education within the Chinese education system, ensuring reflections that were grounded in Chinese school contexts.

Recruitment advertisements were circulated through university contacts and student groups. The authors had no prior relationship with participants before study commencement. All participants received an information sheet outlining the study aims and procedures, and written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Ethical approval was granted by The University of Manchester School of Environment, Education and Development Ethics Panel.

Data Collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Zoom between June and July 2025. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese by the first author and lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Conducting interviews in participants' native language facilitated richer and more nuanced expression of views. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A semi-structured interview guide (see supplementary material 2) was used to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. A neutral and non-judgemental stance was maintained throughout to encourage open discussion.

To facilitate discussion of bystander behaviour, written vignettes were incorporated into the interviews. By focusing on hypothetical scenarios rather than participants' personal experiences, the vignette-based approach enabled indirect engagement with a potentially sensitive topic and helped to reduce discomfort and social desirability bias (Bain, 2024). Vignettes are widely used in bullying research to examine peer responses and moral reasoning (e.g., Khanolainen & Semenova, 2020; Patterson et al., 2017; Voss & Newman, 2021).

Three vignettes were used, each depicting relational, verbal, or physical bullying in a Chinese school context (see

Table 1 Participant demographic characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Academic level
Lily	23	Female	Undergraduate
Eric	25	Male	Master's
Emma	27	Female	Master's
Ben	24	Male	Undergraduate
Jack	29	Male	Doctoral
Daniel	27	Male	Master's
Anna	25	Female	Master's
Sophia	25	Female	Master's
Jason	29	Male	Doctoral
Jenny	24	Female	Master's
Amy	24	Female	Master's
Grace	26	Female	Master's

Supplementary Material 2). The vignettes were adapted from Bellmore et al. (2012) and Patterson et al. (2017) and refined following peer and supervisor feedback to enhance cultural relevance, including the use of Chinese names, familiar school settings, and realistic peer interactions.

During interviews, participants were invited to discuss the psychosocial influences on bystander behaviour in each vignette and to reflect on strategies for preventing and addressing bullying in school settings. At the end of each interview, participants received a debrief sheet containing information about relevant mental health support resources.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), a theoretically flexible approach that emphasises interpretation and meaning-making across qualitative datasets (Clarke & Braun, 2014). NVivo software was used to support data organisation and systematic coding. All interviews were analysed in their original Chinese transcripts to preserve semantic and cultural nuance, with codes and themes subsequently developed and reported in English.

Analysis was conducted using a predominantly inductive approach, with initial coding grounded in participants' accounts rather than a pre-existing theoretical framework (Azungah, 2018). Following the six phases of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2023), transcripts were read repeatedly to generate initial codes. These codes were then iteratively compared and organised into candidate themes based on shared patterns of meaning. Candidate themes were reviewed and refined through repeated engagement with the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure they were coherent, distinct, and addressed the research questions. Although coding was primarily data-driven, the interpretation of themes was informed by the wider literature on bystander behaviour during the later stages of analysis.

Coding and theme development were led by the first author and discussed regularly with the co-author to enhance reflexivity and explore alternative interpretations. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, with recruitment continuing until the dataset was considered to provide sufficient depth and richness to support meaningful interpretation of participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to consider how the researcher's positionality may have influenced data collection and interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The first author, who conducted the interviews and led the analysis, was a Chinese female master's student in educational psychology and had received formal training

in qualitative research methods as part of her programme. Her familiarity with Chinese educational contexts supported rapport and contextual understanding, while also necessitating ongoing reflection to manage potential assumptions or interpretative bias. Reflexive practices were embedded throughout data collection and analysis. Regular discussions with the co-author were used to critically examine developing interpretations, question assumptions, and consider alternative readings of the data. When personal resonance with particular participant perspectives was identified, interpretations were revisited and evaluated in relation to the wider dataset to avoid over-privileging specific perspectives. The co-author's expertise in educational psychology and qualitative research further strengthened reflexive rigour and analytic trustworthiness.

Findings

Two overarching sets of findings were developed: (1) psychosocial influences on bystander behaviour in school bullying, and (2) strategies for supporting school bullying interventions. Direct quotations are used throughout to illustrate participants' perspectives, with pseudonyms and academic status indicated.

Psychosocial Influences on Bystander Behaviour

Six interrelated themes were developed to capture the psychosocial influences on bystander behaviour in school bullying. The thematic structure, including themes, subthemes and relationships between them, is presented in Fig. 1.

Emotional Impact of Previous Bullying-Related Experiences

Participants described how bystanders' prior experiences with bullying, as perpetrators, victims, or witnesses, shaped their responses to subsequent incidents through their emotional impact. Some participants suggested that individuals with prior bullying perpetration were less likely to intervene, as they tended to normalise bullying behaviour or align with perpetrators: "if the bystander had bullied others before, he might not help the victim ... as he could not understand the victim's feelings" (Grace, master's student). This reduced likelihood of intervention was often attributed to diminished empathy. Participants suggested that a lack of empathic understanding limited recognition of victims' suffering, increasing likelihood of ignoring or even joining in bullying behaviours: "If bystanders lack empathy, they may find it harder to understand the victim's suffering and believe that bullying would not have a serious impact on the victim" (Jack, doctoral student).

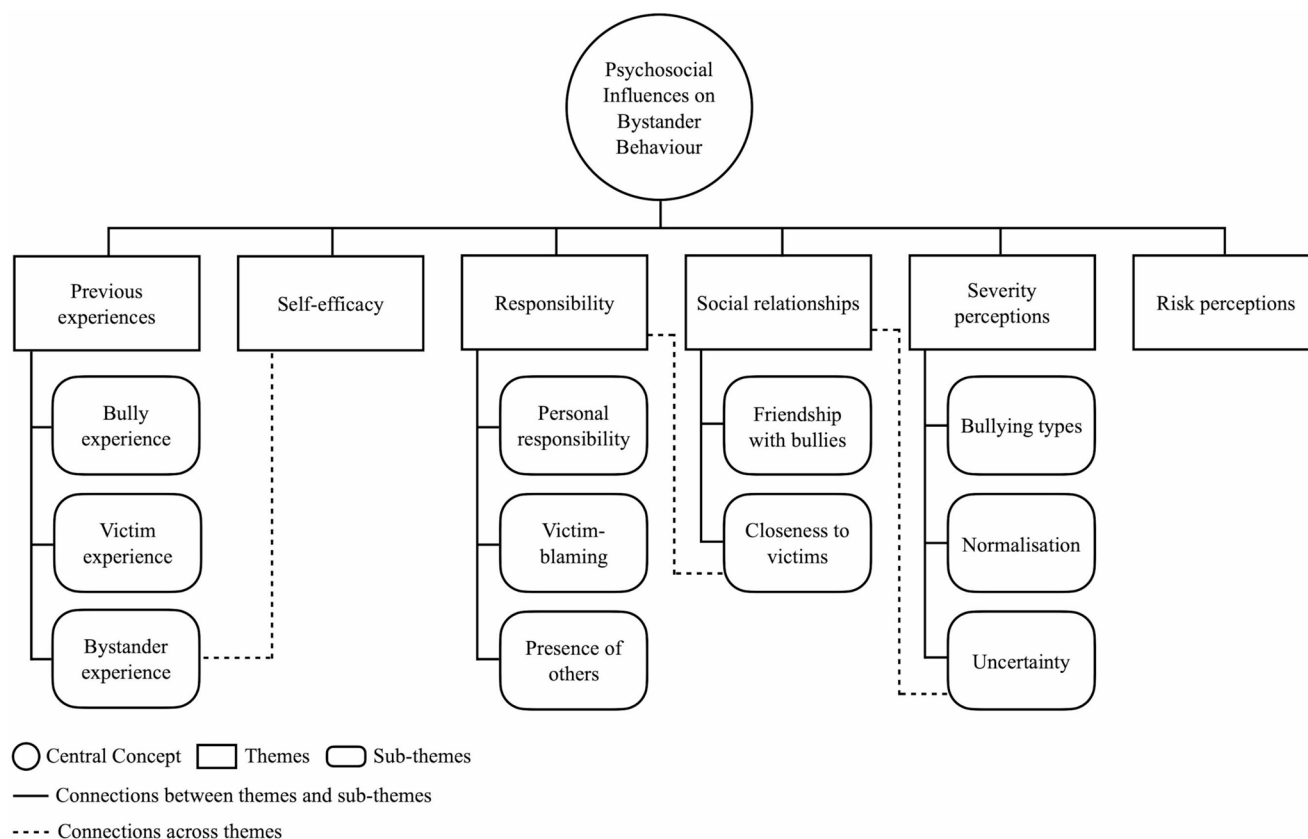


Fig. 1 Thematic map of psychosocial influences on bystander behaviour in school bullying

For bystanders with prior experiences of victimisation, intervention decisions varied depending on how these experiences had been emotionally processed. When victimisation was described as resolved, participants suggested it enhanced empathy and motivation to intervene: “if bystanders had been bullied before, they might find it easier to empathise with the victim... therefore feel more motivated to step in” (Eric, master’s student).

In contrast, unresolved victimisation was described as evoking fear and avoidance, shifting focus towards self-protection and reducing willingness to intervene: “they might experience a sense of reliving the incident and fear being harmed again, which could stop them from actively helping others.” (Daniel, master’s student).

Previous intervention experiences also shaped bystanders’ confidence. Successful past interventions strengthened confidence and willingness to act again, whereas unsuccessful attempts undermined confidence and increased fear: “if they have taken action before and succeeded, they may feel more confident... making them more likely to intervene again” (Eric, master’s student); “if bystanders had intervened before but failed, and even been hurt ... they might feel afraid, lose confidence in intervening, and ultimately choose to remain passive” (Lily, undergraduate student).

Self-efficacy and External Support

Bystanders’ prior intervention experiences were described as shaping beliefs about their ability to act effectively in bullying situations, thereby contributing to self-efficacy. Some participants suggested that bystanders with higher self-efficacy were more likely to intervene: “if bystanders feel capable of helping the victim while also protecting themselves, they will certainly be inclined to intervene” (Grace, master’s student). In contrast, low self-efficacy was linked to doubts about the effectiveness of intervention, leading to hesitation or inaction: “if bystanders lack confidence, they may feel that their intervention would be useless ... making them less likely to take action” (Eric, master’s student).

Self-efficacy was also described as being strengthened through external support particularly from teachers and schools. Knowing that adult support was available was seen to increase bystanders’ confidence and perceived safety:

If bystanders have the opportunity to seek help from teachers, this will increase the likelihood of intervention. Bystanders may feel that ... having someone who can support their intervention would give them

more confidence and assurance to step in. (Eric, master's student)

Perceived Responsibility and Social Contexts

Participants highlighted perceived responsibility as a key driver of intervention. Some suggested that individuals with a strong sense of moral responsibility experienced discomfort or guilt when failing to act: "Some people are naturally more responsible and feel that they must step in ... otherwise, it would go against their inner beliefs and make them feel uncomfortable, so they choose to help" (Ben, undergraduate student). In contrast, a "none of my business" mindset was seen to reduce responsibility, particularly when bystanders lacked close relationships with those involved. In such situations, bullying was perceived as unrelated, reducing feelings of responsibility and obligation to intervene: "the 'none of my business' mindset is understandable ... I might have two classmates ... have some conflicts, but since I'm not particularly close to either of them, I would feel that it has nothing to do with me" (Amy, master's student).

A bystander's perceived responsibility was also described as being weakened when victims were viewed as partly to blame: "another common view is that being bullied might be the victim's problem ... leading bystanders to wonder ... whether the victim did something wrong. If that is the case, ... I have no responsibility or need to intervene" (Grace, master's student). This form of victim-blaming shifted responsibility from bystanders to victims by undermining the legitimacy of their suffering, thereby discouraging intervening.

The presence of peers and adults further shaped responsibility. Responsibility was often diffused when multiple bystanders were present leading to inaction: "if there are other bystanders nearby, that bystander may think they will handle this situation ... it can ultimately lead to no one actually stepping in" (Ben, undergraduate student). Similarly, when peers appeared indifferent, bystanders were described as taking cues from others' reactions, which discouraged intervention: "if others are simply watching and acting as if nothing is happening, the bystander may also pretend that nothing has occurred" (Daniel, master's student). However, participants also described situations in which the presence of peers encouraged intervention. Acting collectively was seen as reducing risk and making intervention more achievable: "when there are many bystanders, their strength can outweigh that of the bully, and they can discuss better ways to intervene, which increases the likelihood of successful intervention" (Emma, master's student).

A similar dual pattern emerged in relation to adults' presence. Some participants suggested that when a teacher was present, bystanders felt less responsible, assuming that

adults should handle the situation: "... because there is already an adult present. If the teacher is not dealing with the situation, then there is even less need for bystanders to get involved" (Lily, undergraduate student). In contrast, others described adults' presence as reassuring, providing support that encouraged bystanders to intervene: "if a teacher is present, bystanders would be more willing to help the victim. Having a teacher nearby gives them confidence, as ... comes with the feeling that someone is there to back them up" (Jack, doctoral student).

Relationships and Social Influences

Participants highlighted that relationships with the victim or bully shaped intervention decisions. Friendship with the victim was associated with a stronger moral obligation and concern about relational consequences of inaction: "The closeness of your relationship with the victim ... may make you feel a need and responsibility to help. If you do not help, it could create tension between you two." (Jenny, master's student).

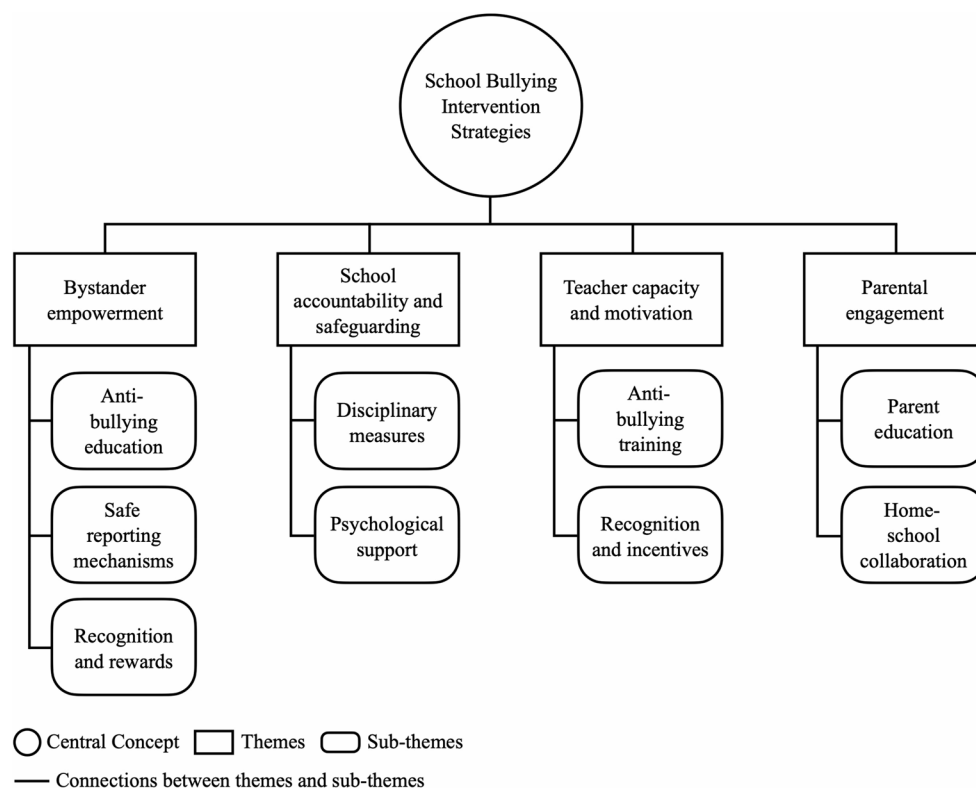
In contrast, when the victim was a stranger, bystanders felt less responsible to intervene, as the absence of a meaningful connection made intervention seem more optional: "if it is a distant relationship, you may not have the responsibility constraint and may feel you have no obligation to intervene" (Grace, master's student).

Participants also described mixed effects of friendship with the bully. Some suggested it could facilitate intervention due to familiarity and reduced perceived risk, whereas others viewed it as a barrier due to fear of damaging the relationship or shared values: "if the bully is a friend, bystanders may find it easier to intervene ... the pressure of handling the situation feels lower, and the friend is more likely to listen" (Eric, master's student); "if bystanders and bullies are friends, they may have many similarities, and bystanders might not want the intervention to affect their friendship ... they would be less likely to help victims" (Grace, master's student).

Perceived Severity and Cognitive Judgements

Participants described perceived severity as an important factor shaping bystanders' judgements about whether intervention was necessary or appropriate. Bystanders were more likely to intervene in cases of physical bullying, which were perceived as more severe due to visible harm and immediate risk: "verbal and relational bullying is not that serious and therefore does not require intervention ... physical bullying [is] more severe and in greater need of immediate action to prevent worse consequences, making bystanders more willing to intervene" (Lily, undergraduate student).

Fig. 2 Thematic structure of strategies to support school bullying interventions



Difficulty judging severity was also reported when contextual information was unclear, particularly in verbal or relational bullying. Uncertainty about whether behaviours were jokes or bullying discouraged intervention: “if bystanders are unfamiliar with the incident ... they may not be able to tell whether it is a joke or bullying” (Jason, doctoral student); “if it is a joke, intervening might feel like overstepping or being inappropriate ... if bystanders are unsure about the situation, they are less likely to intervene” (Ben, undergraduate student).

Some participants further indicated that when bullying occurred frequently, it became normalised, reducing its perceived severity and making bystanders less likely to intervene:

When bullying happens often, people may get used to it and no longer see it as one person bullying another. Bystanders may think it is just a conflict that the people involved can resolve themselves, so they choose not to intervene. (Grace, master’s student)

Perceived Risk and Self-Protection

Participants highlighted that even when bystanders recognised the seriousness of bullying, intervention was often constrained by perceived risks and concerns about self-protection. Fear of becoming the next target or facing social exclusion led bystanders to prioritise their own safety over

intervention: “people tend to prioritise protecting themselves ... [and] first make sure that intervening will not bring them any negative consequences or harm” (Emma, master’s student).

Participants further reported that perceived risk was heightened when the bully was seen as older or more popular. In such situations, bystanders felt more vulnerable and less willing to intervene:

If bullies are more popular or older, it means they have greater status, ability, and power. This makes bystanders more afraid and feel that helping the victim will increase the probability of being bullied themselves. Therefore, bystanders are less likely to step in. (Ben, undergraduate student)

Strategies for Supporting School Bullying Interventions

Four themes were developed in relation to strategies for supporting school bullying interventions. The thematic structure of the strategy-focused findings is presented in Fig. 2.

Empowering Student Bystanders

Participants emphasised the importance of empowering student bystanders by increasing awareness, skills, and motivation to intervene. Anti-bullying education was highlighted as

a way to raise awareness and equip students with intervention skills. Participants highlighted the need for structured teaching that clarified what constitutes as bullying and why it is harmful: “schools can offer some anti-bullying courses, such as teaching the definition, harms, and consequences of bullying, so that everyone can gain knowledge in this area” (Jack, doctoral student).

Beyond knowledge acquisition, participants stressed the importance of experiential learning approaches that allowed students to practice intervention skills in a safe environment. Role-play and case analysis were viewed as particularly effective in helping students translate knowledge into action: “Role-play involves having students act out various roles in bullying to simulate incidents, followed by teacher-led reflection and discussion. Case analysis involves teachers guiding students to analyse real bullying cases and identify appropriate responses for different scenarios” (Eric, master’s student).

Several participants argued that empowerment also requires institutional structures that enable safe reporting (e.g. anonymous reporting channels) and collective action: “the school could set up an anti-bullying committee with dedicated teachers and students to handle bullying incidents. ... they could provide professional support to better protect the victim and intervene with the bully” (Lily, undergraduate student); “the school could provide anonymous reporting channels ... This would allow students to report or intervene in bullying while protecting themselves” (Ben, undergraduate student).

In addition, recognising and publicly rewarding defending behaviour was described as a way to reinforce prosocial norms and encourage intervention: “I think it will encourage bystanders to better support victims, if we acknowledge their behaviour and give them some rewards” (Daniel, master’s student).

Strengthening School Accountability and Safeguarding

Participants emphasised schools’ responsibility to take bullying seriously and to safeguard students’ wellbeing. Clear disciplinary procedures were viewed as essential for signalling that bullying would not be tolerated and for deterring future incidents: “schools should clearly inform everyone of the punishments for different types of bullying ... it can also serve as a deterrent, making potential bullies think twice” (Grace, master’s student). In addition to discipline, participants highlighted the need for emotional and psychological support for victims. Bullying was described as having lasting psychological consequences that require professional support rather than solely punitive responses: “Bullying can cause severe and lasting psychological harm ... it is

important for schools to provide timely counselling for victims” (Grace, master’s student).

Enhancing Teacher Capacity and Motivation

Participants identified teachers as central actors in preventing and addressing bullying and emphasised the need to strengthen both their capacity and motivation to intervene. Training was identified as necessary to improve teachers’ ability to recognise and respond appropriately: “More teachers should receive basic training to teach them about bullying and how they should handle it. This can increase their attention to intervention and give them more experience in addressing bullying” (Eric, master’s student). Participants also suggested that teachers’ willingness to intervene was influenced by institutional incentives. Recognition and rewards were described as signals that intervention was valued and supported by the school: “The most direct way is to provide bonuses, performance rewards, or public recognition when teachers address such incidents” (Jack, doctoral student). Such methods were viewed as encouraging more consistent and proactive teacher involvement.

Engaging Parents in Bullying Intervention

Participants highlighted parents as important in preventing and responding to bullying and stressed the need to improve parents’ understanding and collaboration with schools. Anti-bullying education for parents was described as helping them respond more appropriately when their child was involved: “it is important to strengthen anti-bullying education for parents, so they can correctly recognise the harm their child is experiencing, avoid overreacting, and know the right way to respond to bullying” (Eric, master’s student). Regular communication between schools and parents was also emphasised as important, given that different adults often observe different aspects of students’ lives:

Communication between parents and teachers is also important because they can observe students from different perspectives. This can make it easier to recognise whether a student is experiencing bullying. It can also allow them to better cooperate to prevent this situation from happening again. (Grace, master’s student)

Such collaboration was described as supporting early identification of bullying and enabling more coordinated responses.

Discussion

This study examined the psychosocial influences shaping bystander behaviour in school bullying and explored how school-based interventions may be better supported. Drawing on vignette-guided qualitative interviews with Chinese university students, the findings extend the existing bystander literature by integrating insights into psychosocial influences with culturally informed perspectives on intervention support, offering implications for contextually responsive bullying prevention.

Six interrelated psychosocial influences shaped bystander intervention, with previous bullying-related experiences emerging as a key influence. Participants perceived individuals with histories of perpetration as less likely to intervene, consistent with research linking bullying involvement to reduced empathy and normalisation of aggression (Lambe et al., 2019). When previous victimisation was described as resolved, bystanders were perceived as more empathetic and more willing to intervene, aligning with earlier findings (Ma et al., 2019; Song & Oh, 2017). In contrast, unresolved victimisation appeared to reactivate fear and avoidance, reducing the likelihood of intervention. This finding is consistent with post-traumatic stress models, which suggest that previous trauma may trigger avoidance in similar situations (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Within the Chinese context, avoidance may be further reinforced by cultural norms favouring harmony and conflict avoidance, making direct confrontation less socially acceptable (Hu et al., 2018). Participants also highlighted the role of prior intervention experiences, with successful attempts strengthening confidence and unsuccessful experiences undermining willingness to act, consistent with qualitative research on bystander learning processes (Forsberg et al., 2018).

These intervention experiences appeared to shape bystanders' beliefs about their ability to intervene. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory suggests that successful and unsuccessful intervention experiences serve as mastery experiences that shape efficacy beliefs, which in turn influence willingness to intervene. Consistent with this, participants perceived higher self-efficacy as increasing willingness to intervene, whereas lower self-efficacy was associated with hesitation and inaction, aligning with previous studies (Pronk et al., 2013; Sjögren et al., 2024). Importantly, participants viewed self-efficacy as context-dependent, with perceived support from teachers and schools strengthening confidence by reducing uncertainty about intervening.

Perceived responsibility also shaped bystander behaviour. Stronger responsibility facilitated intervention, whereas lower responsibility inhibited action, consistent with existing research (Chen et al., 2023; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013). Victim-blaming weakened responsibility and

justified non-intervention. This finding reflects Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement theory, whereby attributing blame to victims legitimises not helping. Responsibility was further shaped by social presence. Diffusion of responsibility among peers and displacement onto adults reduced intervention likelihood, consistent with classic bystander-effect research (Darley & Latane, 1968). However, participants also described situations in which peer presence enabled shared responsibility and collective action, while adult presence provided legitimised intervention. In the Chinese context, collectivist values emphasising group action and respect for authority may strengthen these enabling effects when social support is perceived (Komisarof & Akaliyski, 2025; Ying & Jackson, 2025).

Responsibility was often shaped by close relationships. Friendship with victims increased perceived responsibility to intervene, whereas friendship with bullies constrained intervention due to loyalty concerns and fears of relationship damage, aligning with previous qualitative findings (Chen et al., 2016; Forsberg et al., 2014). These dynamics are consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), suggesting that individuals may prioritise the interests of in-group members. In the Chinese context, cultural values relating to loyalty and *face* may further intensify these processes by heightening sensitivity to relational and reputational consequences (Chen, 2023; Hwang, 1999). However, participants also described situations in which friendship with bullies facilitated intervention by enabling persuasion and de-escalation, consistent with previous findings (Thornberg et al., 2018).

Perceived severity was another determinant of intervention. Physical bullying was viewed as more serious and urgent, increasing the likelihood of action, in line with previous research (Macaulay et al., 2019; Thornberg et al., 2012). When severity was ambiguous, particularly in verbal or relational bullying, intervention was less likely. This ambiguity may be influenced by relationships, as unfamiliarity with the victim or bully limited bystanders' understanding of the situation and its severity. This finding is consistent with Latané and Darley's (1970) model, which suggests that uncertainty in interpreting a situation reduces helping. Repeated exposure to bullying was also described as reducing perceived severity through normalisation, consistent with previous research on desensitisation (Forsberg et al., 2014; Thornberg, 2007).

Finally, perceived risk was a major barrier to intervention. Participants described bystanders as prioritising self-protection when intervention was perceived to increase the risk of retaliation or social exclusion, consistent with prior research (Forsberg et al., 2018). This finding also aligns with protection motivation theory (Rogers, 1975), which suggests that perceived threats promote self-protective responses. These

concerns were heightened when bullies were older, more popular, or higher in status, reinforcing power imbalances and inhibiting action (Thornberg et al., 2018). In the Chinese context, hierarchical norms and respect for authority may further amplify perceived risk, as challenging higher-status individuals is often regarded as socially inappropriate (Chien, 2016).

Beyond psychosocial influences, participants identified four strategies to support school-based bullying interventions. Empowering student bystanders was viewed as central to addressing low self-efficacy, perceived risk, and responsibility diffusion. Anti-bullying education that builds awareness and intervention skills was perceived as facilitating intervention, consistent with evidence from programmes such as STAC (Johnston et al., 2018). Anonymous reporting mechanisms were seen as reducing perceived risk and enabling intervention without direct confrontation (Messman et al., 2024). Recognising defending behaviour was further viewed as reinforcing prosocial norms, consistent with Skinner's (1965) theory of positive reinforcement, whereby rewarded behaviours are more likely to be repeated. In the Chinese context, respect for authority, harmony, and *face* may further enhance these strategies by increasing the legitimacy of school-led initiatives and the social value of recognised intervention (Ying & Jackson, 2025).

Strengthening school accountability and safeguarding was also highlighted as a key institutional strategy. Clear and consistently enforced disciplinary procedures were perceived as increasing deterrence and signalling institutional seriousness. This emphasis on institutional responsibility aligns with evidence highlighting the importance of a positive school climate, including positive teacher and peer relationships and an absence of victimisation, for adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing (Jefferson et al., 2023). Participants also emphasised the importance of psychological support for victims, although stigma surrounding mental health services and concerns about loss of *face* may limit engagement in China, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive efforts to normalise help-seeking (Chen et al., 2014; Yin et al., 2020).

Teachers were identified as central actors in bullying prevention. Training was viewed as necessary to enhance recognition and response capacities, while institutional incentives were perceived as strengthening motivation. This aligns with expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), which suggests that motivation increases when effort is expected to produce valued outcomes. Participants also emphasised engaging parents through education and home-school collaboration to reinforce shared responsibility. From an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), home-school collaboration reflects the mesosystem, referring to interactions between children's family and school microsystems. Strong

connections between these microsystems may reinforce consistent anti-bullying expectations and responses, thereby supporting sustained bystander intervention.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths and limitations. A key strength lies in the use of vignette-based interviews, which provided a psychologically safe and ethically appropriate approach for exploring sensitive bullying-related issues while reducing social desirability and defensiveness (Palaiologou, 2017). However, because participants responded to hypothetical scenarios, their accounts may not fully reflect behaviour in real-world bullying situations, raising concerns about ecological validity (Dawes, 1996). Future research could complement vignette methods with more immersive approaches, such as virtual reality or observational designs, to capture bystander behaviour as it unfolds in situ (Liu et al., 2023; van Baak et al., 2025).

A second strength is the use of university students, whose developmental maturity supported reflective and critical engagement on school bullying experiences (Fischer & Pruyne, 2003; Wood et al., 2018). Nevertheless, participants' retrospective accounts may differ from the immediacy of school-aged students' perspectives. Including younger participants in future studies would enable examination of developmental differences in bystander decision-making processes.

Finally, while this study extends research beyond Western contexts, cultural interpretations were primarily derived analytically rather than explicitly articulated by participants. Cross-cultural comparative research is therefore needed to examine the extent to which the identified psychosocial influences are culturally specific or broadly shared.

Implications

The findings have important implications for bullying prevention and intervention. First, they highlight the value of incorporating students' perspectives into intervention design, as students and adults may interpret bullying situations differently (Compton et al., 2014). Interventions that fail to reflect students' lived experiences risk reduced relevance and effectiveness. Second, the findings underscore the importance of addressing underlying psychosocial influences, such as fear, uncertainty, and responsibility diffusion, rather than relying solely on awareness-raising approaches (Gaffney et al., 2021). Interventions that strengthen self-efficacy, clarify responsibility, and reduce perceived risk are more likely to support sustained bystander intervention. Finally, the study reinforces bullying prevention as a shared responsibility. Whole-school approaches, such as

multi-level interventions integrating classroom curriculum, school policies, pastoral support, and home-school collaboration, are well suited to fostering supportive environments in which bystander intervention is both feasible and socially legitimised (Cross et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the bullying prevention literature by identifying six interrelated psychosocial influences on bystander behaviour and four strategies for strengthening school-based bullying interventions within the Chinese context. Drawing on Chinese university students' perspectives, the findings provide insights into how psychological, social, and cultural influences collectively shape bystander behaviour. The findings also underscore the importance of culturally sensitive and collaborative approaches to bullying prevention that address both psychosocial influences and broader social and institutional contexts. Interventions that empower student bystanders, strengthen adult support, and promote shared responsibility across schools, families, and peer groups are particularly well positioned to facilitate sustained bystander intervention. Future research should build on these findings by using more ecologically valid designs, diversified participant samples, and cross-cultural comparisons to further examine how cultural contexts shape bystander processes and to inform inclusive, evidence-based bullying prevention strategies.

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Data Availability The data generated and analysed during this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This research was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of The University of Manchester (2025-22429-41066).

Consent to Publish The authors affirm that human participants pro-

vided informed consent for publication of data collected in the study.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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