



Research Article/ Mob Justice

Bystanders in Mob Justice: Interrogating Public Complicity and Intervention in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Oba Preye Inimiesi 

Department of Public Administration, University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of bystanders during mob justice in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study assessed the role of bystanders in mob justice incidents and how victims interpreted their actions or inactions. This objective is in consonance with the corresponding research question that guided the investigation. To achieve the objective of this study, a mixed-method approach was employed, using questionnaire and interview method as the research instruments. The sample size for the study was 400. The samples were selected using

a multi-staged sampling technique (i.e., cluster, simple random, convenience and the snowball sampling technique respectively). In the course of the study, 336 questionnaires were retrieved, collated and analyzed. Two analytical techniques were adopted namely, the simple percentage and the thematic method. While, the first was used to evaluate the research questions and objectives, the second was opted to analyze the interview. The results from the data analysis revealed that the involvement of bystander in mob justice actions cannot be written off as incidental. Whether active or passive, their roles form a part of the trauma that the victim has experienced. Bystanders' involvement in mob incidents is a reflection of the public's disenchantment with the legal system, which leads to widespread cooperation in extrajudicial activities. The study recommends that the Bayelsa State government, in partnership with Non-governmental Organizations should integrate de-escalation and active bystander training into community programs. They should collaborate to offer practical training on de-escalation techniques and active bystander intervention.

KEYWORDS: Bystanders, mob justice, criminal justice systems, public complicity

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Corresponding Author:

Oba Preye Inimiesi

preye-oba@uat.edu.ng

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INTRODUCTION

Before the arrival of the British, the pre-colonial Nigerian societies had many types of social control mechanisms (Esara, Asuquo, Ekanem, & Samuel, 2023). The

heads of the communities were usually the ones to hear the cases, and punishments ranged from public whipping, restitution, solitary incarceration, and banishment/exile/ostracizing, among other things. With the arrival of colonialism, the current-day administration of criminal justice emerged, complete with well-defined structures such as the police, legal system, and correctional institutions, which sum up the criminal justice system. According to Obarisiagbon (2018), these were already in existence in some form; the essence of the structure was to ensure peace, safety, and social order and to avoid the rule by might. These institutions were created and given legal authority to reduce and control crime to promote a sense of safety, security, and harmony in society.

However, it appears that these institutional structures have failed to live up to the expectations, and scholars have attributed this to some kind of institutional weakness and corruption, with the belief that even when criminals are caught and handed over to the police, they are often not charged to court after money has exchanged hands (Ubabukoh, 2013). Others note that the judiciary, which is the final hope of the oppressed, is corrupt. The slow adjudication of criminal cases in the courts and several unnecessary adjournments have made the court not fancied by the public (Olong, 2010, cited in Obarisiagbon, 2018). Thus, Individuals and groups who see the current situation as a complete perversion of justice have resorted to using mob actions to bridge the justice gap, which infringes on the fundamental human rights of suspected and alleged criminal offenders. Nigerians have made the unfortunate decision to neglect the duties and activities of law enforcement agencies in favour of enforcing the law using mob justice (Sanni, 2017). This pattern is indicative of a perilous erosion in public trust in established legal systems and an increasing inclination for immediate,

illegal retaliation. In the process, the values of justice, human rights, and constitutional order are gravely compromised, and suspects are denied a fair trial.

This social ill is on the rise in numerous sections of the country. Over the last few years, Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa has seen an increase in this inhumane sub-culture of mob justice, in which angry mobs would hunt and pin down the alleged criminal offender like an animal, repeatedly dishing out all forms of violent physical abuse on the alleged criminal offender, which in most cases culminates in setting the person ablaze or flogging the person with whatever instrument was available. The Aluu 4 boys in Port Harcourt are among the popular incidents of mob justice that have made news in Nigeria (2012). Other instances include the case of a first-class graduate of the University of Ibadan, Oyo State, by the name Opuofoni Freeborn Ebimotimi, who was beaten to death by an irate mob in Bayelsa State for allegedly stealing bread (Sahara Reporters, 2023, July 11). In another instance of bypassing the CJS and unleashing mob justice, Igoni (2022) noted in a Punch newspaper report that an enraged mob set ablaze a suspected thief in Yenagoa, the capital city of Bayelsa State. It was learned that the now-deceased youth, who was claimed to be in his early 30s, was part of a three-member gang that specialized in robbing people of their possessions using a tricycle known as a Keke. The two other gang members, on the other hand, were able to flee while members of the public apprehended him in response to a victim's alarm. The purpose of this lengthy explanation is to suggest that if the two gang members who successfully escaped had been apprehended, all three suspects would have met the same fate. It demonstrates how willing people are to transgress the rule of law. Additionally, the Guardian (2022, May 23) reported the gruesome

murder and laceration of a defenseless 200-level student of Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto (Deborah Samuel) by her enraged classmates, who had decided that the deceased had committed blasphemy (for an alleged insult on the Holy Prophet of Islam after a back-and-forth argument), added a religious dimension to the problem. People are criminally victimized regularly, resulting in the loss of property, death, or maiming, among other things. The unpleasant reality is that a wide range of jungle justice executions take place in society without making the news.

Every criminal offender, without question, deserves to be punished, but this obligation does not rest in the hands of anyone or any group who is not empowered by the law of the state. In accordance with the rule of law, the criminal judicial system has the unique and privileged right to perform such responsibilities. The subculture of jungle justice against alleged offenders, even when caught in the act, constitutes a grave violation of fundamental human rights and directly contravenes Sections 33 and 34 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, thereby amounting to a criminal act. Mob justice is inhumane, brutal, and savage, but the negative impact of criminal activity on innocent citizens has led to an increase in the use of mob justice in recent years.

Given its increasing nature and the associated concerns that it generates, the need to understand the drivers and consequences of mob justice has led to several empirical works in Nigeria, highlighting factors such as weak governance, socioeconomic inequalities, and a lack of confidence in the judicial system as critical drivers. For instance, Oguntuyo and Adesiyani (2016) found that the prevalence of jungle justice is hazardous for a growing state, which has occurred in various instances in Lagos state, and its continuance can lead to

underrating such a promising state. In another study, Gbenemene and Eric (2017) examined the nexus between jungle justice and criminal justice administration in Nigeria. The study concluded that the prevalence of mob action in Nigeria is due to weak and corrupt institutions of government, especially the police and the judiciary. Similarly, Obarisiagbon (2018) examined the motives behind the use of jungle justice by the public in Benin Metropolis, Southern Nigeria. Utilizing a combination of both qualitative and quantitative techniques in its data collection from a sample of six hundred and fifteen respondents, the study found that the motivation for jungle justice was multifaceted. The study taxonomized illiteracy, lack of trust in the police, flaccid court system, chronic anger due to economic situation and disregard for the rule of law and human rights as some of the motivations for the alarming incidence of the social phenomenon.

Despite the plethora of extant literature on Nigeria's criminal justice system and mob justice, none has particularly explored the lived experiences of survivors of vigilante justice (more specifically, the role of bystanders during mob actions). This leaves a significant research gap in the literature. Gaining insight into the role of bystanders could go a long way to provide evidence-based narratives that could engender an understanding of the negative effects of mob justice in society. Additionally, there is also a gap relating to the integration of the views of major stakeholders, such as personnel of the police force, legal practitioners, human rights activists, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), members of the Vigilante and community chiefs. This shows that more research needs to be done to strengthen the existing knowledge on mob justice in Nigeria. Hence, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on the different roles bystanders play during mob

actions in Nigeria, using Bayelsa State as a particular case study. The study aims to assess the role of bystanders in mob justice incidents and how victims interpreted their actions or inactions

Bystanders have a vital role in mob justice incidents, though sometimes contradictory. Their presence can aggravate or diffuse the situation, but they are mostly passive observers. In every act of mob violence, some actively participate, some encourage the violence, and some remain mute, either out of fear, apathy, or a solid belief in the crowd's judgement. In these settings, the psychological phenomenon known as the bystander effect, in which people are less likely to act in times of crisis when others are present is especially evident. According to Ikejiaku and Osabutey (2022), people in a mob typically feel less liable for their conduct since their behaviour is communal. Johnson et al. (2018, cited in Tolossa et al., 2023) emphasized the importance of groupthink and deindividuation in creating mob conduct. The larger the crowd, the less personal responsibility each member feels, culminating in a dangerous lack of accountability.

According to Salihu and Gholami (2018), for the victim of jungle justice, the mere presence of spectators represents hope since it demonstrates a common desire for justice. In the early stages of mob antagonism, a victim may have optimism that someone will intervene to stop the injustice. The victim scans the faces around them, hoping for an ally, a voice of reason, or a shield against the impending violence. However, as the seconds pass and no one steps in, hope quickly turns to worry (Laishram & Singh, 2023). Every quiet witness is regarded as a co-conspirator, and every averted gaze appears to be a betrayal. The victim's perception of spectators shifts from potential saviours to passive participants, fostering a deep sense of isolation.

Bystanders fear becoming involved in mob justice cases for a variety of psychological and cultural reasons. Fear is an effective motivator. Seeing an agitated mob punish an alleged offender is scary, and intervening appears suicidal (Ikejiaku & Osabutey, 2022). Even those who perceive the injustice may defend their silence by feeling that speaking up will just turn the mob's wrath upon them. Others experience deindividuation, a state in which members of a group lose their sense of personal identity and moral guilt, leading them to either remain passive or engage in aggressiveness (Tolossa et al., 2023). Non-intervention is regarded by the victim as either cowardice or implicit agreement. As the violence come down and the misery deepens, the victim's attention shifts to those who stand by. Every face in the crowd reflects disinterest (Replogle, 2011). "Why won't they stop this?" is the victim's recurring thought. Some victims may attempt to appeal directly to witnesses by making eye contact, reaching out, or pleading for assistance. The victim's rising hopelessness is worsened by the absence of a response, resulting in a lasting psychological fracture and lamentation that if only one person had spoken out, things would have been different.

Aside from passive individuals who witnessed it, some bystanders actively contribute to the violence, even if they do not overtly participate. These people are outspoken agitators, making allegations, inciting the mob's wrath, or cheering on the attackers (Public Health England, 2016). Their involvement is important in mob justice dynamics because they condone the assailants' actions and deny the victim any opportunity to repent. Bystanders are often the ones who film the crime on their phones, either for their own entertainment or to publish the footage online, further dehumanizing the victim. For the victim, these spectators are some of the most terrifying pictures. Unlike

passive bystanders, who at least appear unbiased, active instigators demonstrate cruelty without taking direct action. Every jeer, sarcastic laugh, and happy yell is perceived as a personal attack by the mob victim. Even if their bodies do not contain weapons, their words are psychologically devastating. Some victims direct their dying pleas at spectators rather than their attackers, pleading with them to intervene, call the police, and acknowledge their humanity. However, the crowd's uproar might occasionally drown out their yells.

Even after the violence has faded, bystanders continue to play an important role. Many who remained passive may have experienced immense heartbreak in the aftermath, troubled by the realization that their silence contributed to a severe wrong. Debnam and Mauer (2021) discovered that some witnesses regret their inaction during violent incidents. Some individuals justify their inactivity with self-assurance: "There was nothing I could have done," or "Someone else should have stepped up first." Others, filled with regret, may anonymously report the crime or aid the victim's family. However, for mob victims, assuming they survive, the trauma of seeing communal apathy is lifelong (Laishram & Singh, 2023). Survivors of mob justice are sometimes extremely skeptical about society. According to the Neurolanch editorial team (2024), the psychological scars left by bystanders' inactions typically outweigh the physical injury inflicted by the infuriated mob. The absence of assistance reveals a depressing truth that in times of crisis, individuals are often more willing to observe suffering than to avoid it. Some victims, incensed by their suffering, develop a profound cynicism towards justice, believing that morality is nothing more than a display that is abandoned when most needed. Others, however, find a way to channel their trauma into activism, becoming outspoken opponents of mob justice and encouraging bystanders to intervene

before another life is lost as a result of collective silence.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employed the mixed method design that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to assess the availability and effectiveness of support mechanisms at the disposal of survivors of mob justice, using Bayelsa state, located in the south-south of Nigeria, as the study setting. This is because they allowed for a detailed statistical and deeper contextual account of the relations under study in the research area. The population of the study comprised 2,537,400 residents in Bayelsa state, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022, cited in Brinkhoff, 2022), in its report on projected population by states. The sample size of this study is 400 household heads drawn using the Taro Yamane statistical technique, as represented thus $n = N \div (1 + Ne^2)$ where n is the expected sample size, 'N' is the total population, which is equal to 2,537,400 and 'e' is the level of significance, which in this case is 0.05. The study adopted a multi-staged sampling technique consisting of both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. These include purposive, cluster, simple, convenience and snowball sampling techniques.

The study adopted the already existing clustering of Bayelsa State based on the three existing senatorial districts (i.e., Bayelsa Central, Bayelsa East, and Bayelsa West), and one Local Government Area (LGA) was selected from each of the clusters (that is, Yenagoa, Southern Ijaw, and Sagbama respectively) using the simple random approach. Having done that, the simple random sampling method was also used to select two (2) communities from each of the three LGAs (Epie, Amarata, Amasoma, Agudama-epketiama, Toru-orua and Sagbama). Thereafter, the convenience sampling

technique will be deployed to select household residents on an easy-to-contact or reachable basis. Hence, an average of 63 respondents were selected from each of the communities. In addition to this, 22 key persons were selected for interviews from major organizations that have a close proximity to the theme of this research using purposive sampling, which allows us to target persons for inclusion into the sample given their knowledge and experience of the subject of study or their role in the practical operation of the subject matter being investigated. The primary data for the study were gathered using a questionnaire and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), while secondary data were gotten from published materials. The respondents were duly informed about the purpose of the study and other rights as respondents of the study, including confidentiality.

In the study, a combination of analytical techniques was used in this study to interpret the data. These are Descriptive statistics; Descriptive statistics were used for the summarizing of frequency via the statistical programme for social sciences SPSS software, while Information from the Key Informant Interviews were collected with an electronic tape and notes were later transcribed, synthesized and organized under thematic headings. Significant statements were quoted verbatim to corroborate or refute important findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the empirical investigation and provides a comprehensive interpretation of the data in relation to the role of bystanders in mob justice incidents and how victims interpreted their actions or inactions. In this section, the results obtained from the field are systematically analyzed and discussed to reveal emerging patterns, relationships, and significant trends.

Results

This section presents the empirical findings obtained from the data collected during the course of the study. In this section, the analyzed data are systematically organized and presented in a clear and objective manner using appropriate descriptive tools such as tables, statistical summaries, and thereafter, followed by the thematic analysis from the qualitative insights.

Table 1

Respondents Who Have Been Bystanders during Mob Justice

| Resp. | Freq. | Perce nt | Valid Percent | Cum. Percent |
|--------------|------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Yes | 71 | 21.1 | 14.3 | 21.1 |
| No | 265 | 78.9 | 78.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 336 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

A tabular breakdown of respondents who acknowledged the frequency of or saw an instance of mob justice or lived close to survivors in Bayelsa State can be found in Table 5 above. It is clear from the data in the table that 265 people (78.9%) said they knew of or had seen at least one mob justice incident in the state, whereas 71 people (21.1%) said they were unaware of it. It suffices to remark at this moment that the majority of the respondents were conversant with the subject matter.

Table 2 below of bystanders/onlookers during mob justice incidents in Bayelsa State. From the information presented in the table, it is easy to see that out of the 265 respondents who have been bystanders during mob justice incidents in Bayelsa State, 28 (11%) reported that sought lawful redress by calling the authorities, and 6 (2%) encourage the irate mob and actively promote the violence. 11 respondents representing 4% reported having “fleeing the scene, reflecting self-preservation. On the supportive side, 17 (6%) reported that they directly participated in the violence, 27 (10%) of the respondents actively recorded the

incidence on their mobile phones, suggesting a tendency towards documentation rather than intervention. Furthermore, the data revealed that 29 (11%) of the aggregate respondents reported that they attempted to stop the mob, reflecting a minority willing to intervene, while 147 (56%) adduced that they just watched passively, showing widespread bystander behaviour.

The excerpt from the qualitative data from the KII as regards the role of bystanders in mob justice incidents and how victims interpreted their actions or inactions in Bayelsa state captures vividly that mob justice occurrences frequently take place in crowded areas where the presence of onlookers influences the outcome just as much as the mob's acts. The study's respondents repeatedly underlined that during such violent episodes, bystanders play a variety of sometimes conflicting roles. For the victim caught in the middle, the action of these spectators bears tremendous meaning, perceived variously as collaboration, cowardice, betrayal, or, in rare situations, compassion. Some bystanders call the police, support the crowd, leave the scene, engage in direct violence, record the incident on their cell phones, just stand by and watch, etc. as chaos is inflicted on a helpless victim, according to the testimonies of survivors and stakeholders. Mob justice reveals societal paradoxes and

moral difficulties through these diverse roles and the meanings victims give them.

The presence of bystanders frequently causes the most severe wounds for survivors, sometimes even more severe than the actual physical suffering caused by the attack. One survivor described how shocked she was to see people she knew just stand by while she was being battered:

Although the beating hurt, those people who stood by and did nothing except watch and stare crushed me on the inside. Some of them were my neighbours, and I knew who they were. They simply folded their hands as I begged them to assist me, continuing to look into their eyes. Some were even using their phones to record. I found it incomprehensible that people could do nothing as they saw me nearly die. Their silence gave me the impression that they had participated in the murder (Survivor, personal communication, 28 August, 2025).

The survivor's account vividly describes the severe psychological trauma caused by both the physical attack and, more tragically, the bystanders' silent cooperation. Although the physical hurt was instantaneous, the emotional harm resulted from the mute stares of familiar faces, neighbours, who, despite the victim's humanity and cries for assistance, chose to do nothing. The crowd becomes

Table 2

As a Bystander during a Mob Justice What Did You Do?

| Response | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------------------------------|------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Called the authorities | 28 | 10.6 | 11 | 11 |
| Encouraged the mob | 6 | 2.2 | 2 | 13 |
| Fled the scene | 11 | 4.2 | 4 | 17 |
| Participated in the violence | 17 | 6.4 | 6 | 23 |
| Recorded it on their cell phones | 27 | 10.1 | 10 | 33 |
| Tried to stop the mob | 29 | 10.9 | 11 | 44 |
| Watched passively | 147 | 55.5 | 56 | 100.0 |
| Total | 265 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

symbolic partners in the assault as a result of this perceived desertion, which intensifies the victim's agony. A troubling transition from empathy to detachment, where human misery becomes a spectacle, is further highlighted by the act of documenting the incidents rather than taking action. Human rights activists see this as indicative of a larger social breakdown in which compassion is subordinated to fear, indifference, or even enthusiasm. One activist explained that

It is impossible to overlook the role of spectators while examining mob justice situations. They are rarely impartial. The mob is strengthened by their silence. The spectacle their phones provide dehumanizes the victim. While some do attempt to contact the police, the number of people who support the violence outnumbers them. In addition to the physical harm they endured, survivors frequently tell us that the lack of humanity in the mob is what pains them the most. Since the people who could have protected them decided to either watch or run away (Human Rights Activist, personal communication, 6 September, 2025).

The human rights activist's assessment highlights the crucial role spectators play in determining the course and outcomes of mob justice, accentuating how far from neutral their participation is. The claim that "the mob is empowered by their silence" emphasizes how inactivity functions as tacit approval, giving offenders more confidence and normalizing violence in the community. The dehumanization of victims is exacerbated by the usage of cell phones to document such events, turning their misery into a public spectacle rather than an appeal for help. A bigger group that either actively supports or passively condones the violence frequently overwhelms any attempts by a minority to involve law authorities. Because it

represents a breakdown of community responsibility and protection, this collective lack of empathy is frequently more psychologically painful for survivors than the actual physical assault. This pattern is interpreted by civil society organizations as proof of deep moral ambiguity in communities, where people are caught between conflicting impulses: a perverse fascination with the unfolding spectacle, a pervasive fear of becoming victims themselves if they intervene, and anger and frustration over rising crime. One CSO representative said,

Onlookers aid the mob in violating the alleged offender. They might not be the ones that is raising a stick to hit the alleged criminal, but encourage the irate mob to kill the alleged criminal, or recount other instances where the alleged criminal has victimized someone. This action energizes the already aggrieved mob to summarily deal with the alleged criminal. However, in cases where we have seen alleged criminal offenders survive, we have seen bystanders who said no to the extrajudicial action of the irate mob. Some onlookers play a positive role by encouraging the angry mob to refrain from dealing with the alleged criminal and hand him/her over to the Police. Some bystanders even go as far as running into the mob to cover the alleged criminal from further beating. These acts sometimes (when especially done by women, religious leaders in the community and respected elders) discourage some of the already irate mob from further violence out of respect for the person that stepped in. Some of these survivors even turn a new leaf after this experience (CSO member, personal communication, 26 August, 2025).

The CSO member's account reveals the dual and often contradictory roles that bystanders occupy in mob justice

situations, reinforcing the central argument of this study that bystander behaviour is pivotal in either escalating or mitigating mob violence. On the one hand, even in the absence of direct physical involvement, bystanders who encourage the crowd verbally or by narrating alleged prior transgressions act as catalysts that justify and escalate the violence. Their behaviour accelerates the shift from suspicion to harsh punishment and feeds public rage. However, the account also emphasizes how opposing bystanders who oppose the mob's behaviour can have a transforming effect. A counter-narrative that questions the inevitable nature of mob justice is introduced by those who intervene by calling for restraint, supporting due process, or physically protecting victims. Notably, these interventions have moral authority that can ease stress and restore some degree of order when they originate from socially valued individuals like women, religious leaders, or community elders. This supports one of the paper's main points, which is that bystanders are active actors whose decisions influence how mob confrontations turn out rather than just passive witnesses. Mob justice is not an uncontrolled occurrence; rather, it may be affected, resisted, and, in certain situations, averted through brave and socially grounded intervention. This is demonstrated by their ability to either promote or interrupt violence.

This complex interplay of supportive and antagonistic bystander actions further finds expression in another CSO representative's observation, which vividly illustrates how these conflicting roles manifest simultaneously at mob scenes, intensifying both the violence and the victim's psychological trauma. The CSO representative said,

As we document the incident, we see bystanders playing conflicting roles: some call the police, others chant slogans to encourage the mob to

continue, some record videos for amusement, and some cry and plead with the crowd to stop. For the victim, these conflicting signals are devastating; the picture of being beaten on the ground and looking up to see one man calling the police while ten others shout, "Kill him!" This chaos leaves the victim feeling as though society is divided over whether they deserve to live, and the psychological trauma lasts long after the wounds have healed (CSO member, personal communication, 26 August, 2025).

The CSO member's account nicely conveys the fragmented and ethically dubious character of bystander behaviour in mob justice scenarios, where conflicting reactions take place concurrently within the same throng. A greater number may intentionally provoke violence through chanting or treat the incident as entertainment by filming it, while a smaller number may try to maintain legality by calling the police or requesting restraint. Because the overwhelming aggression of others overshadows the presence of even one sympathetic actor, the victim experiences a profoundly unpleasant and disorienting experience as a result of the coexistence of help and hostility. The dreadful impression that society is unsure about the value of the victim's life is reinforced by the image of lying defenceless while observing such conflicting emotions. This is consistent with the paper's main thesis, which holds that spectators are critical players rather than passive observers whose varied roles together influence the dynamics and results of mob justice. Their contradictory actions not only influence whether violence increases or decreases, but they also leave victims with long-lasting psychological damage, underscoring the critical need to address the moral and social ambiguities that underlie public reactions to crime and justice.

Additionally, the Nigerian Police Force admitted that bystander behaviour makes their interventions more difficult. Although officers frequently rely on members of the community to inform them, they occasionally arrive to find groups that are too big or aggressive to move swiftly. A senior officer explained,

When mob incidents begin, we count on passersby to call us, and some do. However, a lot of people would rather record or support the crowd. By the time we get there, the mob has gotten so big that it's risky for us to even try to help. Later, victims told us that rather than offering assistance, they witnessed individuals using phones to record them. They see this as society making fun of them when they are at their lowest. It's critical to realize that bystander behaviour has the power to either save a life or end a victim's life (Police personnel, personal communication, 21 August, 2025).

The police officer's account emphasizes the vital, life-or-death significance of bystander behaviour in the course of mob justice situations. The account shows that many onlookers chose inactivity or even involvement by recording or encouraging the crowd instead of seeking assistance, although law enforcement needs timely information from the public to intervene. In addition to allowing the gathering to get bigger and more hostile, this delay raises operational concerns that may prevent prompt police action. From the victim's point of view, being filmed rather than saved exacerbates their feelings of shame and abandonment and strengthens the idea that society doesn't care about or perhaps enjoys their pain. This, once again, aligns with the main contention of this research, which is that bystanders are not neutral actors but rather have a considerable impact on how mob interactions turn out. The urgent necessity to address public attitudes and duties in circumstances of collective violence is highlighted by the

fact that bystanders can either help in the prevention of violence or facilitate its escalation through action or inaction.

Members of vigilante groups, who frequently operate at the intersection between formal law and community expectations, talked about the tremendous pressure they receive from onlookers. A vigilante leader admitted,

Occasionally, we apprehend a suspect, but the crowd assembles before we can make a decision. Onlookers are also fed up with the prevalence of criminal victimization in their environment. Out of anger and frustration, some of them just keep mute during the mob action and allow whatever that wants to happen to happen. Some even begin to shout, "Kill him, beat him!" Some mobs are not merely observing; they demand justice, which makes situational control extremely difficult. In one instance, we wanted to turn over the culprit to the police, but the voices of onlookers sent the crowd into a state of high excitement. "I know I will not live since even those who could have helped are asking for my death," the suspect remarked to me later, just before he passed away. This demonstrates how much victims value bystander behaviour (Vigilante member, personal communication, 26 August, 2025).

The above statement highlights how onlookers' views and responses can significantly influence how mob justice occurrences turn out, frequently surpassing even informal security players' intentions to adhere to due process. Even if vigilante members could try to turn suspects over to the police, the emotional intensity of bystanders, fuelled by a build-up of resentment over crime, can quickly escalate the situation out of control. Collective aggression is legitimized and accelerated by the tense atmosphere created by some bystanders' silence and

the intentional encouragement of others who call for violence. The victim's final reflection, which demonstrates a deep awareness of bystanders' behaviour, is especially stunning. The realization that those who could have intervened instead supported his pain put an end to any chance of survival. This once again agrees with the central point of this research, which is that spectators play a significant role in determining the dynamics of mob justice rather than being incidental characters. Mob justice is a socially created process where collective attitudes and behaviours ultimately determine life-or-death results. Their answers, whether passive, supportive, or oppositional, can either restrict or inflame violence.

Community leaders offered a deeper cultural analysis of the phenomenon, pointing out that bystanders are torn between contemporary spectacle culture and ingrained social inclinations. A chief in Sabama explained,

In the past, the community would get together to judge and make a decision when someone was accused of wrongdoing, not to amuse themselves. These days, individuals use their phones to capture events as though they were dramatic. When victims witness this, they feel ridiculed. Passive onlookers are seen by them as an indication that their lives are cheap. Even though they punished wrongdoers, our forefathers never made fun of people's suffering. Because it transforms onlookers into witnesses to brutality, mob justice is particularly harmful today (Community leader, personal communication, 19 August, 2025).

The narratives also show that some bystanders make sincere attempts to step in, but frequently fail.

One survivor described a brief but impactful incident that demonstrated the possibilities and constraints of individual bystander involvement in the face of the

mob's overwhelming animosity and the seeming indifference of the nearby spectators. According to him:

I believed that everyone wanted me dead when I was being beaten. Then I noticed a man shouting, "Stop, don't kill him!" as he pushed through the crowd. I will always remember him, even if he was unable to stop them. I had the impression that not all of mankind had deserted me at that precise time. However, I also came to see how helpless one voice can be in the face of a mob. His countenance stays with me as evidence that not everyone wished me dead, even though the other onlookers overwhelmed him (Survivor, personal communication, 7 September, 2025).

However, the most common memory for many victims is of individuals documenting their pain rather than offering assistance. This stark contrast between passive voyeurism and active compassion highlights how bystanders' inactivity can exacerbate the psychological trauma of mob violence and leaves survivors feeling lonely for a long time.

In the midst of a violent mob attack, one survivor recounted the added torment of onlookers who transformed the moment of physical assault into public humiliation, capturing his suffering for posterity as he mentioned,

A young boy who lived through a lynching told us that he saw someone laughing while recording on a phone. He said, 'Even if I survived, I knew then that my disgrace would be all over the place.' Not only were they hitting me, but they were also destroying me in front of everyone. The victims see this as a second act of violence, where they are beaten by the mob and then shamed forever by the onlookers (CSO member, personal communication, 26 August, 2025).

Deducible from the preceding instances demonstrated above, bystanders are far from being impartial observers. Their involvement in mob justice cannot be written off as incidental. Whether active or passive, their roles form a part of the trauma that the victim has experienced. Advocates magnify violence, documentarians deprive victims of their dignity, silent observers betray them, those who go away leave the victim feeling abandoned, and a few defenders offer a glimmer of hope. Victims take their encouragement, silence, or filming as proof that society accepts their suffering. When they (bystanders) step in, even if it doesn't work, victims remember it as a glimmer of hope in the face of despair. The silent, applauding, or filming crowd will continue to be just as much a part of the violence as the mob itself. The diversity of these roles is a reflection of larger inconsistencies in society, where mob violence frequently results in the chaotic intersection of fear, rage, curiosity, and compassion. However, for victims, these paradoxes dissolve into a straightforward reality: their community either let them down or, in a few minor instances, reminded them of their humanity.

The excerpt from the qualitative data from the KIIs as regards the role of bystanders in mob justice incidents and how victims interpreted their actions or inactions in Bayelsa state captures vividly that mob justice occurrences frequently take place in crowded areas where the presence of onlookers influences the outcome just as much as the mob's acts. The study's respondents repeatedly underlined that during such violent episodes, bystanders play a variety of sometimes conflicting roles. For the victim caught in the middle, the action of these spectators bears tremendous meaning, perceived variously as collaboration, cowardice, betrayal, or, in rare situations, compassion. Some bystanders call the

police, support the crowd, leave the scene, engage in direct violence, record the incident on their cell phones, just stand by and watch, etc. as chaos is inflicted on a helpless victim, according to the testimonies of survivors and stakeholders. Mob justice reveals societal paradoxes and moral difficulties through these diverse roles and the meanings victims give them.

The presence of bystanders frequently causes the most severe wounds for survivors, sometimes even more severe than the actual physical suffering caused by the attack. One survivor described how shocked she was to see people she knew just stand by while she was being battered:

Although the beating hurt, those people who stood by and did nothing except watch and stare crushed me on the inside. Some of them were my neighbours, and I knew who they were. They simply folded their hands as I begged them to assist me, continuing to look into their eyes. Some were even using their phones to record. I found it incomprehensible that people could do nothing as they saw me nearly die. Their silence gave me the impression that they had participated in the murder (Survivor, personal communication, 28 August, 2025).

From the survivor's testimony, the most serious harm inflicted during mob violence frequently goes beyond physical trauma and includes a severe sense of emotional betrayal and social abandonment. Her bewilderment upon seeing familiar people, neighbours who did not intervene or exhibit empathy, exemplifies the breakdown of expected communal cooperation in times of distress. Their silence, passive observation, and even the act of documenting her suffering, in her opinion, converted them from ordinary bystanders to complicit perpetrators in the violence. This imagined collaboration exacerbated her suffering, as the lack of assistance signalled not just

indifference, but also tacit approval of her victimisation. Such instances provide credence to the central argument that bystanders are not neutral individuals; rather, their inactivity can be just as influential in moulding the outcome and consequences of mob justice. The survivor's interpretation of silence as participation highlights how bystander behaviour contributes to both the physical escalation of violence and the enduring psychological scars borne by victims.

Human rights activists see this silence as a sign of a larger social breakdown in which compassion is subordinated to fear, indifference, or even enthusiasm. This viewpoint emphasizes that such silence is more than just passive inaction; rather, it is a symptom of a deeper social decay in which fear, normalized apathy, and, in certain situations, an uncomfortable collective endorsement of violence takes the place of moral duty. One activist explained,

It is impossible to overlook the role of bystanders while examining mob justice situations. They are rarely impartial. The mob is strengthened by their silence. The spectacle their phones provide dehumanizes the victim. While some do attempt to contact the police, the number of people who support the violence outnumbers them. In addition to the physical harm they endured, survivors frequently tell us that the lack of humanity in the mob is what pains them the most. Since the people who could have protected them decided to either watch or run away (Human Rights Activist, personal communication, 6 September, 2025).

The human rights activist challenges the notion that bystanders are impartial or detached observers by highlighting the intrinsically active involvement of spectators in mob justice. The statement stresses how "the mob is strengthened by their silence,"

demonstrating how passivity serves as tacit consent, empowering offenders and permitting violence to continue unchecked. In addition to depriving victims of their dignity, documenting instances instead of taking action reinforces their dehumanisation and turns suffering into a spectacle. While a minority may try to contact the police to seek legal action, their attempts are sometimes overshadowed by a larger, more vocal group that condones or promotes the violence. Because it indicates a breakdown of collective duty, this withdrawal of empathy and protection often causes more psychological harm to survivors than the actual physical assault. This immediately bolsters the stance that bystanders constitute key players whose actions greatly influence the dynamics and results of mob justice rather than being passive entities. Their silence, encouragement, or intervention can determine whether violence is amplified or restrained, stressing the need to critically address societal attitudes that normalize or tolerate such collective brutality.

In the chaotic atmosphere of a mob justice scene, where emotions run high and uncertainty prevails, observers often display conflicting reactions that reveal the complex and divided moral landscape within the community. According to civil society organizations, the variety of bystander roles reflects the moral ambiguity in the community, as people are divided between being angry at crime, being excited by the spectacle, or being afraid of being targets themselves. One CSO representative said,

Onlookers aid the mob in violating the alleged offender. They might not be the ones that is raising a stick to hit the alleged criminal, but encourage the irate mob to kill the alleged criminal, or recount other instances where the alleged criminal has victimized someone. This action energizes the already aggrieved mob to summarily

deal with the alleged criminal. However, in cases where we have seen alleged criminal offenders survive, we have seen bystanders who said no to the extrajudicial action of the irate mob. Some onlookers play a positive role by encouraging the angry mob to refrain from dealing with the alleged criminal and hand him/her over to the Police. Some bystanders even go as far as running into the mob to cover the alleged criminal from further beating. These acts sometimes (when especially done by women, religious leaders in the community and respected elders) discourage some of the already irate mob from further violence out of respect for the person that stepped in. Some of these survivors even turn a new leaf after this experience (CSO member, personal communication, 26 August, 2025).

The aforementioned account highlights the very conflicted and significant role that bystanders play in mob justice, showing how their actions can either stop or justify violence. On the one hand, spectators who provoke the mob by screaming for punishment or bringing up alleged prior transgressions act as moral amplifiers, turning suspicion into a consensus and hastening the transition to extrajudicial punishment. On the other hand, the testimony reveals that resistance from within the crowd is both possible and, at times, effective. A countervailing moral force that might defuse tensions is introduced by bystanders who confront the mob, defend due process, or physically protect victims. This is especially true when these interventions come from well-respected individuals like women, religious leaders, or elders from the community. Their presence can reassert norms of restraint and legitimacy, occasionally saving lives and even opening pathways for offender reform.

This duality is consistent with the central argument that bystanders are not passive observers but pivotal agents whose choices shape the trajectory and outcomes of mob encounters; their capacity to either inflame or restrain violence demonstrates that mob justice is socially produced and, crucially, can be disrupted through courageous and normatively grounded intervention. In support of the foregoing, another CSO representative said:

As we document the incident, we see bystanders playing conflicting roles: some call the police, others chant slogans to encourage the mob to continue, some record videos for amusement, and some cry and plead with the crowd to stop. For the victim, these conflicting signals are devastating; the picture of being beaten on the ground and looking up to see one man calling the police while ten others shout, "Kill him!" This chaos leaves the victim feeling as though society is divided over whether they deserve to live, and the psychological trauma lasts long after the wounds have healed (CSO member, personal communication, 26 August, 2025).

The above testimony vividly demonstrates the fragmented and contradictory nature of bystander behaviour in mob justice situations, where multiple moral positions coexist within the same crowd. While a minority attempt to uphold legality by calling the police or pleading for restraint, a larger segment may actively encourage the violence or disengage by turning the event into a spectacle through recording. For the victim, this mixture of support and hostility creates a deeply disorienting experience, as the presence of a few sympathetic voices is overwhelmed by the dominant calls for harm. The image of lying helpless while witnessing such opposing reactions reinforces a perception that society itself is divided on the value of

their life, intensifying both immediate fear and long-term psychological trauma. This directly aligns with the central argument of this paper that bystanders are not passive observers but critical actors whose conflicting roles shape the dynamics and outcomes of mob justice. Their actions, whether supportive, indifferent, or antagonistic, not only influence whether violence escalates or is restrained but also leave enduring emotional scars that extend far beyond the physical assault.

Additionally, the Nigerian Police Force admitted that bystander behaviour makes their interventions more difficult. Although officers frequently rely on members of the community to inform them, they occasionally arrive to find groups that are too big or aggressive to move swiftly. A senior officer explained,

When mob incidents begin, we count on passersby to call us, and some do. However, a lot of people would rather record or support the crowd. By the time we get there, the mob has gotten so big that it's risky for us to even try to help. Later, victims told us that rather than offering assistance, they witnessed individuals using phones to record them. They see this as society making fun of them when they are at their lowest. It's critical to realize that bystander behaviour has the power to either save a life or end a victim's life (Police personnel, personal communication, 21 August, 2025).

The above testimony reiterates the critical role of bystander behaviour in determining the timing and effectiveness of intervention in mob justice situations. While law enforcement relies on the public for swift alerts, many observers' desire to capture or encourage the mob slows response and permits the situation to develop beyond controllable levels. As the mob swells in size and intensity, authorities' attempts to interfere become increasingly difficult and risky, diminishing the chances of rescuing the

victim. From the victim's perspective, being videotaped rather than helped exacerbates their feelings of shame and abandonment, supporting the notion that society is unconcerned about, or perhaps entertained by, their misery. The main contention of this study, that bystanders are essential players whose choices significantly influence the course and result of mob justice rather than being passive observers, is well supported by this narrative. In the end, whether a victim of collective violence survives or perishes depends on whether their actions enable prompt intervention and save lives or contribute to delay and escalation.

In the tense moments following the apprehension of an alleged offender, vigilante members often find themselves surrounded by agitated crowds whose demands and reactions place intense pressure on their decisions and actions. Members of vigilante groups, who frequently operate at the intersection between formal law and community expectations, talked about the tremendous pressure they receive from onlookers. A vigilante leader admitted,

Occasionally, we apprehend a suspect, but the crowd assembles before we can make a decision. Onlookers are also fed up with the prevalence of criminal victimization in their environment. Out of anger and frustration, some of them just keep mute during the mob action and allow whatever that wants to happen to happen. Some even begin to shout, "Kill him, beat him!" Some mobs are not merely observing; they demand justice, which makes situational control extremely difficult. In one instance, we wanted to turn over the culprit to the police, but the voices of onlookers sent the crowd into a state of high excitement. "I know I will not live since even those who could have helped are asking for my death," the suspect remarked to me later, just

before he passed away. This demonstrates how much victims value bystander behaviour (Vigilante member, personal communication, 26 August, 2025).

The above account illustrates how quickly control over a suspect can shift from informal custodians of order to an emotionally charged crowd, with bystanders playing a decisive role in that transition. Although vigilante members may intend to follow due process by handing suspects over to the police, the buildup of bystanders, many already frustrated by recurring victimization, creates a volatile environment where silence, anger, and open incitement converge. Passive observers who “allow whatever happens” and vocal agitators who demand immediate punishment collectively legitimize and accelerate the escalation of violence, often overwhelming attempts at restraint. The dying suspect's stated statements powerfully illustrate how victims understand these responses: demands for death and the lack of supportive voices stifle hope and indicate social abandonment. This evidence supports the study's main point that bystanders play a crucial role in the dynamics of mob justice and that their attitudes and actions can either encourage legitimate handling or lead to deadly consequences. In this way, mob justice appears as a socially created process influenced by the moral decisions of people who observe it rather than merely as unplanned violence.

Community leaders offered a deeper cultural analysis of the phenomenon, pointing out that bystanders are torn between contemporary spectacle culture and ingrained social inclinations. A chief in Sagbama explained,

In the past, the community would get together to judge and make a decision when someone was accused of wrongdoing, not to amuse themselves. These days, individuals use their

phones to capture events as though they were dramatic. When victims witness this, they feel ridiculed. Passive onlookers are seen by them as an indication that their lives are cheap. Even though they punished wrongdoers, our forefathers never made fun of people's suffering. Because it transforms onlookers into witnesses to brutality, mob justice is particularly harmful today (Community leader, personal communication, 19 August, 2025).

The accounts of their lives also demonstrate how some bystanders genuinely try to intervene but usually fall short. This assessment emphasises a change from collective accountability to performative spectatorship, where victims' perception of dehumanisation is intensified, and the moral fabric of society is highlighted by the presence of passive and recorded bystanders.

In a similar spirit, survivors' experiences show the emotional significance of such activities as well as the glaring limitations of lone voices in the face of enormous crowd pressure, even in the few instances when people try to interfere. One survivor described his sense of relief at witnessing a man in the crowd begging for his life:

I believed that everyone wanted me dead when I was being beaten. Then I noticed a man shouting, "Stop, don't kill him! As he pushed through the crowd. I will always remember him, even if he was unable to stop them. I had the impression that not all of mankind had deserted me at that precise time. However, I also came to see how helpless one voice can be in the face of a mob. His countenance stays with me as evidence that not everyone wished me dead, even though the other onlookers overwhelmed him (Survivor, personal communication, 7 September, 2025).

However, the most common memory for many victims is of individuals documenting their pain rather than offering assistance. This tendency of bystanders to document rather than intervene transforms the immediate physical violence into a prolonged psychological trauma, as illustrated by the survivor who experienced not only the beating but also the lasting public humiliation captured and shared by onlookers. According to a CSO member, one survivor told them:

A young boy who lived through a lynching told us that he saw someone laughing while recording on a phone. He said, 'Even if I survived, I knew then that my disgrace would be all over the place.' Not only were they hitting me, but they were also destroying me in front of everyone. The victims see this as a second act of violence, where they are beaten by the mob and then shamed forever by the onlookers (CSO member, personal communication, 26 August, 2025).

Deducible from the preceding instances demonstrated above, bystanders are far from being impartial observers. Their involvement in mob justice cannot be written off as incidental. Whether active or passive, their roles form a part of the trauma that the victim has experienced. Advocates magnify violence, documentarians deprive victims of their dignity, silent observers betray them, those who go away leave the victim feeling abandoned, and a few defenders offer a glimmer of hope. Victims take their encouragement, silence, or filming as proof that society accepts their suffering. When they (bystanders) step in, even if it doesn't work, victims remember it as a glimmer of hope in the face of despair. The silent, applauding, or filming crowd will continue to be just as much a part of the violence as the mob itself. The diversity of these roles is a reflection of larger inconsistencies in society, where

mob violence frequently results in the chaotic intersection of fear, rage, curiosity, and compassion. However, for victims, these paradoxes dissolve into a straightforward reality: their community either let them down or, in a few minor instances, reminded them of their humanity.

Discussion

The discussion of findings is done in line with the research objective. The findings in this study addressed the objective, and the relevant data are presented in Tables 1 and 2 above, along with qualitative insights from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) that illuminate the dynamics of bystander behaviour in mob justice incidents. The result shows that while a small proportion 6(2%) actively supported, resisted the mob 27(11%), or even record the incidence of their phone 27(10%), 17 (6%) actively participating in the violence, 11 (4%) fleeing the crime scene, 29 (11%) actively trying their best to stop the mob action, with 28 (11%) calling for the formal authorities to come and rescue the situation, the dominant trend was passive observation 147(56%), which indirectly perpetuates mob justice by allowing such acts to proceed unchecked. This distribution highlights the centrality of bystanders/onlookers in mob justice events, suggesting that such incidents are not merely the actions of a few violent individuals but are socially embedded events sustained by the presence and behaviour of a crowd. The implication is that passivity itself becomes a form of participation, as the failure to intervene creates an enabling environment in which violence can escalate with minimal resistance. This result provides empirical evidence to support the contention made by Ikejiaku and Osabutey (2022) that the perceived dangers of confronting an excited mob, especially the fear of personal injury or retaliation, deter active

intervention and normalise inaction among onlookers. As a result, the prevalence of passive observation reflects both individual decision-making under fearful circumstances and a larger social environment where collective responsibility is dispersed. This reinforces the persistence of mob justice as a response to perceived wrongdoing that is accepted by the community, if not implicitly supported.

Furthermore, the qualitative data reinforce this pattern by demonstrating a consensus among participants that bystanders, whether active or passive, play a critical role in shaping the outcome of mob actions. Their presence is not incidental but constitutive of the violence itself, as it provides both the audience and the implicit validation that sustains such acts. From the victims' perspective, passive observation is often interpreted as complicity, contributing significantly to their psychological trauma alongside the physical harm endured. This underscores a key argument of the study: that there is a significant relationship between the presence of onlookers and the perpetuation of mob justice in the study area. The findings also point to broader structural issues, particularly public disenchantment with the formal justice system, which drives individuals to tolerate or even support extrajudicial measures. In line with structural strain theory, societal frustrations, unmet expectations, and perceived institutional failures create conditions where mob justice becomes normalized as an alternative form of justice. Consequently, addressing this phenomenon requires not only strengthening legal institutions but also implementing public sensitization campaigns and providing protections for those who choose to intervene, thereby fostering a culture of accountability and respect for the rule of law.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study interrogated the multifaceted role of bystanders during mob justice incidents in Bayelsa State, with a view to provide a framework for community-led initiative that promote active citizenship and de-escalation training to rebuild trust and prevent future acts of mob justice in society. It interrogated the driver behind the inactions, such as the bystander effects, as well as the factors that compel individuals to participate, and sought to identify pathways to empower residents to intervene and uphold the rule of law. Based on the findings, it concludes that bystanders in mob justice incidents are not passive observers but play a critical and often complicit role, ranging from active participation to silent inaction. Their involvement in mob justice cannot be written off as incidental. Whether active or passive, their roles form a part of the trauma that the victim has experienced. This highlights the urgent need for public sensitization, stronger trust in the justice system, and legal protections for whistleblowers and interveners. Therefore, this paper recommends that the Bayelsa State government, in partnership with Non-governmental Organizations should integrate de-escalation and active bystander training into community programs. They should collaborate to offer practical training on de-escalation techniques and active bystander intervention. These workshops, held in tertiary institutions, community centers, and places of work, would equip individuals with the skills to safely intervene in a crisis, diffuse tense situations, and encourage a more empathetic, rule of law-based response to alleged crimes.

In addition, the Bayelsa State government, in partnership with civil society organizations, should initiate a public awareness campaign that empowers citizens/residents to report mob justice incidents safely. They should launch a

state-wide “see something, say something” campaign with whistleblower protections. This campaign must be backed by a concrete legal framework that provides robust protection for whistleblowers from intimidation or harm. Creating a confidential and easily accessible reporting system (e.g., a toll-free hotline or a mobile app) would encourage intervention and help dismantle the culture of silence that enables mob violence.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I, Oba Preye Inimiesi, declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper. This research was conducted independently without financial, political or personal relationships that could inappropriately influence the study's findings or interpretations. All procedures adhered to ethical standards, ensuring objectivity, transparency, and integrity throughout the research process.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I, Oba, Preye Inimiesi, declare that this work, “Bystanders in Mob Justice: Interrogating Public Complicity and Intervention in Bayelsa State, Nigeria”, was carried out by me, that this is my original work and that it has not been previously submitted either wholly or in part to any other journal or publication house.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Oba Preye Inimiesi is a nascent scholar and an academic in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. He has completed his Master's and PhD degrees in Criminology and Security Studies. As an emerging scholar who started contributing to knowledge in 2022, he has several articles published in both local and international journals, and has 23 citations on ResearchGate, reflecting his growing academic visibility and impact.

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