TPM

AN ECOLOGICAL-TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL BULLYING IN VIETNAM: RELATIONAL AGGRESSION, COUNTER-STEREOTYPICAL PERPE-TRATORS, AND THE INTERVENTION PERCEPTION GAP

MA. NGUYỄN THỊ HIỀN
NGUYỄN MINH ĐỨC
MA. PHẠM THỊ PHƯƠNG THỨC
MA. MAI THỊ MAI
DR. PHẠM THỊ HỒNG THẮM
ASSOC.PROF. DR. NGUYỄN HỒNG THUẬN
THE VIETNAM NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

DR. HỒ THỊ THÚY HẰNG
UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND EDUCATION - THE UNIVERSITY OF DANANG

Abstract

This study provides a multi-stakeholder analysis of school bullying in Vietnamese lower secondary schools, framed by an ecological-transactional model. A cross-sectional survey collected data from 834 participants—including student victims, perpetrators, bystanders, teachers, and parents—across three diverse provinces. The analysis employed descriptive statistics, comparative analyses, and multinomial logistic regression to identify prevalence rates, stakeholder profiles, and predictive risk factors. Results reveal the overwhelming dominance of relational aggression (e.g., slander, social exclusion) over physical forms. Counter-stereotypical perpetrator profiles emerged, with a majority demonstrating good academic performance and conduct, suggesting bullying may function as a strategic tool for social navigation. Ecological factors, particularly aggressive peer group norms and family conflict, were significant predictors of involvement. A critical "intervention perception gap" was identified: while bystanders perceived school interventions as highly effective, victims and parents expressed significant dissatisfaction and uncertainty, indicating a fundamental misalignment between school actions and stakeholder needs. The findings underscore the necessity of a whole-school approach that strengthens school-family collaboration, builds teacher capacity to manage relational aggression, and develops interventions that address the underlying power imbalances of bullying.

Keywords: School Bullying, Relational Aggression, Ecological Systems Theory, Multi-Stakeholder, Risk Factors, Intervention, Adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

School bullying constitutes a pervasive and persistent public health challenge with profound and enduring consequences for the mental and emotional well-being of adolescents worldwide (Le, Tran, et al., 2019). A substantial body of international research has unequivocally linked involvement in bullying—whether as a victim, perpetrator, or both—to a range of deleterious outcomes, including elevated risks for depression, anxiety disorders, social isolation, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation (Karmilasari et al., 2020; Nurhalimah et al., 2025; Stephens et al., 2018). The scale of the problem is significant; global estimates suggest that approximately one-third of adolescents have experienced some form of bullying, making it a normative, albeit harmful, feature of the school experience for millions (Biswas et al., 2020; Kiing et al., 2025; Kim, 2023). The negative impacts are not confined to victims. Perpetrators are also at increased risk for later antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships, while even bystanders who witness bullying can experience distress and feelings of guilt or anxiety (Stephens et al., 2018). This evidence base firmly establishes school bullying not as a benign rite of passage, but as a serious threat to adolescent development that warrants sustained attention from researchers, policymakers, and educational practitioners.

While the detrimental effects of bullying are universal, its specific manifestations, prevalence rates, and the dynamics of its prevention and mitigation are profoundly shaped by local cultural values (Biswas et al., 2020). This is particularly salient in East and Southeast Asian societies, many of which are characterized by collectivist cultural orientations, often historically influenced by Confucian ethics (Hui et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2004). These cultural frameworks typically place a strong emphasis on group harmony, the importance of social hierarchy and order, and the avoidance of overt, direct conflict (Biswas et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2004). Such values can significantly influence the nature of peer aggression. In contexts where direct confrontation is socially discouraged, bullying may be more likely to manifest in indirect or relational forms. Relational aggression, which includes behaviors such as spreading malicious rumors, gossiping, and deliberate social exclusion, serves as a potent yet less conspicuous means of harming others and negotiating social status without violating explicit norms against physical violence (Kiing et al., 2025; Waasdorp, 2022; Xu & Zhu, 2014). A central cultural script that mediates social interaction in these contexts is the concept of "face" (e.g., *mianzi* in Mandarin, *thể diện* in Vietnamese), which refers to an individual's public image, reputation, and sense of dignity within their social group (e.g., Hwang, 1987; Ting-Toomey, 1994). The imperative to "save face"—to preserve one's own honor and avoid causing others to lose theirs—is a powerful motivator of behavior (Le, Dunne, et al., 2017; Le, Tran, et al., 2019). This cultural dynamic has critical implications for bullying research. For victims, the fear of "losing face" by admitting to being victimized—an admission of weakness or social rejection—can create a powerful barrier to reporting incidents to adults (Englander, 2007). For school administrators, the desire to maintain the school's "face" or reputation for harmony and order may lead to a preference for discreet, private interventions that minimize public acknowledgment of conflict, rather than more transparent and potentially confrontational approaches (e.g., Hwang, 1987). Understanding this cultural backdrop is therefore not peripheral but central to interpreting the dynamics of bullying, help-seeking, and institutional response in the region..

Within this regional context, school bullying has emerged as an issue of growing national concern in Vietnam, reflecting broader societal transformations and posing a significant challenge to the educational environment (Kiing et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2021). Official statistics and media reports have highlighted an alarming frequency of incidents, elevating the issue to a national priority (Kiing et al., 2025; Nguyen, Le, & Le, 2021). Recent empirical research conducted within Vietnam corroborates these concerns and points toward a specific pattern of aggression. A notable study in Da Nang, a major city, found a high prevalence rate, with 73.9% of students reporting having experienced some form of bullying (Nguyen, Le, & Le, 2021; Nguyen, Le, Nguyen, & Le, 2021). Critically, this study identified mental/psychological violence as the most pervasive form, affecting 76.4% of victims (Nguyen, Le, & Le, 2021; Nguyen, Le, Nguyen, & Le, 2021). This finding aligns powerfully with the data from the present study, in which 83% of surveyed teachers identified "slander, belying, and teasing" as the primary form of bullying they observed in their schools. The landscape of peer aggression is further complicated by the rise of the digital sphere. Recent data indicates that approximately 14% of Vietnamese adolescents have been victims of cyberbullying, adding a relentless, 24/7 dimension to peer victimization that transcends the physical boundaries of the school (Kang, 2025; Kiing et al., 2025; Thang et al., 2025). The convergence of national statistics, regional academic studies, and the preliminary data from this investigation points to an inescapable conclusion: the dominant narrative of school bullying in contemporary Vietnam is not one of overt physical fights in the schoolyard, but of the insidious, pervasive, and deeply wounding spread of relational and psychological aggression. This consistency across multiple data sources suggests that any effective intervention strategy in the Vietnamese context must prioritize addressing these less tangible but profoundly damaging forms of bullying, which are often more difficult for adults to detect and for victims to report.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AN ECOLOGICAL-TRANSACTIONAL MODEL

To comprehensively understand the multifaceted nature of school bullying, this study adopts Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as its guiding analytical framework (Analisah & Indartono, 2019; Gradinariu, 2021). This model posits that human development is not determined in isolation but is shaped by a complex, nested set of environmental systems, ranging from immediate interpersonal interactions to broad cultural ideologies (Benbenishty et al., 2008). This perspective moves beyond individual-blame models to conceptualize bullying as a transactional process that occurs within and between these interconnected systems (Analisah & Indartono, 2019; Kiing et al., 2025). The key systems relevant to this study are:

The Microsystem: This refers to the immediate environments where the adolescent directly participates and interacts, such as the family, the peer group, and the school classroom (Albanese, 2024; Lee, 2011). This

study directly assesses the microsystem by examining variables such as family conflict dynamics, perceived parental support, and the normative beliefs and behaviors within an adolescent's peer group.

The Mesosystem: This system comprises the interconnections and relationships between an individual's various microsystems (Analisah & Indartono, 2019). A critical mesosystem linkage in the context of bullying is the relationship between the school and the family. This study explores the functioning of the mesosystem by analyzing the often-conflicting perceptions and breakdowns in communication between teachers and parents regarding school safety and intervention effectiveness.

The Exosystem: This includes external social settings that do not directly involve the developing person but indirectly affect their experiences in their immediate settings (Lee, 2011). For example, parental workplace stress or community norms can influence family dynamics and parenting practices. While not directly measured in this study, the influence of the exosystem can be inferred from data on family conflict and parental support (Gradinariu, 2021).

The Macrosystem: This represents the overarching cultural blueprint of a society, including its dominant beliefs, values, customs, and laws (Benbenishty et al., 2008). In this study, the macrosystem is a critical interpretive lens. Cultural values such as collectivism and the imperative of "saving face" are hypothesized to shape reporting behaviors, the preference for certain intervention styles, and the very expression of aggression itself (Hwang, 1987; Xu et al., 2014).

By applying this ecological-transactional framework, the study can move beyond a narrow focus on the characteristics of individual bullies or victims. It allows for a holistic analysis that conceptualizes school bullying as a systemic problem, produced and maintained by complex interactions across multiple levels of the social environment, and therefore requiring systemic, multi-level solutions (Benbenishty et al., 2008).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Despite the growing concern, there remains a significant gap in the Vietnamese research literature regarding comprehensive, multi-stakeholder investigations of school bullying. Most studies tend to focus on a single perspective, typically that of student victims. There is a scarcity of research that simultaneously captures and contrasts the distinct viewpoints of all key actors involved: victims, perpetrators, bystanders, teachers, and parents. This study was designed to fill this critical gap. By gathering data from these five distinct groups, it aims to construct a more holistic, three-dimensional understanding of the phenomenon.

The present study is guided by three primary research objectives:

1.   To provide a detailed, multi-perspective descriptive analysis of the school bullying landscape in Vietnamese lower secondary schools, including its prevalence, dominant forms, and specific contexts.

2.   To identify the key ecological factors within the family and peer microsystems that predict an adolescent's involvement in bullying, specifically examining the characteristics that differentiate victims and perpetrators from bystanders.

3.   To critically evaluate the perceived effectiveness of current school-based intervention strategies by systematically contrasting the perspectives of school staff with the lived experiences of students and their parents, thereby identifying critical "perception gaps" that may be hindering effective prevention and response.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to collect data from a total of 834 participants across three distinct provinces in Vietnam. The selection of these locations—Hà Nội, representing a major metropolitan urban center; Nam Định, a provincial capital city; and Sơn La, a more rural and mountainous province—was a deliberate strategy to capture a degree of geographical and socio-demographic diversity, thereby enhancing the potential generalizability of the findings beyond a single region.

The sample was composed of five distinct stakeholder groups, allowing for a multi-perspective analysis of the school bullying phenomenon. The groups included:

●   100 Teachers
●   100 Parents or legal guardians
●   124 students who self-identified as having been victims of school bullying
●   33 students who self-identified as having engaged in bullying behaviors (perpetrators)
●   477 students who self-identified as having witnessed school bullying (bystanders)

Participants were recruited from multiple lower secondary schools (serving students in grades 6 through 9, typically ages 11-15) within the selected provinces. Self-report questionnaires, tailored to each specific

stakeholder group, were administered after obtaining appropriate informed consent from school administrators, parents (for student participants), and the participants themselves.

Measures

A multi-part questionnaire was developed and adapted for each of the five respondent groups. While the source documentation does not specify the use of pre-existing, standardized psychometric scales, the content of the questionnaire items was designed to measure a range of constructs central to the study's objectives. The key domains assessed were:

● Bullying Involvement: Participants were asked about their experiences with school bullying, including the frequency and specific forms of behavior. These forms were categorized as physical aggression, verbal/relational aggression (e.g., "slander, belying, teasing," "spreading rumors," "social isolation"), property-related aggression, and cyberbullying. Questions were framed to capture experiences of victimization, perpetration, and witnessing behavior.

● Ecological Factors (Microsystem):

Family Environment: This section included items to assess the student's living situation (e.g., living with parents, grandparents, or others), their perception of the level of parental care and support, and the frequency and nature of conflict within the family, including items specifically referencing "mental violence".

Peer Environment: This section assessed key aspects of students' peer relationships, including the presence of close friends and, critically, the perceived norms for conflict resolution within their peer group. A key item asked about the likelihood of their friends using violence to solve disagreements.

● Demographic and Personal Characteristics: The questionnaire collected standard demographic information, including gender and grade level. It also included items on students' academic performance (e.g., rated as "Excellent," "Good," "Fair") and their official school conduct evaluation (e.g., rated as "Good," "Fair," "Poor").

● Perceptions of School Intervention: To gauge the effectiveness of institutional responses, students and parents were asked to rate the school's interventions on a scale that included "Very good," "Fair," "Not good," and "Don't know." Teachers, in turn, were asked about the frequency with which they employed specific intervention strategies, such as individual counseling, mediation between students, or formal punishment.

● Reporting Behavior: Victims and bystanders were asked about their responses to bullying incidents. Questions explored whether they reported the incident, to whom they reported (e.g., family, friends, teacher), and, if they did not report, their reasons for remaining silent.

Analysis Strategy

The data were analyzed using a multi-stage strategy designed to address the study's research objectives.

● Descriptive Statistics: First, descriptive analyses, including the calculation of frequencies, means, and percentages, were conducted. This was used to provide a comprehensive overview of the prevalence, forms, and contexts of school bullying as reported by the different stakeholder groups, and to characterize the demographic profile of the sample.

● Comparative Analyses: Second, inferential statistical tests were employed to examine differences between the primary student groups (victims, perpetrators, and bystanders). Although the specific tests were not named in the source material, standard methods for such comparisons in social science research would include Chi-square tests of independence for categorical variables (e.g., gender, conduct rating) and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for continuous or ordinal variables treated as continuous. These analyses were crucial for identifying significant differences in the demographic, family, and peer profiles of the groups.

● Predictive Modeling: Finally, to address the second research objective of identifying key risk factors, a Multinomial Logistic Regression (NOMREG) model was utilized. This advanced statistical technique is appropriate for modeling a categorical dependent variable with more than two outcomes. In this study, it was used to determine which independent variables (e.g., demographic characteristics, family environment factors, peer group norms) significantly predicted a student's likelihood of being in the "victim" or "perpetrator" group, relative to the "bystander" group, which served as the reference category. This analysis provides a more rigorous statistical basis for identifying the factors most strongly associated with involvement in bullying.

RESULTS

The Landscape of Bullying: Pervasiveness, Forms, and Locus

The data indicate that school bullying is not an occasional occurrence but a chronic feature of the educational landscape in the surveyed schools. Its pervasiveness is evident from the perspective of both teachers and students. Nearly 40% of teachers reported witnessing bullying behaviors on a weekly or even daily basis. This high frequency of observation is mirrored in student experiences, with 59.1% of all student participants reporting that they had witnessed bullying at school. This establishes a school climate where exposure to peer aggression is a common experience.

A defining characteristic of bullying in this context is the overwhelming dominance of psychological and relational forms of aggression over direct physical violence. When teachers were asked to identify the primary type of bullying they observed, 83% pointed to behaviors such as "slander, belying, and teasing". This focus on verbal and social manipulation was strongly corroborated by the reports of student victims, who cited high rates of being teased, having malicious rumors spread about them, and being subjected to deliberate social exclusion. While physical aggression was present, it was reported with significantly lower frequency by all stakeholder groups. This finding confirms the central thesis that the primary challenge in this context is the insidious nature of relational aggression.

One of the most counter-intuitive findings relates to the location of these aggressive acts. Contrary to the common assumption that bullying thrives in unsupervised areas like hallways or playgrounds, the ***classroom*** emerged as the primary "hotspot." A striking 78.2% of victims and 45.1% of bystanders identified the classroom as the main place where bullying occurred. Other common locations included cyberspace, the route to and from school, and the schoolyard, but the classroom was the undisputed epicenter.

The confluence of these findings—the dominance of subtle relational aggression and the classroom as its primary stage—points to a significant challenge in school safety management. It suggests a potential failure of traditional models of classroom supervision. While a teacher is physically present and managing academic instruction, their presence alone appears insufficient to deter or even detect the sophisticated, non-physical forms of aggression that are most prevalent. The classroom is not merely a physical space but a complex social ecosystem where power dynamics, social hierarchies, and peer status are actively negotiated, often through covert aggressive behaviors that fly under the radar of adults focused on overt disruption or academic tasks (Waasdorp, 2022). This redefines the notion of a "supervised" and "safe" environment, suggesting that teacher presence must be accompanied by a specific competence in observing and managing the social-emotional climate of the classroom to be truly effective.

Deconstructing Stereotypes: Comparative Profiles of Participants

The comparative analysis of student profiles reveals a complex picture that challenges deeply entrenched stereotypes about the characteristics of those who bully and those who are victimized. The data on gender and, most notably, on academic and conduct records, paint a portrait of the perpetrator that is far from the conventional image of a socially marginalized or academically failing student.

The following table provides a comparative summary of key characteristics across the three student groups.

TABLE 1 Comparative Analysis of Student Profiles by Bullying Involvement

Characteristic	Victims (N=124)	Perpetrators (N=33)	Bystanders (N=477)
Gender (% Male)	52.4%	48.5%	45.9%
Academic Performance (% Good + Fair)	61.3%	63.6%	75.7%
Conduct (% Good)	52.4%	78.8%	61.8%

Notes. Data derived from the multi-stakeholder survey.

With regard to gender, the data disrupt the simple male-bully/female-victim narrative. The perpetrator group demonstrated a near-even gender split (48.5% male, 51.5% female), while the victim group, contrary to some stereotypes, was slightly majority male (52.4% male). This indicates that both perpetration and victimization are common experiences for both boys and girls in this context.

The most striking finding, however, lies in the academic and conduct profiles. As shown in Table 1, the perpetrator group presents a surprisingly positive profile. A substantial majority of students who engage in bullying were officially rated as having "Good" conduct (78.8%) and achieving "Fair" or better academic

results (63.6%). In fact, their conduct record was markedly better than that of the victim group (52.4% "Good" conduct) and even surpassed that of the bystander group (61.8% "Good" conduct).

This counter-intuitive profile suggests that bullying behavior in this setting may not be an outcome of academic failure, behavioral maladjustment, or social alienation. Instead, it points toward a more calculated form of aggression. These students are successfully adhering to the *formal rules* and expectations of the school, as evidenced by their positive evaluations from teachers. Their aggression is not an act of rebellion against the adult-managed system. Rather, it appears to be a strategic tool employed within the informal social system of the peer group. This aligns with social dominance theories, which propose that aggression can be a calculated means to acquire and maintain status and power within a social hierarchy (Xu et al., 2004). These students appear adept at navigating two different sets of rules: they conform to the explicit expectations of adults to maintain their good standing, while simultaneously using relational aggression—a form of harm less visible and less likely to be punished by adults—to establish and enforce their position within the implicit peer hierarchy. This reveals the perpetrator not as a simple deviant, but as a potentially sophisticated and socially integrated actor.

The Ecological Context: Family and Peer Predictors of Involvement

The multinomial logistic regression analysis provided statistical evidence for the powerful role of the immediate microsystem—specifically, family and peer environments—in predicting a student's involvement in bullying.

The family environment presented a nuanced picture. A notable demographic feature across all groups was the high proportion of students (approximately 50%) living with their grandparents, highlighting the significance of multi-generational households in this cultural context. While victims reported receiving high levels of parental care, they also reported a significantly higher frequency of conflict within the family, particularly what was described as "mental violence". This suggests that while parents may be emotionally invested, a home environment characterized by conflict may increase a child's vulnerability to victimization at school.

The influence of the peer group emerged as one of the most powerful predictors of aggressive behavior. The analysis revealed a dramatic link between an individual's behavior and the perceived norms of their friends. *An astonishing 90.9% of students who identified as perpetrators reported that their close friends were likely to use violence to resolve conflicts*. This stands in stark contrast to the bystander group, where only 5.2% reported the same peer norm. This finding provides compelling evidence for the role of peer influence and social learning in the development of aggressive behaviors. It suggests that aggression is not merely an individual trait but is heavily sanctioned and modeled within certain peer clusters.

The results of the multinomial logistic regression, which identified the most significant statistical predictors of being a victim or perpetrator (relative to being a bystander), are summarized below.

TABLE 2 Parameter Estimates of Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Bullying Involvement (Reference Category: Victim)

Predictor Variable	Category	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Predictors of Being a Perpetrator (vs. Victim)						
Drinking alcohol	Yes	2.458	0.627	15.362	.000	11.685
Carrying dangerous objects	Yes	2.016	0.559	12.991	.000	7.511
Endorses violence to resolve conflict	Yes	1.942	0.584	11.062	.001	6.975
	Sometimes	1.705	0.536	10.113	.001	5.503
Smoking	Yes	1.564	0.624	6.273	.012	4.776
Has close friends	Yes	1.474	0.550	7.185	.007	4.365
	Sometimes	1.341	0.537	6.230	.013	3.824
Internet usage time	(Continuous)	0.207	0.063	10.840	.001	1.230

Open Access

Province/City (vs. Hanoi)	Nam Dinh	1.201	0.563	4.547	.033	3.323
Predictors of Being a Bystander (vs. Victim)						
Endorses violence to resolve conflict	Yes	1.096	0.334	10.741	.001	2.991
Has close friends	Yes	0.582	0.237	6.014	.014	1.789
Drinking alcohol	Yes	-1.928	0.428	20.278	.000	0.145

Notes. This table presents the statistically significant predictors from the NOMREG analysis.
The reference category for comparison is the "Victim" group. B = Beta coefficient; S.E. = Standard Error; Sig. = p-value; Exp(B) = Odds Ratio

The profile of a perpetrator is characterized by a "behavioral syndrome" of interconnected risk factors. The strongest predictor is alcohol use; a student who drinks is nearly 12 times more likely to be a perpetrator than a victim (OR = 11.685). This is followed by carrying dangerous objects (OR = 7.511) and a firm belief in using violence to resolve conflicts (OR = 6.975). These factors suggest a level of intent and identification with an aggressive role. This profile is further reinforced by smoking (OR = 4.776) and strong peer group connections (OR = 4.365), highlighting the role of social reinforcement for deviant behaviors. Increased internet usage also significantly raises the odds of being a perpetrator (OR = 1.230), reflecting the rise of cyberbullying.[1]

The profile of a bystander reveals a more complex social dynamic. Like perpetrators, they are more likely to have close friends (OR = 1.789) and endorse violence as a solution to conflict (OR = 2.991) compared to victims. This suggests a "tough bystander" persona; their social integration and willingness to retaliate may act as a shield against victimization, yet it places them in high-conflict environments where they witness bullying.[1] Notably, drinking alcohol makes a student less likely to be a bystander compared to a victim (OR = 0.145), reinforcing that this behavior is strongly associated with perpetration rather than observation.

The Wall of Silence and the Intervention Paradox

The study's findings reveal a deep-seated "wall of silence" surrounding bullying, rooted in a profound lack of student trust in formal school systems, and a startling paradox in how school interventions are perceived by different stakeholders. A "wall of silence" surrounds bullying, with a majority of victims (51.6%) choosing to "suffer in silence". When help is sought, students turn to family (33.9%) and friends (33.1%) far more often than teachers (21.8%), reflecting a profound lack of trust in formal school systems. This distrust appears to be validated by a critical "intervention perception gap" between those who observe bullying and those who experience it directly.

Data from teachers on their intervention practices confirms a preference for "soft" approaches. As detailed in Figure 1, strategies such as individual counseling by the homeroom teacher (M = 3.67) and mediation between parties (M = 3.53) are the most frequently employed methods. In contrast, more severe, punitive measures like school suspension (M = 2.96) and public criticism at the flag ceremony (M = 2.90) are utilized less often. This highlights an institutional inclination towards restorative and discreet approaches over formal disciplinary actions.
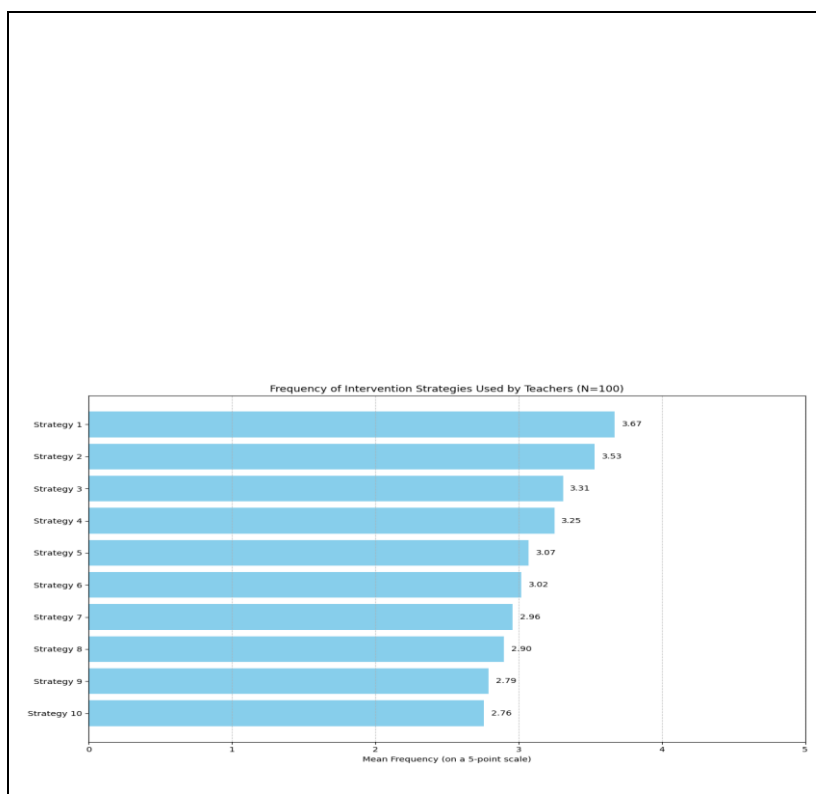
Frequency of Intervention Strategies Used by Teachers (N=100)

Strategy	Mean Frequency
Strategy 1	3.67
Strategy 2	3.53
Strategy 3	3.31
Strategy 4	3.25
Strategy 5	3.07
Strategy 6	3.02
Strategy 7	2.96
Strategy 8	2.90
Strategy 9	2.79
Strategy 10	2.76

FIGURE 1 Frequency of Intervention Strategies Used by Teachers[1]

This lack of trust appears to be validated by a critical "intervention perception gap" between those who observe bullying and those who experience it directly. The data reveal a profound disagreement on the effectiveness of school responses, which tend to favor "soft" interventions such as individual counseling, mediation, and private warnings over more stringent, public disciplinary actions.

TABLE 3 Stakeholder Perceptions of School Intervention Effectiveness

Evaluation of School Intervention	Bystanders (%)	Victims (%)	Parents (%)
Very Good	72.7%	23.4%	16.0%
Fair	9.6%	28.2%	22.0%
Not Good	5.2%	12.9%	26.0%
Don't Know / Uninformed	12.5%	35.5%	36.0%

Notes. Data derived from the multi-stakeholder survey.

As illustrated in Table 3, the disparity in perception is stark. Bystanders, who are external observers, hold a highly positive view, with nearly three-quarters (72.7%) rating the school's response as "Very good." In stark contrast, victims are deeply ambivalent and uncertain; only 23.4% feel the response was "Very good," while a large plurality (35.5%) state they "Don't know," suggesting the intervention was either invisible or forgettable to them. Parents express the most negative view, with only 16% satisfied, while 26% are actively dissatisfied, and another 36% are uninformed about any actions taken.

[1]*Strategy1 = Individual counseling by homeroom teacher; Strategy2=Mediation between parties; Strategy3 =Punishment according to school regulations; Strategy4 =Public warning/reprimand in class; Strategy5 =Intervention by school counselor; Strategy6 =Lowering conduct rating; Strategy7 =School suspension; Strategy8 =Public criticism at flag ceremony; Strategy9 =Involvement of parent committee; Strategy10 =Deferring to family resolution*

This perception gap is not random noise; it is a systemic outcome of a fundamental misalignment between the school's intervention model and the nature of bullying itself. Bullying is not a "conflict" between two parties of equal power; it is a form of abuse characterized by a power imbalance (Olweus & Limber, 2010). School-preferred strategies like mediation are designed for conflict resolution and wrongly assume power parity. Forcing a victim to "mediate" with their abuser can be re-traumatizing and sends the message that both parties are partially at fault (Englander, 2007). From the perspective of a bystander, seeing a teacher pull two students aside for a "talk" looks like action being taken, leading to their high satisfaction. The conflict appears to be resolved. However, for the victim and their family, this process fails to address the core issues of power, abuse, and emotional harm. The underlying dynamic is left unchanged, leading to their profound dissatisfaction and reinforcing the belief that reporting is futile. The school's approach, likely driven by a macrosystemic cultural preference for restoring surface-level harmony and "saving face" quickly (Englander, 2007; Hwang, 1987), addresses the visible symptom (the dispute) but fails to treat the underlying disease (the abuse of power).

DISCUSSION

Synthesis of Key Findings

This multi-stakeholder investigation into school bullying in Vietnamese lower secondary schools reveals a complex, culturally-inflected phenomenon that diverges significantly from Western-centric archetypes. The findings paint a cohesive picture of a systemic problem characterized by four central themes. First, the landscape of aggression is dominated by relational and psychological forms, with overt physical violence playing a secondary role. Second, the profile of the typical perpetrator is counter-stereotypical; they are often academically competent and behaviorally compliant students who may be using aggression strategically to navigate peer social hierarchies. Third, the ecological context is paramount, with microsystem factors—particularly aggressive peer group norms and conflictual family environments—serving as powerful predictors of bullying involvement. Finally, and perhaps most critically, there is a profound systemic failure in intervention, evidenced by a "wall of silence" from victims and a deep "perception gap" between the actions schools take and the needs and experiences of victims and their families.

Theoretical Implications: Bullying as an Ecological-Transactional Phenomenon

The results of this study lend strong empirical support to an ecological-transactional model of school bullying (Analisah & Indartono, 2019; Gradinariu, 2021). The findings clearly demonstrate that bullying is not simply the product of an individual's flawed character but is an outcome of dynamic transactions across multiple levels of the social environment. At the *microsystem* level, the study provides powerful evidence for the role of peer and family contexts. The finding that 90.9% of perpetrators have friends who endorse violence illustrates how aggressive behaviors are learned, sanctioned, and maintained within the peer group microsystem. Similarly, the correlation between family conflict and victimization highlights how instability in the family microsystem can create vulnerabilities that manifest in the school environment.

The study's most novel contributions, however, illuminate the critical role of the *mesosystem* and *macrosystem*. The "intervention perception gap" and the "wall of silence" can be conceptualized as symptoms of a dysfunctional mesosystem—a breakdown in the connective tissues of trust, communication, and shared understanding between the school and family microsystems. When parents feel uninformed and dissatisfied, and students feel that reporting is futile, the collaborative front necessary to effectively combat bullying cannot form.

Furthermore, the influence of the *macrosystem*—the overarching cultural values of Vietnamese society—provides a crucial interpretive lens for these findings. The strong cultural emphasis on collectivism, maintaining group harmony, and, most importantly, "saving face" helps to explain several key results (Hwang, 1987; Xu et al., 2004). The high rate of victim silence can be partly understood as an attempt to avoid the "loss of face" associated with being publicly identified as a victim, which can be perceived as a position of weakness or social failure (Englander, 2007). Concurrently, the school's preference for discreet, "soft" interventions like mediation, rather than public and punitive measures, can be seen as an institutional strategy to restore an outward appearance of harmony and "save face" for the school community, even if it fails to address the underlying abuse. This demonstrates how broad cultural scripts can shape individual decisions and institutional practices in ways that inadvertently perpetuate the problem.

The Intervention Perception Gap and the Roots of Systemic Inefficacy

The profound chasm in how interventions are perceived by different stakeholders is not a mere curiosity but a critical diagnostic indicator of systemic failure. The high satisfaction of bystanders suggests that schools are succeeding at one goal: quelling overt disruption and restoring a visible sense of order. An administrator who orchestrates a mediation session can check a box, and an observing student sees the conflict "handled." However, this approach is fundamentally misaligned with the nature of bullying. By treat-

ing an abuse of power as a "conflict between peers," it invalidates the victim's experience and fails to address the psychological harm and fear of future retaliation (Englander, 2007; Olweus & Limber, 2010).

This misalignment is the root cause of the dissatisfaction and distrust expressed by victims and parents. For them, a successful intervention is not one that simply makes the problem disappear from public view, but one that acknowledges the injustice, ensures safety, and addresses the power imbalance. The current model fails on all these counts, thereby reinforcing the victim's sense of helplessness and the parent's belief that the school is not a reliable partner in ensuring their child's safety. This cycle is exacerbated by the mutual blame observed between stakeholders: teachers cite a lack of parental engagement as a key barrier, while parents express a desire to be more involved but feel marginalized by the school. This breakdown in the school-family mesosystem prevents the formation of a united, consistent front against bullying, allowing it to persist in the gaps between home and school.

LIMITATIONS AND AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides valuable insights, its limitations must be acknowledged to ensure a balanced interpretation and to guide future inquiry. These limitations are essential to state transparently for a high-impact publication.

First, the study relies exclusively on self-report data, which is susceptible to several forms of bias. Social desirability bias may have led perpetrators to under-report the frequency or severity of their actions, and victims or bystanders to alter their responses to align with perceived social norms (Latkin et al., 2017; Van de Mortel, 2008). Furthermore, all self-report measures are subject to recall bias, as participants' memories of events may be imperfect (Gonçalves et al., 2016; Karatas & Ozturk, 2020). The cross-sectional design of the study is another significant limitation; while it allows for the identification of associations between variables, it cannot establish causal relationships. For example, it is unclear whether family conflict leads to victimization or if the stress of being victimized contributes to family conflict. Finally, the source materials indicated some potential data quality issues, such as internal inconsistencies, which necessitate caution in the interpretation of specific quantitative results.

These limitations point directly to a clear agenda for future research on school bullying in Vietnam and similar cultural contexts:

1.   Longitudinal Research: There is a critical need for longitudinal studies that follow adolescents over time. Such designs would allow researchers to track the developmental trajectories of bullying involvement, establish the temporal precedence of risk factors, and understand the long-term mental health consequences of bullying in the Vietnamese context (Le, Tran, et al., 2019; Nurhalimah et al., 2025).

2.   Culturally-Sensitive Instrument Development: The field must move beyond the simple translation and application of Western assessment tools. Future research should focus on the development and psychometric validation of bullying and cyberbullying measurement instruments that are culturally and linguistically tailored to Vietnamese youth, ensuring they capture the specific behaviors and social dynamics relevant to their experience (Thang et al., 2025).

3.   Mixed-Methods Approaches: To gain a richer understanding of the findings presented here, future studies should employ mixed-methods designs. Combining large-scale quantitative surveys with in-depth qualitative interviews would provide crucial context, particularly for exploring the nuanced influence of cultural concepts like "saving face" on reporting behaviors and intervention choices.

4.   Rigorous Intervention Research: The clear failure of current intervention strategies highlights the urgent need for evidence-based program development. Future research should focus on designing, implementing, and rigorously evaluating the effectiveness of comprehensive, whole-school intervention programs that are specifically adapted to the Vietnamese cultural and educational context, directly addressing issues like relational aggression and the school-family partnership (Restad, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

School bullying in Vietnam is a complex, culturally-embedded, and systemic problem that cannot be remediated with simplistic, individual-focused, or reactive solutions. The evidence from this multi-stakeholder study indicates that the current approach, which often relies on discreet, conflict-resolution-oriented measures, is fundamentally failing to protect the students who need protection the most. The result is a climate of silence and distrust that allows relational aggression to flourish, particularly within the very classrooms that should be safe havens for learning. To effectively address this challenge, a paradigm shift is re-

quired, moving away from blaming individuals and toward transforming the school ecosystem. Based on the findings, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed for policy and practice.

1.   Adopt a Comprehensive Whole-School Approach: Schools must transition from a reactive, disciplinary model to a proactive, systemic framework that actively involves all stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators, and parents—in co-creating a school culture founded on safety, respect, and inclusion. This must be more than a slogan; it requires integrating anti-bullying principles into the school's formal curriculum, policies, and daily social interactions, ensuring a consistent message is delivered across the entire school environment (Gaffney et al., 2021; Hui et al., 2011; Restad, 2020).

2.   Enhance Teacher Capacity for Managing Social Dynamics: Professional development for teachers must extend beyond traditional classroom management focused on academic tasks and overt misbehavior. Teachers need to be equipped with the specific skills to recognize, understand, and respond effectively to the subtleties of relational aggression and cyberbullying. Training should reframe classroom management as a tool for proactively building a positive and supportive social-emotional climate, not just for delivering academic content (Waasdorp, 2022).

3.   Strengthen the School-Family Mesosystem: To bridge the critical perception and communication gap, schools must establish structured, proactive, and collaborative partnerships with parents. This means moving beyond reactive phone calls about disciplinary issues to regular, positive communication, parent workshops on bullying identification and support strategies, and meaningful inclusion of parents in the development of school safety policies. Empowering parents as knowledgeable partners is essential for creating a united front against bullying (Kim, 2023).

4.   Build Trustworthy and Accessible Reporting Systems: To break the "wall of silence," schools must create, publicize, and maintain multiple reporting channels that are perceived by students as safe, confidential, and effective. This could include a combination of trusted adults (counselors, designated teachers), anonymous online reporting tools, and suggestion boxes. The ultimate goal is to transform the school from an institution that students fear reporting to, into a reliable and trusted node within their network of support.

5.   Empower Students with Social-Emotional Skills: Interventions should focus on empowering the entire student body, not just punishing perpetrators. Implementing evidence-based Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs can equip students with essential competencies such as empathy, emotional regulation, responsible decision-making, and effective conflict resolution. Furthermore, fostering positive bystander behavior—teaching students how and when to intervene safely—is one of the most powerful ways to shift peer group norms and create a climate where bullying is not tolerated by the students themselves (Gonçalves et al., 2016; Kim, 2023).

NOTE/NOTES

1. Nguyễn Thị Hiền (First author), The Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences, Email: hiennt@vnies.edu.vn, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9550-8113

2. Nguyễn Minh Đức, The Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences, Email: ducnm@vnies.edu.vn, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5218-5498

3. Phạm Thị Phương Thức, The Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences, Email: thucptp@vnies.edu.vn; Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0850-5770

4. Mai Thị Mai,   The Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences, Email: maimai1287@gmail.com, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5681-0772

5. Phạm Thị Hồng Thắm, The Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences, Email: thampth@vnies.edu.vn, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2755-3230

6. Nguyễn Hồng Thuận, The Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences, Email: thuannh@vnies.edu.vn

7. Hồ Thị Thúy Hằng (Corresponding author), University Of Science And Education - The University Of Danang, Email: htthang@ued.udn.vn, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0117-0905

Open Access

REFERENCES

1. Analisah, C. D. C., & Indartono, S. (2019). Ecological theory: Preventing student bullying to promote culture of peace. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Social Science and Character Educations (ICoSSCE 2018) and International Conference on Social Studies, Moral, and Character Education (ICSMC 2018)* (Vol. 323, pp. 239-244). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/icossce-icsmc-18.2019.44

2. Benbenishty, R., Astor, R. A., & Estrada, J. N. (2008). School Violence Assessment: A Conceptual Framework, Instruments, and Methods. *Children and Schools, 30*(2), 71–81. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/30.2.71

3. Biswas, T., Scott, J. G., Munir, K., Thomas, H. J., Huda, M. M., Hasan, M. M., de Vries, T. D., Baxter, J., & Mamun, A. A. (2020). Global variation in the prevalence of bullying victimisation amongst adolescents: Role of peer and parental supports. *eClinicalMedicine, 20*, 100276. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2020.100276

4. Englander, E. K. (2007). *When should you hesitate to mediate?* MARC Publications. https://vc.bridgew.edu/marc_pubs/15

5. Gaffney, H., Ttofi, M. M., & Farrington, D. P. (2021). Effectiveness of school- based programs to reduce bullying perpetration and victimization: An updated systematic review and meta- analysis. *Campbell Systematic Reviews, 17*(2), e1143. https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1143

6. Gonçalves, F. G., Heldt, E., Peixoto, B. N., Rodrigues, G. A., Filipetto, M., & Guimarães, L. S. P. (2016). Construct validity and reliability of Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire – Brazilian version. *Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica, 29*, 27. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41155-016-0019-7

7. Gradinariu, T. (2022). An Ecosystemic Approach to Preventing Bullying in School. Risk Factors Associated with School. *LUMEN Proceedings*, *17*, 283-290. https://doi.org/10.18662/wlc2021/27

8. Hui, E. K. P., Tsang, S. K. M., & Law, B. C. M. (2011). Combating School Bullying through Developmental Guidance for Positive Youth Development and Promoting Harmonious School Culture. *The Scientific World Journal, 11*, 2266–2277. https://doi.org/10.1100/2011/705824

9. Hwang, K. K. (1987). Face and favor: The Chinese power game. *American Journal of Sociology, 92*(4), 944-974. https://doi.org/10.1086/228588

10. Kang, J. (2025). *Protecting Vietnamese children online amid growing digital risks*. RMIT University. https://www.rmit.edu.vn/news/all-news/2025/jan/protecting-vietnamese-children-online-amid-growing-digital-risks

11. Karatas, H., & Ozturk, C. (2020). Examining the Effect of a Program Developed to Address Bullying in Primary Schools. *Journal of Pediatric Research, 7*(3), 243-249. https://doi.org/10.4274/jpr.galenos.2019.37929

12. Karmilasari, F. D., Winarni, I., & Windarwati, H. D. (2020). The Susceptibility to Mental Health Problems in the Future as a Serious Effect of Bullying on Adolescent: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Science and Society*, *2*(3), 295-311. https://doi.org/10.54783/ijsoc.v2i3.175

13. Kiing, J. S. H., Ragen, E. S., Sulaiman, M. S. B. M., Goh, W. S., Tan, N. J. H., Ng, S. H., Luo, Y., Samuel, M., Young, D., & Loh, V. W. K. (2025). Bullying and depression among adolescents in East Asia: A scoping review on prevalence rates, risk and protective factors. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 16*, 1497866. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2025.1497866

14. Kim, S. (2023). *Ending bullying and violence in school should be a top priority in Asia-Pacific*. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ending-bullying-and-violence-school-should-be-top-priority-asia-pacific

15. Latkin, C. A., Edwards, C., Davey-Rothwell, M. A., & Tobin, K. E. (2017). The relationship between social desirability bias and self-reports of health, substance use, and social network factors among urban substance users in Baltimore, Maryland. *Addictive Behaviors, 73*, 133–136. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2017.05.005

16. Le, H. H. T., Tran, N., Campbell, M. A., Gatton, M. L., Nguyen, H. T., & Dunne, M. P. (2019). Mental health problems both precede and follow bullying among adolescents and the effects differ by gender: A cross-lagged panel analysis of school-based longitudinal data in Vietnam. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems, 13*(1), 35. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-019-0291-x

17. Le, H. T. H., Dunne, M. P., Campbell, M. A., Gatton, M. L., Nguyen, H. T., & Tran, N. T. (2017). Temporal patterns and predictors of bullying roles among adolescents in Vietnam: A school-based

cohort study. *Psychology, Health & Medicine, 22*(sup1), 107-121. https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2016.1271953

18. Lee, C.-H. (2011). An Ecological Systems Approach to Bullying Behaviors among Middle School Students in the United States. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 26*(8), 1664–1693. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260510370591

19. Nguyen, P. T. H., Le, D. M., & Le, L. T. P. (2021). An Investigation into Causes of Violence at Secondary Schools in Da Nang, Vietnam. *International Journal of Pharmaceutical Research and Allied Sciences, 10*(3), 112-119. https://doi.org/10.51847/hF5h5nzXgn

20. Nguyen, P. T. H., Le, D. M., Nguyen, A. T. T., & Le, L. T. P. (2021). The current situation of school bullying among secondary school students in Da Nang city, Vietnam. *Journal of Advanced Pharmacy Education and Research, 11*(4), 74-79. https://doi.org/10.51847/CSxY3LrBuj

21. Nguyen, T. T. (2021). Some Recommendations for Improving Educational Environment: A Case of Vietnam Context. In *Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference on Sustainable Development of Regional Infrastructure (ISSDRI 2021)* (pp. 626-632). SciTePress. https://doi.org/10.5220/0010595006260632

22. Nurhalimah, N., Haryati, O., Wartonah, W., & Adelia, A. (2025). The impact of verbal bullying on the mental health of students at a senior high school in Bekasi, Indonesia. *Healthcare in Low-Resource Settings, 13*(s1). https://doi.org/10.4081/hls.2025.13092

23. Olweus, D., & Limber, S. P. (2010). The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program: Implementation and evaluation over two decades. In S. R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 377–401). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group..

24. Restad, F. (2020). Is There a Hole in the Whole-School Approach? A Critical Review of Curriculum Understanding in Bullying Research. *Nordic Studies in Education*, *40*(4), 362–386. https://doi.org/10.23865/nse.v40.2610

25. Stephens, M. M., Cook-Fasano, H. T., & Sibbaluca, K. (2018). Childhood bullying: Implications for physicians. *American Family Physician, 97*(3), 187–192. https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2018/0201/p187.pdf

26. Thang, T. Q., Le Thi, K. C., Hoang, T., Dao Anh, S., & Tran Thi, L. (2025). Reliability and validity of the Vietnamese Cyberbullying Scale (CBS) among University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Vietnam National University students. *Acta Informatica Medica, 33*(1), 58–63. https://doi.org/10.5455/aim.2024.33.58-63

27. The School House Educators (2024). *Is bullying in school a micro or exosystem issue: Bronfenbrenner's theory*. The Anywhere Blog. https://www.tshanywhere.org/post/bullying-in-school-micro-exosystem-issue

28. Ting-Toomey, S. (Ed.). (1994). *The challenge of facework: Cross-cultural and interpersonal issues.* State University of New York Press.

29. Van de Mortel, T. F. (2008). Faking it: Social desirability response bias in self-report research. *Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing, 25*(4), 40–48.

30. Waasdorp, T. E. (2022). *Unmasking relational aggression in schools*. Center for Injury Research and Prevention. https://injury.research.chop.edu/blog/posts/unmasking-relational-aggression-schools

31. Xu, J.-M., Huang, H.-C., Bellmore, A., & Zhu, X. (2014). School Bullying in Twitter and Weibo: A Comparative Study. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, *8*(1), 631-634. https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v8i1.14563.

32. Xu, Y., Farver, J. A. M., Schwartz, D., & Chang, L. (2004). Social networks and aggressive behaviour in Chinese children. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 28*(5), 401–410. https://doi.org/10.1080/01650250444000090