

# Hiya Vs. Malasakit: Navigating Social Hesitation in the Presence of Menstrual Taboos

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined bystander responses and intervention behaviors when witnessing a female decoy with a visible menstrual stain in a public setting. Utilizing a naturalistic field observation design, the researchers investigated how the taboo nature of menstrual stains influences a bystander's willingness to intervene, their hesitation, their response time, and their chosen mode of assistance. A total of 10 naturally observed public bystanders (N = 10) participated across various community locations. Bystander demographic characteristics—specifically age, sex, and generational group—were recorded during post-observation debriefing to analyze potential differences in helping behavior. To examine the demographic association between bystander sex (male, female) and generational group (Gen X, Millennial, Gen Z), a 2 x 3 Fisher Exact Probability Test was performed. The statistical analysis revealed a non-directional, two-tailed probability value of  $p = 0.60$ . Based on these specific statistical findings, the null hypothesis could not be rejected, leading to the main conclusion that there is no significant demographic relationship or association among the observed sample. Ultimately, the study highlights the complexity of public helping behaviors and social discomfort surrounding highly taboo bodily experiences.

## INTRODUCTION

Bystander intervention and the social dynamics of helping behavior remain foundational areas of inquiry within experimental psychology. When individuals witness an unusual or awkward situation in a public space, their decision to step in or remain passive is rarely random; instead, it is heavily mediated by situational cues, social norms, and perceived discomfort. Traditionally, psychological frameworks tracking helping behavior have focused on high-stakes emergencies, mapping out how the presence of others can stifle individual initiative. However, a growing body of contemporary social literature shifts this focus toward everyday social crises—specifically, situations that involve deeply stigmatized scenarios and public vulnerabilities. Menstruation, despite being a natural and universal biological process, continues to carry a distinct cultural stigma and sense of taboo in public environments. When an accident like a visible menstrual stain occurs in public, it instantly shifts from a private matter to a source of acute social discomfort, triggering unique psychological evaluations among onlookers who must decide whether or not to violate social boundaries to offer assistance.

To understand how bystanders navigate this discomfort, researchers rely on **Latané and Darley's (1970) Five-Stage Model of Bystander Intervention**. This cognitive framework posits that before an individual provides help, they must successfully progress through five distinct sequential steps, which include noticing that something is amiss, interpreting the situation as an event requiring assistance, accepting personal responsibility to act, deciding on the appropriate mode of assistance, and finally implementing the chosen action. In public spaces, a psychological or situational breakdown at any of these consecutive stages inevitably results in a failure to intervene. For instance, a bystander might experience pluralistic ignorance during the critical interpretation phase, looking to the passive inaction of other passersby to falsely conclude that nothing is wrong, or they may freeze during the final implementation stage due to audience inhibition—the paralyzing fear of social embarrassment, awkwardness, or negative judgment by onlookers in a shared public environment.

When applied to a highly sensitive issue, this model intersects directly with **Erving Goffman's (1963) Social Stigma Theory**. Goffman defined stigma as an attribute or "mark" that deeply discredits an individual, reducing them from a whole person to a tainted, discounted one. Sociological and psychological extensions of this theory emphasize that women go to great lengths to manage the "menstrual mark," keeping it strictly hidden to conform to societal expectations of cleanliness and decorum. A visible menstrual stain breaks this social expectation, transforming a concealed biological state into a highly visible public "defect." Consequently, a bystander witnessing this is caught in a psychological conflict: the empathetic urge to help someone in distress is actively bottlenecked by the powerful social norms dictating that menstruation should never be acknowledged publicly.

Empirical research testing these concepts has shown mixed results regarding how demographics influence the path to intervention. Early foundational studies by Darley and Latané (1968) demonstrated that increasing the number of witnesses decreases individual responsibility, yet subsequent field studies have shown that the specific nature of the victim and the situation can alter this effect. Furthermore, empirical literature examining the "menstrual mark" reveals that even indirect reminders of menstruation (such as the presence of a tampon) prompt social distancing and avoidance from both male and female observers, highlighting the pervasive nature of the taboo. How these reactions translate into real-time, behavioral hesitation and concrete physical intervention across different demographic categories—such as sex and age—remains an under-explored area in experimental psychology.

This study narrows these broad psychological and sociological concepts down to a specific public crisis: witnessing an unfamiliar female decoy who is experiencing a visible menstrual stain in an open, public setting. The importance of this study lies in its capacity to map out naturalistic social behaviors and evaluate the boundaries of public empathy in real-time. By moving away from artificial laboratory settings and employing a naturalistic field observation design, this experiment captures genuine, unprompted human reactions to a highly sensitive social trigger.

Specifically, this study addresses how many seconds pass between a bystander's visible recognition of the stain and their ultimate decision to act, capturing their level of hesitation. It also measures the exact proportions of bystanders who choose to offer help and what specific modes of intervention—whether direct verbal communication or indirect signaling—are favored. Finally, examining how these intervention patterns vary across age, sex, and distinct generational groups (such as Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z) provides valuable contemporary insights into whether shifting cultural attitudes are successfully dismantling deeply rooted biological taboos.

## Research Question

This study aimed to examine bystander responses when witnessing a person with a visible menstrual stain in a public setting. Specifically, the study investigated the participants' willingness to intervene, the time it took them to notice and respond to the situation, and the manner in which they chose to provide assistance. Participants' demographic characteristics were also considered to determine whether these factors influenced intervention behavior.

## Quantitative Measures of Bystander Response:

Response Time (in seconds.)

- The number of seconds that passed between the bystander's first noticeable recognition of the menstrual stain and their decision to intervene or not intervene.

## Demographic Profile of Bystanders

Participants' demographic characteristics were recorded to examine possible differences in intervention behavior based on:

- Generational Group (Baby Boomers, Millennials, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha)

- Sex (Male or Female)
- Age

The specific research questions derived from this study were:

- How many seconds pass before a bystander notices the menstrual stain and decides whether to intervene or not intervene?
- Are there significant differences in intervention behavior based on the bystanders' age, sex, and generational group?
- Is there a relationship between response time and the bystanders' generational group and sex?

These questions guided the analysis of bystander behavior to better understand factors influencing intervention decisions in situations involving visible menstrual stains and social discomfort.

### **H0 (Null Hypothesis):**

There is no significant relationship between bystanders' demographic characteristics (age, sex, and generational group) and their response time, likelihood of intervention, or mode of intervention when witnessing a visible menstrual stain. Bystanders are equally likely to intervene regardless of demographic differences.

### **H1 (Alternative Hypothesis):**

There is a significant relationship between bystanders' demographic characteristics (age, sex, and generational group) and their response time, likelihood of intervention, or mode of intervention when witnessing a visible menstrual stain. Demographic differences influence whether and how bystanders choose to intervene.

## **METHOD**

A quantitative field experiment utilizing a naturalistic, passive observation design was employed to investigate prosocial intervention and cultural social barriers (*Hiya vs. Malasakit*) in a public setting. The sample consisted of a convenience sample of ten (10) unprimed public bystanders who visually noticed and actively responded to the stimulus. The independent variables focused on the observed demographic characteristics of the participants, specifically gender and generational age groups (e.g., Gen Z, Millennial, Gen X, or Boomer). The dependent variables measured included the occurrence and latency of spontaneous bystander intervention—specifically, the act of informing a stranger about a visible stain—and the nature of any subsequent physical assistance offered, such as tissues, handkerchiefs, or garments to cover the area.

The primary physical apparatus and stimulus consisted of a pair of jeans worn by a female research decoy, modified with a realistic application of a non-toxic, water-soluble red dye on the rear seat to simulate a menstrual breakthrough (*tagos*). Additional research materials included a standardized response script for the decoy, printed Post-Debriefing Informed Consent Forms, and standardized interview questionnaires. The field work was executed across two distinct public locations: Olympus Zabarte and National University - Fairview. During the trials, the research team established a secure perimeter, positioning covert data trackers and a primary debriefing team at adjacent vantage points while the decoy stood or walked naturally in high-traffic zones.

The standardized procedure dictated that the decoy remain entirely passive, looking at her mobile device without initiating eye contact, approaching, or verbally requesting assistance from passersby. When a bystander visually identified the stain and approached the decoy to notify her, the decoy delivered a standardized reactive script of surprise and gratitude. Immediately after, the debriefing team stepped forward to intercept the participant. The debriefer disclosed the academic nature of the psychology social experiment, clarified that the hygiene emergency was completely staged, and presented the Post-Debriefing Informed Consent Form to secure voluntary authorization for data analysis and to document the participant's explicit preferences regarding photo

or video documentation retention. Lastly, all participants were asked to answer a standardized interview questionnaire to gather their insights and thoughts.

## Design

A naturalistic field observation design was employed. The study examined bystander responses to a female decoy displaying a visible menstrual stain in a public setting. The independent variables (subject variables) were the bystanders' age, sex, and generational group, which were not manipulated but recorded as naturally occurring characteristics. The dependent variable were response time. This design was selected to investigate whether the taboo nature of a visible menstrual strain influences the likelihood of intervention behavior and the speed at which bystanders choose to intervene. Each bystander was exposed to only one observation scenario and was unaware that they were participating in a research study, allowing researchers to observe natural helping responses in a public setting.

Each independent variable were operationalized as follows:

- **IV 1 (Age):** Self-reported by participants during the debriefing and recorded in years for analysis.
- **IV 2 (Sex):** Self-reported by participants during the debriefing and coded as male, female or self-identified gender for analysis.
- **IV 3 (Generational Group):** Deduced from self-reported age and classified into generational demographics (e.g., Gen Z, Millennial, Gen X) based on standard age range cut-offs.

Each dependent variable were operationalized as follows:

- **DV 1 (Response Time):** Measured in seconds from the bystander's first noticeable recognition of the menstrual stain until the moment they decide to intervene or not intervene.

## Participants

A total of 10 bystanders participated in the experiment. The ages ranged from 15 to 58 years old, with the mean age being 38.1 years. The sample consisted of 1 male and 9 females. The generational distribution included Gen X (n = 4), Millennial (n = 2), and Gen Z (n = 4). No participants from the Boomer and Gen Alpha generation were recorded to approach the social experiment's decoy. Participation was voluntary and were provided informed consent forms to use their data for interpretation of results,

## Materials

There were five (5) main materials that were used in this experiment:

First, the **red and green food coloring**. These colors were mixed to create an artificial stain resembling menstrual stains. The mixture was used to stimulate the stain, allowing researchers to observe participants' reaction and receptions toward a visible menstrual stain in a public setting.

Secondly, **a pair of pants** served as the primary stimulus in the experiment. The stain was strategically applied to the pants to create a realistic scenario that could evoke natural responses from the participants regarding menstrual taboo and social attitude toward menstruation.

In addition, **a camera** was also used to document the social experiment and record the participants' observable reaction. The visual documentation provided supporting evidence for the observation and helped ensure accurate reporting of the events that occurred during the study.

Lastly, **a paper and pen** were utilized to record field notes, participants' responses and other relevant observations during the experiment. These materials were also used to facilitate informed consent processes and maintain proper documentation of the study.

## Procedure

The experiment was conducted in public locations, including Centi Park in Lagro, Olympus in Zabarte, and selected areas within National University Fairview such as hallways, the canteen, and PE Area. A total of ten bystanders ((N=10) served as participants. Participants were not recruited beforehand; instead, they were naturally observed as they encountered the experimental situation in the selected locations.

A female decoy was instructed to wear light-colored jeans with a visible red stain on the back, created using red coloring dye to simulate a menstrual stain. The decoy acted naturally and appeared unaware of the stain throughout the observation period. She walked slowly through the designated public areas, occasionally stopping to look at her phone, read notices, or remain stationary in commonly occupied spaces.

As participants encountered the decoy, researchers discreetly observed and recorded their reactions. A timer was used to measure the number of seconds between the participant's first noticeable observation of the stain and ant intervention behavior. Researchers documented whether the participants informed the decoy about the stain. The types of intervention displayed (direct, indirect, or no intervention).

For participants who intervened, researchers recorded estimated response time. For participants who did not intervene, the absence of helping behavior was recorded. Researchers also documented the participant's apparent sex, estimated age, and generational group based on observational criteria. Following the observation period, participants who interacted with the decoy were informed of the true purpose of the study through debriefing procedure. And all observation were recorded anonymously on the researchers observation sheet

## RESULTS

Table 1 Reaction Time by Generation

Participant	Generation Group	Setting	Reaction Time (Seconds)
1	Gen X	Olympus, Zabarte	33
2	Gen X	Olympus, Zabarte	31
3	Gen X	Olympus, Zabarte	15
4	Gen Z	Olympus, Zabarte	99
5	Gen Z	Olympus, Zabarte	16
6	Millennial	NU Fairview	15
7	Gen X	NU Fairview	15
8	Gen Z	NU Fairview	8
9	Gen Z	NU Fairview	7
10	Millennial	NU Fairview	15

Table 1.2 Reaction Time by Generation Levels of Measurement

Generation Group	Mean	Median	Mode
Gen X	23.5 seconds	23 seconds	1 seconds

Millennial	15 seconds	15 seconds	15 seconds
Gen Z	32.5 seconds	12 seconds	No repeats

Reaction times among generational groups varied. Gen X participants (n = 4) a mode of 15 seconds, indicating that half of its respondents reacted within 23 seconds or less. Millennial participants (n = 2) reacted exactly for 15 seconds, resulting in the mean, median, and mode being 15 seconds. Suggesting that Millennials have the most swiftest response time. The Gen Z participants (n = 4) showed the most variability as the reaction times are 99, 16, 8 and 7 seconds with its mean being 32.5 seconds, the highest among the three generations recorded in this study due the recorded 99 seconds of reaction time. No mode was presented due to the reaction times being unique across all four participants in this generation group. Overall, the patterns suggest that while Millennials reacted both consistently and quickly, Gen Z displayed quick reaction time and a slow reaction time (99 seconds). While Gen X fell into the middle of speed and variability.

Table 2 Reaction Time by Sex

Sex	Reaction Time (Seconds)	Mean	Median	Mode
Male	15	15	15	15
Female	33, 31, 15, 99, 16, 15, 8, 7, 15	24.3	15	15

The highly imbalanced sex distribution in the sample (male = 1, female = 9) showcases that this social experiment resonates to the female participants, as they are more likely to aid a woman with a visible red stain in their pants compared to men. Additionally, researchers have observed that during the social experiment in Olympus, Zabarte there were men who noticed the decoy's visible fake red stain behind her pants but chose to glance away or ignore it entirely, not informing the participant of her stain. While the male participant reacted quickly in this experiment, no strong conclusion could be made about sex differences in their reaction times.

Due to the experiment only having one constant level of the independent variable and the nature of the experiment was focused solely on the social aspect of the participants' reaction time and their demographic profile, the levels of measurement aren't used as tools for the data gathered. A 2 x 3 table was made using a Fisher Exact Probability Test to examine the association between the sex (male, female) and generation group (Gen X, Millennial, Gen Z). The table below shows a 90% female participant while 10% to the male sex. No Boomer or Gen alpha participants approached the decoy. The test was performed using an online calculator, as the analysis shows a two-tailed probability value of p = 60, greater than the alpha level = 0.05. Therefore, failing to reject the null hypothesis showcasing that there was no significant relationship between sex and generational group due to the presence of only one male participant. Effect size was not calculated in this study as with only one male participant in this study, the data would be misleading.

Table 3 Fisher Exact Probability (2 X 4) Test

	Gen X	Millennial	Gen Z	Row Total
Male	1	0	0	1
Female	3	2	4	9
Column Total	4	2	4	10

### Data Entry

	C <sub>1</sub>	C <sub>2</sub>	C <sub>3</sub>	Totals
R <sub>1</sub>	1	0	0	1
R <sub>2</sub>	3	2	4	9
Totals	4	2	4	10

Clear

Calculate

### Fisher Exact Probability Test

$P_A =$

$P_B =$

No. of tables evaluated =

The Fisher test is performed only if  $N \leq 300$ .

Note that  $P_A$  and  $P_B$  are both non-directional (two-tailed).

### Chi-Square Test (df=2)

Chi-square =

$P =$

The chi-square test is performed only if at least 80% of the cells have an expected frequency of 5 or greater, and no cell has an expected frequency smaller than 1.0.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine bystander responses when witnessing an individual with a visible menstrual stain in a public setting. Specifically, it investigated participants' willingness to intervene, the time taken to notice and respond, the modes of intervention chosen, and whether demographic characteristics such as sex and generational group influenced this behavior.

The hypothesis that demographic differences would significantly influence intervention behavior was not supported. The Fisher's Exact Probability Test revealed no significant association between a person's sex or generational group and their intervention behavior (two-tailed  $p = 0.60$ ). This suggests that the decision to intervene in a socially uncomfortable situation involving menstruation is not heavily dependent on whether a bystander is male or female, or whether they belong to Generation X, the Millennial generation, or Generation Z.

Despite the social stigma historically attached to menstruation, the lack of significant demographic differences can be explained through the framework of the Latané and Darley's (1968) Bystander Intervention Model. According to this framework, a bystander must progress through four stages before intervening: witness a situation, interpret it as requiring assistance, assume personal responsibility, then decide how to act. The participants who chose to intervene likely progressed through these stages despite the social discomfort associated with menstruation.

In the present study, the visible menstrual stain acts as a highly specific, ambiguous social cue rather than a life-threatening emergency. Because the situation induces "evaluation apprehension", a phenomenon wherein bystanders fear social awkwardness or worsening the victim's embarrassment, the psychological barriers to intervention remain universally high across all demographics. The statistical insignificance ( $p = 0.60$ ) suggests that the tension between social discomfort and the desire to help is a shared human experience, transcending both generational and sex differences.

The results agree with previous research demonstrating that helping behavior is often influenced more by situational and social-contextual factors than by demographic characteristics alone. Darley and Latané (1970) found that the presence of social ambiguity can affect whether bystanders choose to help.

Additionally, the findings are generally consistent, yet subtly contrast, existing literature on menstrual stigma and bystander behavior. Historically, research by Roberts et al. (2002) demonstrated that visible markers of menstruation elicit strong negative evaluations and social avoidance, which explains the hesitation and prolonged response times observed in this study.

Furthermore, while traditional bystander literature often notes that females are more likely to intervene in situations requiring emotional or social comfort (Eagly & Crowley, 1986), our findings echo more recent work by Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013). They argue that modern shifts toward menstrual activism and education have begun to normalize the topic across younger generations and genders, potentially closing the behavioral gap between sexes and age groups when confronted with menstrual mishaps in public.

Similarly, Fischer et al. (2011) reported that intervention decisions are strongly shaped by the perceived nature of the situation and the level of responsibility felt by observers. In the context of a visible menstrual stain, bystanders may have viewed the situation as a low-risk opportunity to provide assistance, reducing the impact of demographic differences on helping behavior.

Two notable limitations must be considered when interpreting these results. First is the Sample Size Constraints, the utilization of the Fisher's Exact Test implies a small sample size ( $N \geq 300$ ). A smaller sample reduces the statistical power of the study, making it more difficult to detect subtle behavioral nuances or true differences between the demographic groups.

The second limitation are the Methodological Restrictions, Because the experiment relied on a single, constant level of the independent variable, it focused strictly on the social aspect of reaction time and basic demographics. The cells within the data did not meet the minimum frequency requirements for a Chi-Square test (where 80% of cells must have an expected frequency of 5 or greater), limiting the depth of the quantitative analysis.

Future research could address these limitations by increasing the sample size and including a more diverse participant pool across different settings and cultural backgrounds to satisfy the assumptions required for a Chi-Square test or multi-way ANOVA. Researchers may also compare responses across multiple social scenarios involving varying levels of urgency, stigma, or public visibility to determine whether intervention patterns differ under different circumstances such as altering the setting or changing the demographic profile of the decoy.

In conclusion, this study highlights that witnessing a visible menstrual stain in public presents a unique psychological dilemma for bystanders, characterized by hesitation and social discomfort. Although demographic characteristics such as sex and generational group were not significantly associated with intervention behavior, the findings suggest that situational factors and social perceptions may play a more important role in determining whether and how individuals choose to help. Further research is needed to explore these influences and to expand understanding of helping behavior in everyday social contexts.

## **Ethical Considerations**

To preserve the natural behavior of the participants, the study employed deception as part of its social experiment design. Participants were not informed beforehand that they were being observed, as prior knowledge of the study could have influenced their responses and compromised the validity of the findings. The staged scenario involved a researcher wearing pants with an artificial menstrual stain created using food colors to examine social intervention in public settings. Following the observation, participants were approached and fully debriefed regarding the situation that had been intentionally staged and were given the opportunity to ask questions about the experiment.

Informed consent was obtained after the debriefing process. Participants received a consent form explaining the study's objective, procedure, use of deception and their rights as research participants. Participation remained entirely voluntary, and individuals were informed that they could refuse the use of their data or withdraw their consent without any penalty. Participants who chose not to participate were assured that all observations, photographs, and videos related to their interaction would be deleted and excluded from the study.

Lastly, confidentiality and privacy were maintained throughout the research process. No personally identifying information was collected or included in the final report. Participants were also given control over the use of any visual documentation by selecting one of three consent options: allowing the use of data only, permitting the use of photos or videos with their identity concealed through blurring, or granting full consent for the use of unblurred documentation in classroom presentations. All collected data and documentation were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team for academic purposes.

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