




The role of anxiety in shaping bystander behavior: A study of students in bullying situations in Indonesian high schools

Nengsih Nengsih^{*1} , Sabrida M. Ilyas² , Silviarisa Br. Nasution³

^{1,3} Department of Islamic Guidance and Counseling, Institut Agama Islam Negeri Langsa, Langsa, Indonesia

² Department of Islamic Psychology, Institut Agama Islam Negeri Langsa, Langsa, Indonesia

^{*} Corresponding author,  e-mail: nengsih@iainlangsa.ac.id

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Abstract

The bystander effect is a social phenomenon in which an individual's likelihood of helping others in an emergency decreases. Barriers preventing bystanders from intervening include anxiety about taking inappropriate actions and fear of becoming the next victim. This study aims to describe the level of anxiety among students in bullying situations and to examine the relationship between anxiety and the bystander effect in such contexts. A quantitative correlational research design was employed to explore the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The study involved 154 high school students aged 16 to 18 years. Data were collected using researcher-developed anxiety and bystander effect scales, and analyzed using Pearson correlation. The findings indicate a significant positive relationship between anxiety and the bystander effect among students in bullying situations, meaning that higher anxiety levels are associated with a stronger bystander effect. These results suggest that school counseling services should prioritize interventions that address student anxiety and promote proactive bystander behaviors. Implementing programs focused on anxiety management and safe intervention strategies can play a vital role in reducing the incidence of passive bystander behavior in bullying cases.

Keywords: Bystander Effect, Student Anxiety, Bullying Intervention, School Counseling Services, Adolescent Behavior

Abstrak

Efek pengamat (bystander effect) adalah fenomena sosial di mana kemungkinan seseorang untuk membantu orang lain dalam situasi darurat menurun. Hambatan yang menghalangi pengamat untuk bertindak antara lain kecemasan akan melakukan tindakan yang salah dan ketakutan menjadi korban berikutnya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan tingkat kecemasan siswa dalam situasi perundungan serta mengkaji hubungan antara kecemasan dengan efek pengamat dalam konteks tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kuantitatif korelasional untuk mengeksplorasi hubungan antara variabel independen dan dependen. Studi ini melibatkan 154 siswa sekolah menengah atas berusia 16 hingga 18 tahun. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan skala kecemasan dan skala efek pengamat yang dikembangkan oleh peneliti, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan korelasi Pearson. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya hubungan positif yang signifikan antara kecemasan dengan efek pengamat pada siswa dalam situasi perundungan, yang berarti semakin tinggi tingkat kecemasan, semakin kuat kecenderungan terjadinya efek pengamat. Temuan ini mengisyaratkan bahwa layanan bimbingan dan konseling di sekolah perlu memprioritaskan intervensi yang mengatasi kecemasan siswa serta mendorong perilaku proaktif dalam menolong. Implementasi program pengelolaan kecemasan dan strategi intervensi yang aman dapat berperan penting dalam mengurangi perilaku pasif siswa sebagai pengamat dalam kasus perundungan.

Keywords: Efek Pengamat, Kecemasan Siswa, Intervensi Perundungan, Layanan Bimbingan dan Konseling Sekolah, Perilaku Remaja



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of bullying in Indonesian schools between 2022 and 2024 shows an alarming trend. Reports indicate a significant increase in cases of violence within educational environments. Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) recorded approximately 2,473 reports of bullying in educational settings between 2011 and 2019 (Ayunda Pininta Kasih, 2023). Similarly, the Indonesian Teachers Federation (FSGI) reported 119 bullying cases in 2020, 53 cases in 2021, and a sharp rise to 226 cases in 2022, with physical bullying (55.5%) being the most prevalent, followed by verbal bullying (29.3%) and psychological bullying (15.2%) (Thomas Rizal, 2023).

Bullying incidents have not only resulted in physical injuries but also led to severe psychological consequences, including tragic deaths of victims in regions such as Sukabumi and Blitar (Haizan, 2023). Despite various efforts by educational institutions to implement preventive measures, bullying remains a persistent problem within school environments (James E. Bartlett & Michelle E. Bartlett, 2011). Previous studies have shown that victims of bullying often suffer from long-term mental health issues such as trauma, low concentration, diminished self-confidence, social phobia, and, in some cases, a desire for retaliation through bullying behavior (Jessica Angeline De Eloisa Tobing & Triana Lestari, 2021). These negative impacts not only hinder the victims' social adaptation but also impair their academic performance and may lead to school dropout (Halliday et al., 2021). Furthermore, perpetrators of bullying often exhibit traits characterized by low empathy, hyperactivity, antisocial

tendencies, and dysfunctional social behavior (Arslan et al., 2021).

Several factors have been identified as contributors to bullying behavior, including physical disparities between perpetrators and victims, gender differences, poor communication skills, and low social status of victims (Hidayati & Djumali, 2019). Abuse of power with the intent to intimidate or isolate the victim has also been recognized as a critical cause (Nugroho et al., 2020). Additionally, family disharmony and childhood experiences of emotional abuse have been linked to the development of aggressive and bullying behaviors among adolescents (Herawati & Deharnita, 2019; He, 2024).

An emerging and increasingly discussed factor in bullying dynamics is the bystander effect. This phenomenon, as described by Parris et al. (2020), refers to a situation where individuals are less likely to help a victim when other people are present, based on the assumption that someone else will intervene (Konishi et al., 2021). In bullying situations, the bystander effect can be exacerbated by feelings of anxiety, where witnesses experience fear of retaliation, uncertainty regarding appropriate actions, and apprehension about being socially judged (Sanderson, 2021). Anxiety not only inhibits intervention but also adversely affects the emotional well-being of bystanders themselves, increasing risks of guilt, depression, and stress-related symptoms (Bauman et al., 2020; Anggraini et al., 2020). Furthermore, relational dynamics among bystanders, perpetrators, and victims influence intervention decisions; bystanders emotionally close to victims may still hesitate to act if they perceive an overwhelming threat from the

perpetrator (Eijigu & Teketel, 2021; Kim, 2020; Rizkyanti et al., 2021).

While numerous studies have explored bullying dynamics and the psychological consequences for victims and perpetrators, research specifically addressing the psychological mechanisms linking anxiety to bystander inaction remains limited. Previous investigations often treated bystander behavior superficially, focusing primarily on peer pressure, environmental factors, or generalized emotional responses without delving deeply into how anxiety specifically mediates behavior during bullying incidents (Arslan et al., 2021). Moreover, prior literature has often isolated the bystander effect and anxiety as separate phenomena, without integrating them into a cohesive framework that explains bystander inaction in bullying scenarios. This fragmented approach leaves a critical gap in understanding the internal emotional processes that inhibit intervention among student bystanders.

This study offers a novel contribution by adopting an integrated psychological perspective, investigating the direct relationship between anxiety and the bystander effect in bullying contexts among adolescents. Unlike previous studies, this research not only identifies anxiety as a factor inhibiting intervention but also explores its role as a psychological mechanism underlying bystander inaction during bullying events. Furthermore, this study enriches the literature by examining empirical evidence obtained from observations and interviews at a real-world educational setting (SMAN Unggul X), providing valuable insights into how anxiety and the bystander effect interact within the Indonesian sociocultural context. The findings are expected to inform the

development of more effective and psychologically grounded strategies for bullying prevention within schools.

Understanding how anxiety manifests among bystanders and influences their decision-making processes is critical, particularly in the unique cultural and social context of Indonesian schools. In many bullying situations, students witnessing aggression hesitate or fail to intervene not solely due to external threats but because of internal emotional conflicts and fears. The lack of empirical research examining the psychological pathways from anxiety to passive bystander behavior, especially within Indonesian educational settings, represents a significant gap that this study seeks to address.

Thus, the main objective of this study is to describe the level of anxiety experienced by students witnessing bullying situations in Indonesian high schools and to examine the relationship between anxiety levels and the bystander effect in bullying incidents. Furthermore, this study aims to analyze how anxiety influences bystander decision-making processes, provide empirical evidence that can inform targeted interventions aimed at reducing the bystander effect by addressing emotional barriers such as anxiety, and contextualize the findings within the Indonesian educational environment, considering the cultural and social dynamics that may moderate this relationship.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research design with a correlational approach. Correlational quantitative research is used to investigate the relationship or influence between one or more independent variables and one or

more dependent variables (Suryani & Hendryadi, 2015). In this study, anxiety was designated as the independent variable, while the bystander effect served as the dependent variable.

The population of the study consisted of 250 students from grades 10 and 11 at SMAN Unggul X. The sample was determined using the Slovin formula with a margin of error of 5%, resulting in a final sample size of 154 students. The sampling technique employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive sampling, to select participants who met the predetermined criteria related to bullying and bystander experiences.

Data were collected using two research instruments: an anxiety scale and a bystander effect scale, both of which were developed by the researchers based on relevant theoretical constructs. These scales were specifically designed to measure the multidimensional aspects of anxiety and bystander behavior in bullying situations. The data analysis technique utilized a parametric statistical approach, with the Pearson product-moment correlation method employed to examine the relationship between anxiety levels and the bystander effect. Pearson correlation analysis was selected under the assumption that the data met parametric requirements, including normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Islamic Guidance and Counseling, IAIN Langsa. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Anxiety

The results of the study of anxiety in bullying situations in students can be seen in tables 1 and 2. Table 1 displays the hypothetical and empirical scores, while table 2 displays the frequency.

Table 1. Descriptive Result of Anxiety

Score hypothetic				Score empiric			
Xmin	Xmax	M	SD	Xmin	Xmax	M	SD
15	60	17,5	7,5	16	60	38,05	7,599

Based on Table 1. anxiety variable hypothetical score maximum value is 60, minimum value is 15, mean value is 17.5 and standard deviation value is 7.5. While in the empirical score the maximum value is 60, minimum value is 16, mean value is 38.05 (moderate) and standard deviation value is 7.599.

Table 2. Descriptive Results of Anxiety Categories

Score	Categories	F	%
$X < 30$	Low	18	11.7
$30 < X < 45$	Medium	103	66.9
$45 < X$	Higth	33	21.4
Total		154	100.0

Based on Table 2, the descriptive results of categorization with anxiety variables, it can be seen that there are 18 respondents (11.7%) with low levels of anxiety, 103 respondents (66.9%) with moderate anxiety, 33 respondents (21.4%) with high anxiety.

Meanwhile, the results of research on anxiety in bullying situations in students based on physiological, emotional and cognitive aspects can be seen in tables 3 and 4 below.

Table 3. Description Analysis of Anxiety Based on Aspects

Aspect	Score hipotetik			
	Xmin	Xmax	M	SD
Psychological	6	24	15	3
Emosional	4	16	10	2
Cognitive	5	20	12,5	2,5
Aspect	Score Empiric			
	Xmin	Xmax	M	SD
Psychological	6	24	15,80	3,394
Emosional	4	6	10,85	2,963
Cognitive	5	20	11,40	2,955

Based on Table 3, it was found that the empirical mean on the physiological aspect of 15.80 was higher than the mean hypothetical score of 15. The emotionality empirical mean score of 10.85 was higher than the mean hypothetical score of 10. The cognitive empirical score of 11.40 was higher than the mean hypothetical score of 12.5.

Table 4. Categorizing Subjects Based on Anxiety Aspects

Aspect	Score	Categoris	F	%
Psychological	<12	Low	16	10,4 %
	12 -18	Medium	88	57,1%
	>18	High	50	32,5%
Total			154	100%
Emosional	<8	Low	14	9,1%
	8-12	Medium	81	52,6%
	>12	High	59	38,3%
Total			154	100%
Cognitive	<12	Low	79	51,3%
	12-15	Medium	50	32,5%
	>15	High	25	16,2%
Total			154	100%

From Table 4. shows that the physiological aspect included in the low category is 10.4%, in the medium category is 57.1% and in the

high category is 32.5%. Furthermore, in the emotional aspect included in the low category is 9.1% for the medium category is 52.6% and for the high category is 38.3%. The cognitive aspect for the low category is 51.3% for the medium category 32.5% and for the high category is 16.2%.

Bystander Effect

The results of the bystander effect research in bullying situations on students can be seen in tables 5 and 6 below. Table 5 presents hypothetical and empirical scores, while table 6 presents the frequency

Table 5. Descriptive Result of Bystander Effect

Score Hypthotic				Score Empiric			
Xmax	Xmin	M	SD	Xmax	Xmin	M	SD
12	48	30	6	20	39	31,3	3,5

Based on Table 5, it shows that in the bystander effect variable, the hypothetical score has a maximum value of 48, a minimum value of 12, a mean value of 30 and a standard deviation value of 6. Meanwhile, in the empirical score, the maximum value is 39, the minimum value is 20, the mean value is 31.3 (moderate) and the standard deviation value is 3.5.

Table 6. Descriptive Category Level Bystander Effect

Score	Categories	F	%
X < 24	Low	2	1.3
24 < X < 36	Medium	134	87.0
36 < X	High	18	11.7
Total		154	100.0

Based on Table 6, the results of the categorization above related to the bystander effect variable, it can be seen that

there are 2 respondents (1.3%) with a low bystander effect level, 134 respondents (87.0%) with a moderate bystander effect, 18 respondents (11.7%) with a high bystander effect. Meanwhile, the results of the bystander effect research on bullying situations in students based on aspects can be seen in tables 7 and 8 below.

Table 7. Descriptive Analysis Bystander Effect

Aspect	Score Hipotetic			
	Xmin	Xmax	M	SD
Social Influence	3	12	7,5	2,5
Inhibitor	4	16	10	2,6
<i>Bystander</i>				
Disfussion of Responsibility	5	20	12,5	2,08
Aspect	Score Empiric			
	Xmin	Xmax	M	SD
Social Influence	5	12	8,88	1,378
Inhibitor	4	16	10,58	2,231
<i>Bystander</i>				
Disfussion of Responsibility	7	17	11,82	1,945

Based on Table 7, it was found that the empirical mean on the social influence aspect of 8.88 was higher than the hypothetical mean score of 7.5. On the bystander barrier aspect, the mean value on the empirical score of 10.58 was higher than the hypothetical mean score of 10. Distribution of responsibility, the mean value on the empirical score of 11.82 was lower than the hypothetical mean score of 12.5. In Table 8, it is explained that in the aspect of social influence, the low category is 0% while in the medium category it is 70.1% and in the high category it is 29.9%. In the aspect of bystander obstacles in the low category it is 9.1% in the medium category it is 74.0% and in the high category it is 16.9%. And the last aspect of the distribution of responsibility in the low

category is 22.7% in the medium category it is 42.9% and in the high category it is 34.4%. To answer the purpose of the study to determine the relationship between anxiety and bystander effect in bullying situations, in this case the researcher first conducted an assumption test, namely the normality and linearity test. The test results can be seen in Tables 9 and 10.

Tabel 8. Descriptive Statistic of Anxiety

Aspect	Score	Categorie s	F	%
Social Influence	<5	Low	-	-
	5-10	Medium	10	70,1 %
	>10	High	46	29,9 %
Total			15	100%
Inhibitor	<7,4	Low	14	9,1%
	7,4-12,6	Medium	11	74,0 %
	>12,6	High	26	16,9 %
Total			15	100%
Disfussion of Responsibility	<10,4	Low	35	22,7 %
	10,42-12,5	Medium	66	42,9 %
	>12,5	High	53	34,4 %
Total			15	100%

Table 9. Normality Test Result

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Unstandardized Residual	,069	154	,072

Based on Table 9, the results of the normality test using the residual value above, it can be seen from the results of the normality test that the significance value of the anxiety and bystander effect variables tested for normality using the residual value

of $p = 0.072 > 0.05$, which means that the research data value is normally distributed. The criteria for testing are as follows: If the probability value > 0.05 , then the relationship between variables X and Y is linear. If the probability value < 0.05 , then the relationship between variables X and Y is not linear.

Table 10. Linearity Test

Variabel	Deviation form linearity F	p
Anxiety with bystander effect	1.451	0.078

Based on Table 10. The results of the linearity test of the relationship conducted using SPSS Version 25.0 obtained deviation from linearity with $F = 1.451$ and $p = 0.078$. This means that both scales have linear properties and do not deviate from the straight line, so it can be concluded that there is a relationship between anxiety and bystander effect in students in bullying situations. Through the correlation test in this study, it was found that the Pearson correlation value was 0.450 for the anxiety and bystander effect variables. The direction of the relationship between the two variables in this study is positive. Because in the two variables the direction of the relationship is positive, meaning that the higher the anxiety, the higher the level of bystander effect. The results of the study obtained to see the relationship between anxiety and bystander effect in students in bullying situations at SMAN Unggul X that the sig. value. (2 tailed) = 0.000 < 0.05 means that there is a significant relationship between anxiety and bystander effect.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationship between anxiety and the bystander effect among students witnessing

bullying situations in an Indonesian educational setting. The results revealed that student anxiety was predominantly at a moderate level (66.9%), with significant physiological, emotional, and cognitive manifestations. These findings align with classic conceptualizations of anxiety responses in high-threat environments (Barlow, 2002) and reflect the global understanding that physiological arousal, emotional dysregulation, and maladaptive cognitions are central features of anxiety (Clark & Beck, 2010).

Physiologically, the heightened symptoms observed among students—such as dizziness, rapid heart rate, and sweating support Fromell et al. (2019) and Nengsih and Simarmata’s (2022) assertion that bullying exposure elicits acute stress responses. Emotional and cognitive symptoms, such as fear, worry, and catastrophic thinking, also mirror findings from Porhola (2019) and Thornberg (2018), who argue that the social dynamics of bullying, coupled with perceived helplessness, intensify emotional instability among bystanders.

Interestingly, the cognitive domain in this study was relatively less elevated compared to the physiological and emotional domains. This nuance contrasts with studies from Western contexts (e.g., Rigby, 2017; Espelage et al., 2018), where cognitive appraisal processes are often found to dominate in bystander decision-making. One plausible explanation could be the collectivist cultural orientation in Indonesia, where emotional contagion and somatic expressions of distress tend to be more salient than individualized cognitive interpretations (Triandis, 2001).

Regarding the bystander effect, the majority of students demonstrated moderate levels of bystander behavior

(87%), suggesting a pervasive tendency towards passive observation rather than active intervention. This pattern is consistent with the classical bystander effect theorized by Darley and Latané (1968), which has been widely validated across numerous emergency and non-emergency contexts globally. However, recent studies, such as those by Banyard (2015) and Pozzoli and Gini (2020), emphasize that in school bullying, bystander passivity is increasingly influenced not only by diffusion of responsibility but also by fear of retaliation, social status considerations, and emotional dysregulation factors highly evident in the present findings.

The breakdown of bystander effect aspects further enriches the analysis: social influence pressures were particularly strong, suggesting that peer norms and expectations weigh heavily on students' hesitation to act. This resonates with global findings (e.g., Salmivalli, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2021) highlighting that adolescents' actions in bullying are profoundly shaped by group dynamics and the desire to avoid social alienation. The bystander inhibitor aspect also scored high, indicating that internal fears (such as being judged or making the situation worse) substantially hinder intervention, a finding consistent with Bauman et al. (2020) and corroborating Sanderson's (2021) argument that internalized anxiety magnifies bystander paralysis.

The slightly lower score on diffusion of responsibility compared to the global average (e.g., Nickerson et al., 2014) suggests an important cultural insight: collectivist societies may experience more personal moral pressure to act, even when peer pressure inhibits action, compared to highly individualistic settings. This nuanced finding adds depth to the current

understanding of cultural modulation of the bystander effect (see Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

The positive moderate correlation between anxiety and the bystander effect ($r = 0.450, p < 0.05$) emphasizes that students with higher anxiety are more likely to exhibit passive bystander behavior. This relationship supports the integrative model proposed by Twemlow et al. (2014), who argue that anxiety can both paralyze action and rationalize inaction through fear-based cognitive distortions. Furthermore, Song and Oh (2017) highlight that in ambiguous emergency situations, individuals with high anxiety are particularly susceptible to deferring responsibility and awaiting external cues a pattern strongly visible in this study's participants.

Critically, while prior studies in Western contexts have emphasized cognitive pathways (e.g., moral disengagement, responsibility attributions) in bystander behavior (e.g., Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Gini et al., 2014), the current findings suggest that affective and physiological pathways—such as fear, stress, and emotional overwhelm—may be equally, if not more, influential among Indonesian adolescents. This provides an important contribution to the global literature by suggesting a more culturally sensitive, biopsychosocial model of bystander behavior, integrating emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors.

Furthermore, the incorporation of an Islamic moral perspective, drawn from Surah At-Taubah verse 71 (Quṭb, 2000), highlights an underexplored avenue in bystander intervention research: leveraging religious and ethical frameworks to counteract social and psychological barriers. While Western interventions often emphasize individual empowerment and

assertiveness training (e.g., Polanin et al., 2012), integrating religious and moral narratives may offer a culturally resonant alternative to foster prosocial bystander behavior in Islamic-majority societies.

In sum, this study not only confirms key tenets of global bystander effect and anxiety theories but also extends the discourse by integrating emotional-physiological dimensions, collectivist cultural values, and religious moral imperatives into the analysis of bullying intervention dynamics. These insights provide valuable implications for developing culturally responsive, psychologically informed anti-bullying programs that are sensitive to the emotional and moral landscapes of students.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The research relied solely on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability bias and subjective interpretation. Furthermore, the sample was limited to a single school context, restricting the generalizability of the findings across different cultural or regional settings. Despite these limitations, the findings have important practical implications. School counseling services (*Bimbingan dan Konseling*) should prioritize the development of emotional regulation programs that specifically target anxiety management, promote empathy-building exercises, and foster proactive bystander behavior through moral education aligned with cultural and religious values. Family engagement is equally crucial; parents should be involved in educational interventions to reinforce emotional resilience and prosocial norms at home, thereby creating a consistent support system across both school and family environments. Future research is

recommended to employ longitudinal designs to examine causal relationships between anxiety and bystander behavior over time, to include multi-informant assessments (e.g., peer reports, teacher evaluations), and to explore the moderating roles of cultural dimensions, religiosity, and gender differences in shaping the dynamics of the bystander effect in bullying contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that student anxiety as bystanders in bullying situations was predominantly at a moderate level, with dominant manifestations in physiological and emotional aspects, such as muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, fear, and excessive worry. Although cognitive aspects of anxiety were also present, their intensity was relatively lower compared to physical and emotional symptoms. Regarding the bystander effect, the majority of students demonstrated a moderate level of passive bystander behavior, influenced by social pressure, internal inhibitions, and diffusion of responsibility. The findings confirmed a moderate positive relationship between anxiety and the bystander effect, indicating that higher anxiety levels are associated with a greater tendency toward inaction in bullying situations. This study enriches the global literature by demonstrating that in collectivist cultural contexts such as Indonesia, emotional and physiological factors play an equally or even more dominant role than cognitive factors in shaping bystander behavior. Furthermore, the integration of religious moral perspectives, as reflected in Islamic principles, offers an innovative approach to encouraging students' prosocial engagement in bullying situations. Therefore, this research highlights the critical need for school-based interventions

that not only raise students' awareness of bullying but also strengthen emotional resilience, enhance anxiety management, foster empathy development, and promote the internalization of moral norms to support active bystander intervention against bullying.

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CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Nengsih Nengsih: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding, Writing-original draft, Writing-review & editing, **Sabrida M. Ilyas:** Writing-review & editing, **Silviarisa Br. Nasution:** Conceptualization, Writing-review & editing.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The Authors Declare No Conflict of Interest in This Paper.

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