

# Loose Change and Lost Papers: A Field Study on the Bystander Effect

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## ABSTRACT

This field study investigated the bystander effect within a high-traffic environment, examining whether helping behavior in everyday public situations is influenced by situational context and the type of dropped item. Utilizing a between-subjects experimental field design with a descriptive approach, the study observed a convenience sample of 47 naturally occurring bystanders (estimated age range of 18–24 years) across four public locations in Quezon City, Philippines. Helping behavior was operationalized as active (directly intervening to assist) or passive (observing without intervening) following a staged accident. The independent variable was manipulated across two conditions: a "Lost Papers" condition ( $n = 31$ ), where an actor dropped 40–50 loose sheets of paper, and a "Loose Change" condition ( $n = 16$ ), where an actress dropped a coin purse containing 15–20 coins. Descriptive statistics indicated a total of 24 participants (51.1%) demonstrated active helping behavior while 23 participants (48.9%) remained passive. Active helping occurred at relatively comparable rates between the paper condition (51.6%) and the coin condition (50.0%). A Chi-square Test of Independence revealed no statistically significant association between the type of dropped item and the likelihood of bystander intervention,  $X^2(1, N = 47) = 0.01, p = .917$ , with a negligible effect size ( $\Phi = .02$ ). Similarly, the number of bystanders present did not significantly alter individual intervention rates. These findings suggest that the type of object dropped or immediate social density contributed minimally to variations in bystander intervention within this context. The consistent willingness to help across both conditions may suggest the overarching influence of deeply embedded Filipino cultural values, such as *kapwa* (shared identity) and *malasakit* (shared compassion), which appear to promote prosocial behavior in mundane, non-emergency public settings despite situational barriers or potential social risks.

## INTRODUCTION

A human's behavior does not only occur when a person is alone, but also in how they act and respond socially in different situations and environments. Social psychology experiments examine how thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are influenced by the presence of other individuals particularly in public places, emergency areas, or everyday social interactions. One social phenomenon that is still commonly observed today is the "**Bystander Effect**". This phenomenon shows that people may be less likely to help others in social scenarios because of an increased number of people who are nearby to help (Ganti & Baek, 2021). This became widely known through the studies of John Darley and Bibb Latane, who later expound by research studies the concept of diffusion of responsibility. This is where when more people are present in a situation, individuals may feel less personal responsibility to help, because they assume that someone else will take action, which causes hesitation or no response at all. Based on this theoretical basis, there are key factors of people becoming a 'bystander', when the five stages of decision making situations are being ignored. These include identifying the situation if assistance is needed, if the individual is responsible to act, choosing between helping or not, how they will help, and execution of their help.

However, within the context of Filipino culture, *malasakit* (shared compassion or concern for others) is deeply embedded due to Virgilio Enriquez's concept of *kapwa* (shared identity). This framework suggests that Filipinos are inherently connected to others, even those who are not blood-related. Consequently, this cultural inclination

to help in times of need offers a starkly different lens through which to view social behavior, contrasting sharply with the Western concept of the bystander effect. Supporting this idea, Libiran et al. (2024) found that Filipino university students showed less bystander effect as many participants were still willing to help in bullying situations. However, research suggests that having a bystander effect differs internally and externally, when individuals are alone and exposed to situations needing help, it has an impact of responsibility because no one else is around. Meanwhile, people felt less responsibility when others are present to assist, making that bystander effect may not be eligible because of its inclined responsibility regarding whether to be surrounded with other people or not (Ai, Yueyue et al., 2026). Given these perspectives, the present study examines whether helping behavior in everyday public situations is influenced by the type of dropped item and the number of bystanders present.

This gap is important because helping opportunities are not limited to emergencies but also occur through simple interactions, such as assisting a person who accidentally drops papers or loose change. Philpot et al. (2020) found that bystander intervention frequently occurs in real-world public settings, highlighting the importance of understanding helping behavior in natural environments. By examining helping responses in non-emergency situations, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on the bystander effect and provide a deeper understanding of how situational factors influence prosocial behavior in everyday life. Furthermore, the findings may offer insight into whether Filipino values such as “malasakit” and “kapwa” continue to encourage helping behavior despite the presence of other bystanders.

## Main Research Question

To what extent do the number of bystanders and the type of dropped item (lost papers vs. loose change) affect helping behavior in a high-traffic commercial environment?

**Specific Question 1:** Is there a significant difference in helping behavior toward a person who drops loose change?

**Specific Question 2:** How does the number of bystanders present influence the likelihood of helping behavior?

## Hypothesis

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There is no significant difference in helping behavior based on the type of dropped item or the number of bystanders present.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is a significant difference in helping behavior based on the type of dropped item or the number of bystanders present.

## METHOD

### Design

The study employed a field study design using a between-subjects approach to examine the Bystander Effect in a public setting. A field study design was deemed appropriate because the study was conducted in an open environment where participants were unaware that they were being observed as part of a research investigation. This approach allowed helping behavior to be examined in a more natural context, minimizing the influence of artificial laboratory conditions and reducing the likelihood of response bias.

The descriptive approach was used to systematically observe and describe the helping behaviors exhibited by bystanders when exposed to a staged accident. This allowed the researchers to record the frequency and nature of bystander responses as they occurred in a real-world environment.

The Independent Variable (IV) was the type of dropped item presented during the staged incident. This variable was operationalized through two experimental conditions: (a) **Lost Papers Condition** and (b) **Loose Change Condition**. The study examined whether the type of dropped item influenced helping behavior among bystanders.

The Dependent Variable (DV) was the helping behavior, operationalized as the behavioral response displayed by bystanders after witnessing the staged incident. Helping behavior was categorized as either active bystander or passive bystander.

**Active Bystander** – Individuals who directly intervened by assisting the actor/actress, such as picking up and returning the dropped items or otherwise providing immediate help.

**Passive Bystander** – Individuals who witnessed the incident but did not actively intervene. This category includes those who merely observed the situation, hesitated without taking action, or continued on their way without offering assistance.

To ensure consistency across conditions, several factors were controlled, including the location of the staged accident, which was conducted in both an enclosed space and an open space, the behavior and appearance of the actor and actress, the timing of the incident, and the observational procedures used by the researchers. The same procedures were followed across all locations to ensure that any differences in helping behavior could be attributed to the experimental conditions rather than environmental variations.

## Participants

Participants consisted of naturally occurring bystanders who were present in the locations where the staged incidents were conducted. A total of 47 bystander responses were observed across both experimental conditions. As the study was conducted in public settings using unobtrusive observation, participants were not directly recruited and were selected through convenience sampling based on their presence at the time of data collection.

To ensure the data accurately reflected behavioral responses to the staged events, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during observation. The final sample included only those individuals who qualified as either active bystanders (those who directly intervened or offered assistance) or passive bystanders (those who visibly noticed the event but did not directly intervene). Conversely, individuals who demonstrated no reaction or awareness of the situation whatsoever were excluded from the final count. Consequently, precise demographic data could not be collected; however, based on visual estimation, the participants fell within the 18–24 age bracket. Finally, because the study occurred in an open, public domain, individuals retained complete freedom to engage with, remain near, or leave the scene at any point.

## Materials

### Experimental Stimuli (Props)

To manipulate the types of dropped items across experimental conditions, two distinct sets of physical props were used:

- **Object Set A (Lost Papers):** Consisted of approximately 40 - 50 loose sheets of unclipped white paper.
- **Object Set B (Loose Change):** Consisted of a coin purse holding an assortment of 15 to 20 pieces of Philippine peso coins in varying denominations.

### Observational Tracking and Data Recording

- **Video Recording Equipment:** Distantly positioned smartphone and digital camera were utilized to record high-definition video footage of each experimental trial. This allowed the researchers to capture the naturalistic responses of the bystanders without causing reactivity or awareness that an experiment was taking place.

### Ethical Documentation

- **Informed Consent Forms:** Printed consent sheets outlining the study's true purpose, data privacy disclosures, and a signature line indicating voluntary permission to utilize the observed behavioral data.

- **Debriefing Script:** A standardized verbal script read aloud by researchers during the post-experimental disclosure to systematically explain the staged incident and alleviate any participant discomfort.

## Statistical Software

All collected categorical frequency data (a total of 47 bystander responses) were compiled and analyzed using the Chi-square Test of Independence in Google Sheets.

## Procedure

This study utilized a field experiment design to observe spontaneous helping behavior in natural public settings. To ensure environmental diversity and minimize bias, the study was conducted across various days at four distinct locations in Quezon City: the Quezon City Circle Memorial Park, the National University - Fairview Learning Resource Center (LRC), the National University - Fairview Cafeteria, and the SM Fairview Annex. Participants were not actively recruited; instead, naturally occurring bystanders in these environments served as the subjects. To ensure that all observed helping behavior remained completely spontaneous, no verbal requests for assistance were made in either condition.

### Condition 1:

In the first condition, the actor, dressed in casual civilian clothing, walked through crowded areas while carrying several papers and personal items. The actor then intentionally stumbled, causing numerous papers to scatter on the ground. This condition was conducted in Quezon City Circle Memorial Park and National University - Fairview Learning Resource Center (LRC), with large groups of people or crowded environments to observe helping behavior under high social density.

### Condition 2:

In the second condition, the actress, however dressed in National University - Fairview's BS Psychology uniform, walked while carrying a lot and heavy coin purse. The actress then intentionally dropped the coins to see if the bystanders would help her. This condition was conducted inside the National University - Fairview Cafeteria and SM Fairview Annex.

Across both conditions, the independent variables manipulated or observed were the type of dropped item (scattered papers vs. loose change) and the number of bystanders present. The dependent variables measured were the frequency of helping behavior and the type of help offered (categorized as active or passive help). To ensure that all observed helping behaviors remained entirely spontaneous and natural, no verbal requests for assistance were made by the actors in either condition.

## RESULTS

A **Chi-square Test of Independence** was performed to examine whether the type of dropped item (**paper or coins**) was associated with helping behavior among bystanders in a high-traffic commercial environment. Helping behavior was operationally defined into two categories: **Active Bystander**, referring to individuals who directly assisted after observing the dropped item, and **Passive Bystander**, referring to individuals who observed the situation but did not provide assistance.

### Descriptive Statistics

A total of **47 bystanders** were observed across the two experimental conditions. Of the total sample, **24 participants (51.1%)** demonstrated active helping behavior, while **23 participants (48.9%)** remained passive observers.

Within the **paper condition**, 16 participants (**51.6%**) exhibited active bystander behavior, whereas 15 participants (**48.4%**) displayed passive behavior, yielding a total of 31 observations.

Within the **coin's condition**, 8 participants (**50.0%**) engaged in active helping behavior, while 8 participants (**50.0%**) remained passive, for a total of 16 observations.

These descriptive findings indicate a slight difference in helping behavior between the two conditions, with active helping occurring at relatively comparable rates across both types of dropped items.

**TABLE 1: Observed Frequencies of Helping Behavior by Type of Dropped Item**

Item Dropped	Active Bystander	Passive Bystander	Row Total
Paper	16	15	31
Coins	8	8	16
Column Total	24	23	47

**TABLE 2: Expected Frequencies of Helping Behavior by Type of Dropped Item**

Item Dropped	Active Bystander	Passive Bystander	Row Total
Paper	15.8	7.8	23.7
Coins	8.2	7.8	16
Column Total	24	16	40

### Inferential Statistics

To determine whether the observed differences in helping behavior across item conditions were statistically significant, a **Chi-square Test of Independence** was conducted.

The analysis revealed **no statistically significant association** between the type of dropped item and helping behavior,  $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 0.01, p = .917$ . The obtained Chi-square statistic was smaller than the critical value of **3.841** at the  $\alpha = .05$  significance level. Accordingly, the **null hypothesis was not rejected**.

The magnitude of association was further assessed using the **Phi coefficient ( $\phi$ )**, which is appropriate for a  $2 \times 2$  contingency table.

$$\Phi = \sqrt{(\chi^2 / N)}$$

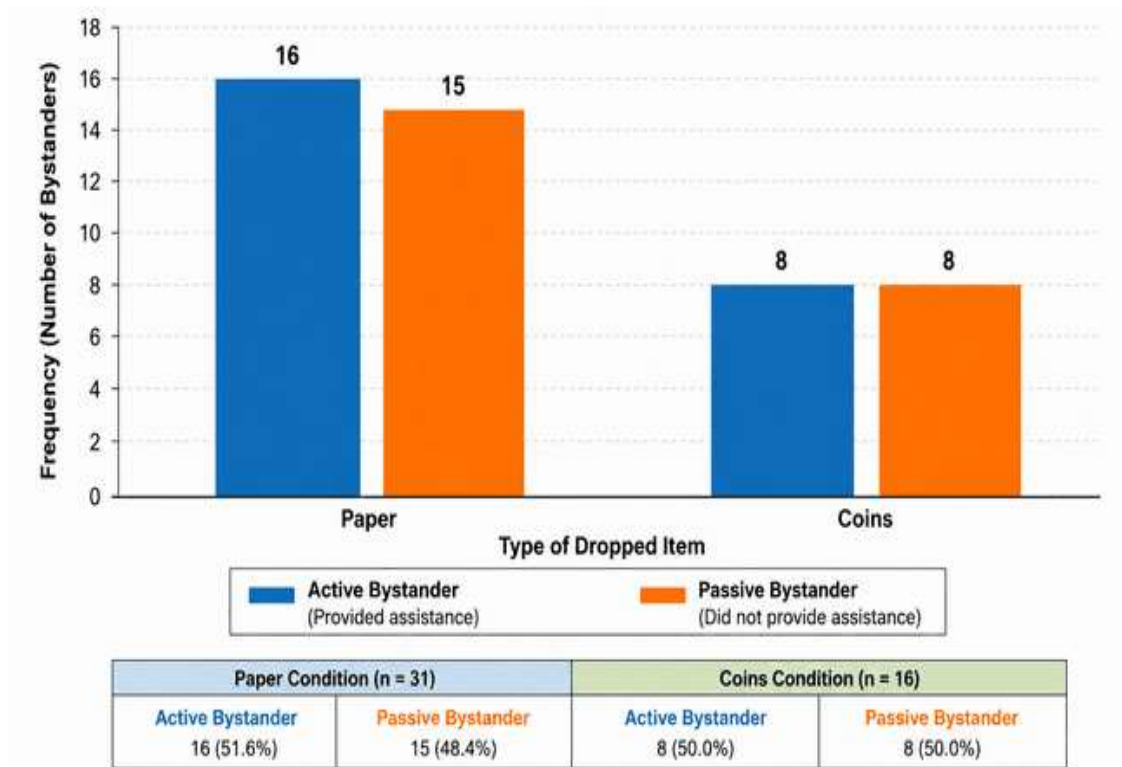
$$\Phi = \sqrt{(0.01 / 47)}$$

$$\Phi = 0.02$$

The resulting  $\phi = .02$  indicates a **negligible effect size**, suggesting that the association between the type of dropped item and helping behavior was extremely weak. This finding implies that the type of item dropped contributed minimally to variations in bystander responses within the observed sample.

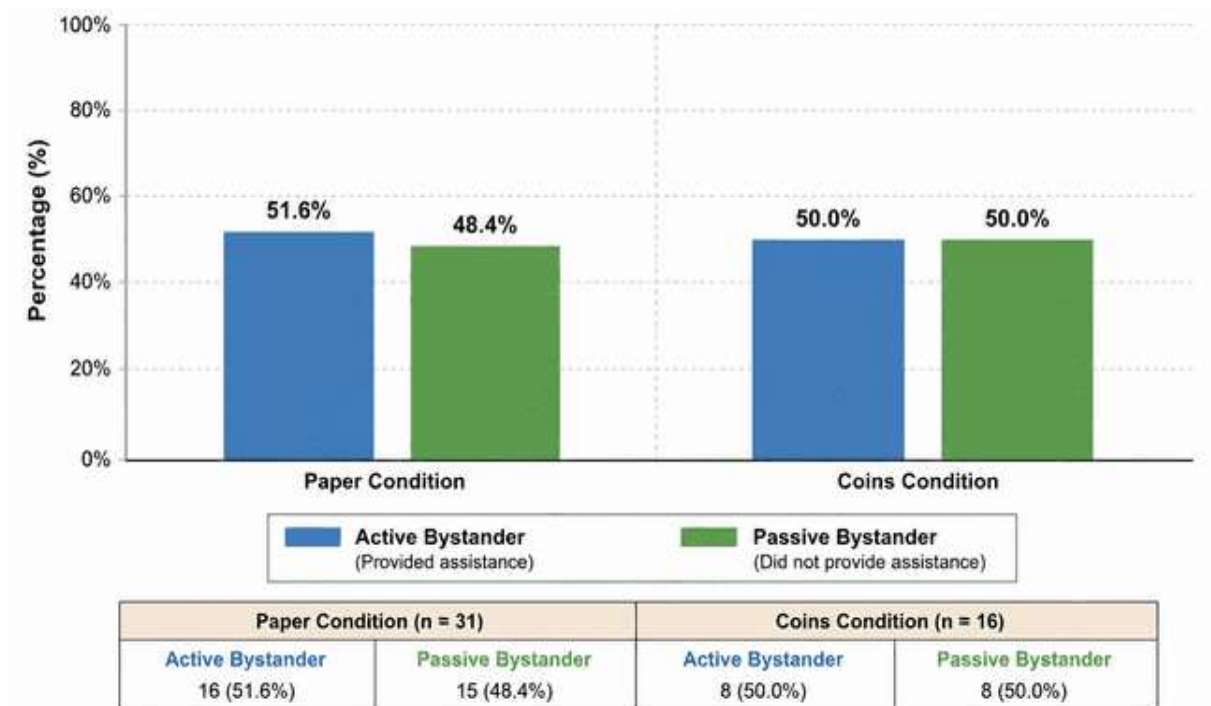
Tables and Figures:

Figure 1. Helping Behavior by Type of Dropped Item.



The figure illustrates the frequency of active and passive bystander responses under paper and coin conditions. Active helping behavior was observed at nearly identical levels across both conditions.

Figure 2. Percentage of Helping Behavior by Condition



The figure presents the percentage distribution of active and passive bystander responses under the paper and coins conditions. The percentage indicates that helping behavior occurred at comparable rates regardless of the type of dropped item.

## INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate that helping behavior was relatively similar across the two experimental conditions. Although active helping behavior was observed slightly more frequently when **papers were dropped** than when **coins were dropped**, the difference between conditions was **minimal**.

Consistent with the Chi-square analysis, the results revealed **no statistically significant relationship** between the type of dropped item and helping behavior,  $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 0.01, p > .05$ . Furthermore, the obtained effect size ( $\phi = .02$ ) indicated a **negligible association** between the variables, suggesting that the type of dropped item had little practical influence on bystander responses.

Overall, participants demonstrated comparable levels of active and passive helping behavior across both conditions, providing no evidence that the type of dropped item significantly affected the likelihood of bystander intervention.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine whether the type of dropped item (paper versus coins) significantly influences helping behavior among bystanders in a public, non-emergency setting. Specifically, it examined whether individuals are more likely to become active bystanders (providing assistance after observation) or remain passive bystanders (no intervention after observation) depending on the item being dropped. The findings revealed no statistically significant association between the number of bystanders and helping behavior. Therefore, the study failed to reject the null hypothesis that the number of bystanders present has no significant relationship whether individuals become passive or active bystanders. This indicates that the presence of additional bystanders did not influence the individual's decision to help in the situations observed.

Although active helping behavior was observed slightly more frequently in paper condition than in the coin condition, the difference between the two was minimal. This suggests that the type of item dropped contributed very little to variations in helping behavior among the observed bystanders. The findings indicate that individuals were generally willing to help regardless of whether the dropped object was paper or coins. This pattern may be understood through the bystander decision-making framework proposed by Latane & Darley (1968), which suggests that individuals interpret a situation before deciding whether to help. In this study, the 'lost paper' items may have been perceived as important personal belongings such as documents, receipts, or records. This aligns with Abbate et al. (2022), which emphasizes that helping behavior is influenced by cognitive interpretation, perceived responsibility, and situational clarity. When an item appears more important, individuals are more likely to feel a moral obligation to assist. On the other hand, the coin condition may have been perceived as low value or less urgent, and the situation may be more ambiguous in terms of whether helping is necessary or appropriate. According to Liu et al. (2023), helping decisions is weighted between the benefits of helping and possible personal or social risks, individuals may be unlikely to help or avoid helping when they think that there is a chance of negative consequences. In this study's coin-related scenario, bystanders may hesitate to help due to the fear of being misjudged as stealing the money, which increases the social cost of helping. Likewise, Lockwood et al. (2017), describe "prosocial apathy", where individuals are less likely to help when involving cognitive or high effort. In this case, coins may require additional psychological effort like risks, uncertainty, making helping behavior less likely to happen. With that, helping behavior appears to depend not only on effort but also on how safe and clear the situation feels.

However, the findings suggest that while bystanders may have perceived paper items as slightly more deserving of assistance than coins, such differences were not substantial enough to conclude that the type of dropped item meaningfully influenced helping behavior. Instead, the results indicate that helping behavior remained relatively similar across both conditions. These can be looked through lenses of Filipino Psychology, the findings may suggest the influence of cultural values including kapwa and malasakit. Kapwa emphasizes a shared identity and interconnectedness with others, while malasakit reflects empathy, concern, and willingness to assist those in need. These values may encourage helping behavior regardless of the specific item involved, potentially explaining why helping responses remained relatively consistent across the paper and coin conditions. In this sense, the findings may provide preliminary support for the idea that Filipino cultural values promote prosocial

behavior even in ordinary, non-emergency situations (Conwi et al., 2019). Although the present study did not directly measure *kapwa* and *malasakit*, the relatively small difference observed between conditions may suggest that participants' decisions to help were not influenced by the type of an item, but rather by broader cultural values emphasizing concern for others.

In comparison with previous studies, the findings are consistent with research showing that people are more likely to help in situations that are clear, low-risk, and easy to interpret, while ambiguity and perceived risk reducing helping behavior. However, unlike many studies that focus on emergency situations, this extends to everyday scenarios such as dropping items in public spaces. This helps show that even small, non-emergency situations can still influence whether people choose to help or not, depending on how they interpret the situation, while cultural values such as *kapwa* and *malasakit* may also play a role in encouraging helping responses.

Other than the influence of dropped items to help behavior of bystanders, another factor examined in this study was the number of people present in the situation whether individuals feel responsible enough to help or choose to remain passive. However, the findings revealed no statistically significant association between the number of bystanders present and helping behavior, thus, the study fails to reject the null hypothesis. Although with these findings, existing literature suggests that the number of individuals present in a situation may influence helping behavior by altering people's assessment of the situation. There could be a misinterpretation on what individuals think deems worthy of assistance, or what the majority thinks worthy of assistance. One concept that explains this process is pluralistic ignorance coined by Katz & Allport (1931), which refers to widespread public adherence to a norm, where individuals observe each other's behavior, and upon noticing what the majority is acting on, this becomes the norm where individuals conform to. The core principle of this concept hinges on the distinction between private thought and public action, where belief and interpretation could be easily distorted, and the general population adheres to what is perceived as the norm. Other influencers of helping behavior underlying the amount of people present in a situation also include psychological mechanisms. Another psychological mechanism associated with helping behavior is the responsibility effect (Darley and Latané, 1968), wherein responsibility is assumed based on how many people are present during a situation. Responsibility is diffused when people witness someone needing help, and those individuals would intervene if they assume the responsibility to do so but only if they have established that assisting is their responsibility and not someone else's. As the amount of people present in a situation increases, the diffusion of responsibility expands in turn, making individuals assume responsibility upon others more than themselves.

However, there are also perspectives that explain why helping behavior remained relatively consistent regardless of the number of bystanders present. A study by Rovira et al. (2023), found that the more individuals are present, as long as they are grouped together, or sharing some form of social connection. Even in situations where responsibility could be diffused, individuals are more likely to help a person in need. Another contributing factor is prosocial modelling, where an individual who acts prosocially can further inspire other individuals to help, because being in the presence of a helping model can stimulate others' own prosocial behavior (Greitemeyer, 2021). Drawing from Bandura's Social Learning theory, human behavior is guided by observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors of others. In turn, when people witness an individual or a group of individuals act in a prosocial way towards a person, after having assessed that they will not be judged negatively for helping, and that individuals are indeed in need of help, these individuals may be encouraged to also help those in need, propagating a more prosocial behavior aimed towards volunteerism, empathy, and altruism, making it to have *malasakit sa kapwa* or concern for others in Filipino Psychology (Juanillo, 2026).

Despite the meaningful data and findings accumulated from this study, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. First, the experiment was conducted across different geographical locations. While the targeted areas were similar in being accessible to the general public, the specific environmental, cultural, and social micro-dynamics of each distinct location were not strictly controlled, which may have introduced unintended variations. Furthermore, because these experiments took place within enclosed, limited public spaces, the confined nature of the environment may have artificially heightened social pressure or forced eye contact, potentially altering bystander responses compared to wide-open settings. Second, the study employed convenience sampling, as the participants consisted entirely of naturally occurring bystanders who happened to be present during the field experiments. Consequently, the sample may not be fully representative of the broader population, limiting the external validity and generalizability of the findings. Finally, the study's

reliance on a specific stimulus, dropped coins, introduces a unique contextual bias, the distinct social cost identified here (the fear of being misjudged as taking money) is inherently tied to monetary items and may not accurately reflect bystander hesitation when non-monetary personal belongings are dropped. Nonetheless, even with these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into how situational factors and immediate environments influence the likelihood of prosocial behavior. The findings contribute to the growing literature on the bystander effect by providing empirical evidence of how individuals navigate ambiguity and perceived social risk in everyday, mundane scenarios. These findings may serve as a useful reference for future researchers interested in examining the intersection of situational barriers and prosocial action.

To build upon this work, future research should consider utilizing more randomized or representative sampling methods and maintaining strict consistency across geographical conditions and settings. Researchers are also encouraged to systematically vary the types of dropped items, specifically comparing monetary objects to non-monetary items like school materials or personal belongings, to isolate whether the fear of negative misjudgment is exclusive to financial stimuli. Lastly, incorporating additional variables, such as crowd density, alongside qualitative or indigenous research methods (such as pagtatanong-tanong) would allow future studies to capture a more comprehensive, emic understanding of how internal cultural values like kapwa and malasakit interact with external situational pressures.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The experiment was guided by the following Ethical Considerations:

**Informed Consent & Voluntariness:** The study aimed to observe spontaneous behavior in natural public settings, obtaining informed consent before the experiment was not possible, as it could have influenced the responses and compromised the validity of the results. Therefore, participants were not informed in advance but were given informed consent form immediately after debriefing and assured that their involvement was entirely voluntary. They were informed that they had the right to refuse inclusion of their observed data and could withdraw consent without any consequences.

**Confidentiality:** All information and footage obtained from the participants was kept confidential as it must be protected, respected, and treated fairly. No information, and footage was disclosed or used in any manner that could potentially harm or exploit the participants.

**Debriefing:** After the experiment, the participants were given a debriefing on the true purpose of the experiment. They were informed that the situation they witnessed was staged and were only intended to investigate a social phenomena—bystander effect hence the “accidental” public situation. Although, there is a minimal use of deception as the participants were not aware about the staged experiment, this was explained during debriefing immediately after the act, ensuring that participants who are involved left aware of what experiment they had been part in.

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