Original Research Article

How Exposure To Violent Media Impacts Aggression In Children: Exploration Of Gender Differences

Theodora Papageorgiou

Athens College Stefanou Delta 15, Psychiko, 154 52, Greece

ABSTRACT

With the rapid evolution of social media, children are spending more time on screens than ever before. Given this increased screen time, there is growing concern about violent media because such exposure can result in normalized aggressive behavior. Exposure to violent content and its effects on childhood aggressive behavior are examined, with particular focus on the role of gender and the specific context of Greece. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 mothers of school children living in Athens, Greece. Most mothers perceived that both girls and boys exposed to media violence expressed some form of aggression and/or violent thoughts. However, girls expressed a different kind of aggression than boys, as a result of their different content preferences. Specifically, girls express verbal violence, whereas boys resort to physical violence. Future studies should examine whether the gender differences in expressing violence follow children into their adult lives.

Keywords: aggressive behavior, childhood, gender identity, Greece, media exposure, media violence

INTRODUCTION

Media violence, characterized by portrayals of physical and verbal aggression, is prevalent across many platforms, including television, video games, and online content. The impact of media violence on children's aggressive behavior has been a topic of significant concern and research over the past few decades (1). According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory introduced in 1977, human behavior can be learned through observing and modeling others (2). As a result, children who are exposed to media violence are more likely to express aggressive behavior when they become adults (3). While excessive screen time raises general health concerns, violent media exposure, which has distinct behavioral implications, is the primary focus of this research.

Gender identity plays a crucial role in shaping how children interpret and respond to media. According to the traditional gender roles, males are seen and portrayed in television as having more power and being more aggressive and dominant. Thus, the media avoids depicting their caring and loving side (4). This misinterpretation focuses solely on the concept of masculinity, leaving no space for feminine and soft men (5). Women also suffer from stereotypical portrayals in television as they are mostly depicted as having more solidarity and more emotion (6,7). These traits reflect gender stereotypes that link femininity with communal traits of compassion and sensitivity (8). Such stereotypes can influence how children of different genders perceive and internalize media violence,

Corresponding author: Theodora Papageorgiou, E-mail: theopap08@gmail.com.

Accepted October 29, 2025
https://doi.org/10.70251/HYJR2348.36300311

potentially leading to diverse effects on their behavior (9). As such, existing literature provides ample evidence on the relationship between media violence and violent behaviors in children that are exposed to it (10).

While existing literature provides evidence of the relationship between media violence and children's aggressive behaviors, less is known about how cultural settings, such as Greece, may shape parental perceptions of media violence and its effects on children. Although prior research tends to rely heavily on experimental or quantitative designs, the focus is shifted to the perspectives of parents who directly observe their children's media consumption and behavior, often influenced by the cultural context (10). This study investigates how exposure to media violence affects children's aggressive behaviors within Greek families, focusing on perceived gender differences as observed by mothers. By situating research in this cultural setting, the study aims to illuminate how local values and gender norms shape both children's behavioral responses and parental perceptions of media-related aggression.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review focuses on three major areas of the literature: "Bandura and Social Learning Theory", Impacts of Media Violence, and Gender Differences in response to media violence.

A report produced by The Commonsense Media Census identified that children aged 8 and younger spend about two and half hours per day with screen media (11). They found that screen time differs significantly by age group. Children aged two to four spend roughly around two hours whereas those aged five to eight use screens for about 3.5 hours daily. Such an increase in children's media exposure has concerned many health experts. In particular, according to Nemours Children's Health, excessive screen time can unconsciously trigger childhood obesity as physical exercise is replaced with media exposure (12). Increased screen time activity may also disrupt healthy habits such as playtime, family bonding, sleep patterns and language skills. Given such concerns, it is crucial to comprehend not only how much media children consume, but also its context and quality. In particular, there is concern regarding exposure to violent media and its effect on child aggression. The impacts of screen time extend beyond the physical and mental health concerns outlined above, and, as further literature analyzed will show, can even affect behavioral traits of children.

Bandura and the Social Learning Theory

Several studies support that exposure to media violence affects children's aggressive behavior. This idea is embedded in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which suggests that children learn through modeling and observing other's behaviors (13). In 1961, researcher Albert Bandura tested this theory by conducting the Bobo Doll experiment. He hypothesized that children learn by observing and imitating other people's behaviors and emotional reactions.

To investigate this, numerous researchers showed both physical and verbal violence towards an inflatable doll in the presence of pre-school children aged 3 to 6 years old. The 72 children in total were randomly allocated to one of the three conditions, each containing 24 children: The aggressive model, the non-aggressive model and the control group in which no model was shown. In the aggressive model condition, each child observed an adult model, either a man or a woman, behave aggressively towards the inflatable Bobo Doll by punching, tossing and hitting it. Verbal violence included phrases like "Kick him" and "Pow". Furthermore, in the non-aggressive model condition, each child observed an adult model who just played with a toy set, sitting quietly and not engaging with the Bobo Doll. Both of the experimental conditions lasted for 10 minutes. In the control group, children were not exposed to any adult model, therefore investigating their usual behavior without modeling.

After the 3 conditions took place, children were separately taken to a room with toys like a doll set and a fire engine. As soon as each child attempted to play with the toys, they were told that these items were set aside for other children, an intervention that would make even calm toddlers feel frustrated. Finally, children were taken into a room that contained both aggressive and non-aggressive toys such as a replica of the Bobo Doll, a toy gun and stuffed animals. They were then left to play alone for a 20-minute period. During this time, researchers observed their behavior through a one-way mirror. Children who were exposed to an aggressive model are more likely to copy that behavior, both physically by kicking it in a certain way and verbally by repeating phrases such as "Sock him!". Additionally, 70% of children who were exposed to a calm adult model or were assigned to the control group, showed almost no aggression.

While conducting this study, Bandura was simultaneously investigating the gender differences between girls and boys included in aggressive behavior.

More specifically, the results provided evidence to the researcher's hypothesis that same- sex models heavily affect children. In particular, boys were more likely to exhibit aggression when exposed to an aggressive male model than to an aggressive female one. In contrast, girls mostly expressed physical aggression when in the presence of a male model but showed higher levels of verbal aggression when observing a female model. Therefore, the sex of the model had differential impacts on the children based on whether they were the same-sex or opposite- sex. However, cross- sex influences are also found in response to different kinds of aggression.

Despite the fact that the Bobo Doll experiment laid the groundwork for observational learning, it has numerous limitations (14). The scenario of a child observing an adult model that behaves violently towards a doll is not a usual real-life situation in which a child would find itself in. Therefore, there is low ecological validity since such modeling is unlikely to occur. Moreover, the long-term effects of such modeling are unclear considering that children were investigated in terms of immediate behavioral imitation upon seeing the model. Additionally, researcher bias can take place because observers were aware of which condition each child was in, allowing for them to consciously or unconsciously fabricate the results depending on what they expect to find.

The Impact of Media Violence on Children's Aggression

Huesmann and Miller found that media violence can affect behavior through observational learning processes such as attention, retention, reproduction and motivation (1). These were initially proposed by Bandura in 1977. Drawing on the findings of Huesmann and Miller proposed that these cognitive processes gradually resolved in cognitive schemas that are stored in a person's memory and help guide behavior in social situations (1). Media violence can cue cognitive schema that promote aggressive behavior. Children's beliefs and cognitive schemas are still developing, but they can swiftly encode new aggressive scripts through observational learning as demonstrated in Bandura's Bobo Doll experiment in 1961. The study, focusing explicitly on short-term effects, clearly showcases that children imitate aggressive behaviors after observing a model, underscoring the immediate impact that such behavior can have on children's aggression.

While children initially use conscious processes to apply these scripts, they later become automatic and operate very swiftly as the children grow older. Thus, individuals are mostly unaware of the mental processes taking place. Once the scripts are rehearsed, performed, and lead to real life consequences, they are more prone to irreversible changes thus having long term effects.

Huesmann and Miller also note that while there is little relation between adult aggression and adult's exposure to violent media, there is a significant link between childhood exposure and child aggression (1). Furthermore, they add that such childhood aggression is associated with aggressive behavior in adulthood. This emphasizes the toll that exposure to media violence can take on an individual's path, even leading up to adulthood.

One limitation is that the literature that Huesmann and Miller cited was conducted using Western samples. This indicates that the findings may not thoroughly address the cultural differences involved in aggressive behavior and media violence exposure in non- Western societies.

An additional study conducted by Huesmann et al. collected data on the longitudinal relations between TV-violence viewing at ages between 6 to 10 and adult aggressive behavior about 15 years later for a sample growing up in the 1970s and 1980s (15). Furthermore, in Bushman and Huesmann's meta-analysis researchers examined multiple studies to test their initial hypothesis that media violence has long-term effects on children (16). They clarify that they interpret the term media as TV, movies, video games, music, and comic books. Their findings suggest that media violence is related to subsequent aggression and overall anger.

Gender Differences in the Effect of Media Violence on Children's Aggression

Conclusions from the present literature indicate that gender impacts the extent of aggressive behavior. Specifically, Huesmann et al. utilized a sample of youth and found that women mostly use indirect violence, verbal, whereas men use direct, physical violence (15). The experiment's findings show that more childhood exposure to TV violence and greater childhood identification with same-sex aggressive TV characters predicted higher levels of adult aggression regardless of how aggressive participants were as children. This suggests that children are drawn towards characters that are the same gender as them, imitate them, and eventually adopt aggressive behaviors even in the long-term.

In a violent video game experiment that was conducted to observe the possible aggressive thoughts

and behaviors provoked, women were observed displaying more hostility and aggression than men (17). This finding was surprising since men are usually seen as more directly aggressive (18). However, one explanation is that because women are less familiar with video games and do not conventionally prefer such activity, they are less happy to be participating in this experiment.

Overall, given the above literature, childhood exposure to media violence and identification with same-sex characters can lead to aggressive behavior such as assault and delinquency later in life. However, besides the long-term impacts, there are also short-term complications such as imitation and overall aggressive behavior in childhood.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Study Design and Participants

For this qualitative study, data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with mothers to understand how children are affected by media violence with regard to their gender (19). Specifically, 12 Greek mothers, whose children included a total of 9 girls and 9 boys, ranging in age from 6 to 13. However, only 11 were ultimately analyzed as one was excluded because the participant's child was not exposed to violent content. Mothers who were aged 40-50 were recruited through social networks, over the period of two weeks of summer 2023. The interviews were semi-structured meaning that a pre-determined set of questions was used (Appendix), however additional questions were asked in response to interviewees' answers. Interview questions were sent to interviewees in advance. Although all participants were based in Athens, it was considered important to give them the flexibility to participate in the way most convenient to them. Participants chose to have the interviews conducted via audio phone calls. All interviews were recorded after obtaining the verbal consent of interviewees. The interviews lasted for an average of 30 minutes.

Ethical Considerations

For confidentiality, no personally identifying information is included and all participants are referred to using numbers throughout the study (e.g. Subject 1). The only personal information used in the research is that the interviewed parents and, accordingly, their children are of Greek nationality. As such, since no personally identifying information was collected or retained during the research process, an Institutional Review Board or equivalent ethics committee is not required, yet ethical research standards and the privacy of interviewees were upheld.

Interview Structure and Thematic Focus

In terms of the interview process, open-ended questions were chosen so as to give interviewees ample opportunity to be as thorough as possible, benefiting the process as well as increasing the scope of the data collected (Appendix). The general themes of the questions asked in the interviews included screen time, media content and genre, observed behavior, parental role and regulation strategies, imitation of behaviors, and gender differences. For the purposes of the study violent media refers to television programs or films that involve depictions of violence and gore whether in animated or realistic form. Examples mentioned by participants included superhero films such as *"Power Rangers"* which includes physical combat against monsters and villains as well as thriller and horror movies. Violent video games were also taken into consideration. Notable examples are *"Fortnite",* and car games that involve stealing or crashing - when mothers noted that their child spends time doing such an activity. However, explicit links between violent content and children's aggressive behavior were made. Only cases when mothers named a specific violent title, scene or game and described a subsequent instance of aggression in their child were coded as a violent media aggression link.

A descriptive qualitative analysis of the interviews was then conducted. This involved transcribing the recordings of the interviews, reading through the transcripts and becoming familiar with the data, and coding and extracting key information in order to answer the research question.

The Greek Cultural Context

An important consideration in interpreting these findings is the national and cultural context in which the study was conducted. All participants were Greek mothers, and their parenting practices, beliefs, and observations are embedded within Greek cultural norms. In that sense, the findings reflect not only the impact of media violence, but also the ways in which cultural values shape parental perceptions of aggression and gendered behavior. Specifically, even though children in Greece have rich media experiences in the home, with broad access to print, screen

entertainment and digital media, the presence of video games in Greek homes is more limited compared to other countries (20). This difference in the type of media violence that children in Greece are exposed to potentially affects the way they respond to it and their parents' perception of it.

At the same time, traditional gender norms are still dominant within Greek society and thus may contribute to the way mothers interpret their sons' and daughters' exposure to violent content (20). While girls are viewed by their mothers as less physically aggressive according to this study's findings, this perception might be influenced by gendered expectations rather than by observable differences in behavior alone. In Greek culture, femininity is still often associated with emotionality and compliance, whereas masculinity is linked with strength and physical dominance. These cultural narratives may lead mothers to downplay or reinterpret girls' displays of aggression, framing them as verbal, emotional, or situational rather than as physically aggressive behaviors. On the contrary, boys' aggressive behaviors may be normalized or even expected, reinforcing the perception that media violence has a stronger, more direct effect on sons than on daughters. Therefore, while these findings provide valuable insights into the Greek context, their transferability to other cultural settings should be considered with caution, as differing media environments and gender norms may significantly shape both parental perceptions and children's behaviors in distinct ways. A comparison between children in Greece and other, non-Western, cultural contexts would be an interesting future research topic, yet it is out of the scope of this paper.

RESULTS

This section outlines the findings of the 11 interviews analyzed. The three recurring themes which guide this analysis include: boys' physical aggression, girls' verbal aggression, and parental perceptions of gendered aggression. These were shaped by key moderating factors: screen time, extent of violent content, and external pressures. The table (Table 1) below introduces the primary pieces of information gathered during the study for each interviewed subject.

Table 1. Overview of Participant Characteristics and Reported Links Between Media Violence and Child Aggression

Participant	Number of children	Age/Gender of children (B-boy, G- girl)	Average daily screen time(hours)	Violent Exposure (Yes/No/)	Specific link to aggression (Yes/No/Maybe)	Reported aggression form (Physical, Verbal, Both, None)
Subject 1	1	B- 6	1	Yes	**No**	None
Subject 2	2	B- 8	1	Yes	No	None
		G- 9	1	Yes	No	None
Subject 3	2	B- 8	3	Yes	Yes	Both
		G- 6	2	Yes	Yes	Both
Subject 4	1	B- 7	2	Yes	Yes	Physical
Subject 5	2	B- 11	4	Yes	Yes	Physical
		G- 13	6	Yes	Yes	Physical
Subject 6	2	B- 7	4	Yes	Yes	Both
		G- 9	4	Yes	Yes	Both
Subject 7	1	G- 7	2	Yes	Maybe	Verbal
Subject 8	2	B- 9	3	Yes	Yes	Both
		G- 8	2	Yes	Yes	Both
Subject 9	2	B- 7	2	Yes	Yes	Physical
		G- 8	2	Yes	Yes	Verbal
Subject 10	2	B- 8	2	Yes	Yes	Physical
		G- 7	2	Yes	Yes	Verbal
Subject 11	1	G-7	2.5	Yes	Yes	Verbal

Out of the research sample of 12 interviewees, one reported that their child does not consume any violent content and therefore was not considered for this study. Therefore, the findings presented are based on the responses of 11 interviewees. Among these, 2 out of 11 noted that although their children consume violent media content, there has not been a noticeable impact on their children's behavior. Thus, 9 out of 11 mothers revealed that they have observed a significant increase in aggression by their children after consuming violent media.

Boys' Physical Aggression

The impact of media violence on the two genders provoked significantly different reactions. Namely, 5 out of 7 interviewees with both a daughter and a son agreed that their children showed some form of an aggressive reaction regardless of their gender. Across the sample, mothers consistently described boys' aggressive reactions as direct and physical, including behaviors such as hitting, pushing, or rough play. Specifically, Subject 4 pointed out that her son had become "increasingly aggressive, even showing signs of physical violence towards his parents and friends." Subject 9 also emphasized that "ever since I allowed my son to consume violent content, I have noticed that he gets into frequent physical arguments at home and even at school." This pattern appeared to be strongly associated with screen time duration and the severity of violent content.

Mothers of boys who spent more than two hours daily on screens frequently observed elevated aggression. Subject 3 said that "Not limiting my children's screen time may have been a mistake since I have recently observed a big increase in aggressive behavior on both my children." Accordingly, Subject 4 added that "The more my child's screentime increased, the more the aggression I observed for my child." In contrast, 2 out of 11 interviewees who reported one hour or less of daily screen time (Subjects 1 and 2) described little to no change in behavior. Subject 1 stated: "Since my child only has 1 hour of screen time per day the exposure to violent content is limited." Subject 2 added that "The few minutes of screen time my children get might be the reason they have not been impacted by the violent content they consume".

The extent of violent imagery also played a decisive role. Five interviewees noted that once their sons began engaging with highly violent video games or films, their aggression became more intense. As Subject 5 explained, "When my children started playing very violent games, their aggressive behavior became more intense and direct. Before that, with only mild language or action scenes, the impact wasn't as significant." This observation raises questions as to how children are affected by different levels of violence, possibly meaning that more severe violent content leads to imitation of more violent behaviors. Nonetheless it is important to note that the remaining 4 out of 9 interviewees who observed an impact on their children's behavior did not notice such a connection. Instead, they stated that any extent of violence impacted their children the same. For instance, Subject 6 mentioned that "All types of media violence have impacted my children the same. One of my children consumes more violent content than the other yet has shown less aggressive behaviors."

Mothers frequently contrasted this behavior with their daughters' responses, as will be seen in the next section, suggesting that these gendered patterns might reflect broader social expectations. As subject 9 noted "their reactions might differ because physical assertiveness is more tolerated in boys, while verbal expression is seen as a safer outlet for girls." Overall, mothers perceived that both longer exposure and more graphic content preferences reinforced physical aggression among boys.

Girls' Verbal Aggression

Mothers frequently contrasted this behavior with their daughters' responses, noting that while boys tended to externalize aggression physically, girls were more likely to express anger through verbal violence. Namely, 7 out of 9 mothers of girls reported that their daughters displayed some degree of verbal irritability or heightened emotional reaction after consuming violent content. This aggression was often manifested through arguing, teasing, or the use of inappropriate language. Subject 10 observed that "Although my son has become more noticeably aggressive, kicking and punching his sister, my daughter has also become increasingly aggressive through the use of inappropriate language."

Screen time was again a decisive factor. Daughters with two or more hours of daily viewing were more frequently described as "easily irritated" or "verbally aggressive," while those with around one hour or less were reported to show no significant change. Subject 8, for instance, highlighted that longer viewing time magnified these effects for boys and girls alike, adding that "After two or three hours consuming these intense violent scenes, both my son and daughter become

restless and short-tempered to the same extent."

Such behaviors were also linked to type of content, specifically exposure to media featuring interpersonal conflict, even when the violence was not physical. Subject 11 said "I think the type of media content my daughter consumes has led her to have violent thoughts, but she seems to merely express them verbally." Four mothers mentioned that reality shows, online videos, or teen dramas were common triggers, as they often portrayed rivalry and verbal confrontation between peers. Subject 7 explained: "I've noticed that my daughter repeats what she hears online, such as phrases or insults from YouTube videos, and she uses them when she's upset." In some cases, mothers described short-term imitations of behavior immediately after viewing, while in others, the pattern persisted for several days.

Although most mothers described verbal aggression rather than physical actions, two mothers, Subjects 3 and 6, observed mixed forms of aggression, with daughters occasionally combining verbal outbursts with physical gestures such as pushing or slamming doors. These behaviors were often reported following periods of extended viewing or exposure to highly emotional scenes.

The findings from the interviews suggest that girls' aggression most often emerged as verbal mimicry of media behavior, influenced by both screen time and type of content. Mothers reported that the reactions were less visible than those of boys but more persistent in everyday interactions, particularly when screen time exceeded two hours per day.

Parental Perceptions of Gendered Aggression

Thus, according to the findings, most parents emphasized that both sons and daughters were influenced by violent media, yet each manifested aggression differently. There was no indication of one gender being impacted more or less than the other. On the contrary, the interviewees clearly established that in most cases both their children have been affected equally by media violence yet choose to externalize it in a different way.

Out of the interviewees that had both male and female children, 5 out of 7 noted that the content preferences of their two children significantly differ. They mentioned that girls consume content with more verbal violence while boys prefer graphically violent content. Subject 6 claimed that "My daughter rarely consumes heavily violent content, while my son almost exclusively watches that type of content." However, Subject 9 added that "Both my daughter and son consume very similar content which portrays intense violence." The different types of content that girls and boys choose to consume in most cases may also affect their aggressive reactions.

In addition to media exposure, several mothers discussed external social pressures that reinforced aggression. Subject 7 and Subject 8 mentioned that their kids often follow their peers, imitate their behaviors, act aggressively and even reward such behavior through laughter. As Subject 7 described: "My child sometimes acts aggressively to fit in at school and thinks that it is normal to do so because others behave that way." These accounts suggest that violent media may interact with peer dynamics, amplifying the expression of aggression through imitation and social reinforcement.

A smaller number of parents described specific strategies to mitigate these behaviors. Only 2 interviewees mentioned specific activities to entertain their children and divert their attention away from screens. Subject 9 shared that "I make an active effort to play board games, read, and go on walks with my son and daughter to lower their screen time. I have seen that once other activities keep them occupied, their aggressive behavior is minimized." Similarly, Subject 8 noted that "Ever since I observed this aggressive behavior, I encouraged my children to start practicing martial arts. This acted as an outlet for them to decompress and helped them understand that violence and aggression is not the answer." When asked what the role of parents in regulating their child's media exposure should be, 10 out of 11 interviewees agreed that open dialogue and conversation is the most effective way of breaching the gap between parents and children. The interviews underscored that parental mediation, through discussion, supervision, and structured alternatives, plays a crucial role in moderating the effects of media violence.

DISCUSSION

Mechanisms of Observational Learning in Children's Aggressive Behavior

The findings of this study are consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, according to which children learn and imitate behaviors through observation. Supporting later studies by Huesmann & Miller and Anderson Bushman, most mothers in this study perceived a clear link between exposure to violent media and the development of aggressive tendencies in

their children (1,10). Mothers frequently described their children as mirroring the attitudes and expressions of on-screen characters, aligning with Bandura's assertion that identification with media models increases the likelihood of imitation. The results are also corroborated by the findings of Bustamante et al., which demonstrate a correlation between screen time and the likelihood of children adopting aggressive behavior, suggesting that both the duration and nature of exposure contribute to behavioral outcomes (21). Specifically, interviewees established a link, noting that the longer children remain immersed in violent narratives, the more likely they are to internalize aggression. This finding might explain how violence becomes a normalized script for problem-solving or social dominance, thereby transforming passive observation into active behavioral modeling.

Beyond confirming the mechanism of observational learning, these findings help explain why violent media remains particularly influential during early and middle childhood. In Bandura's framework, learning depends on four key processes, namely attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (2). Mothers' accounts suggested that violent scenes command children's attention due to their sensory-intense nature, repeated exposure aids retention by reinforcing aggressive scripts, imitation of characters' actions demonstrates reproduction, and the reactions of peers provide motivation by rewarding such behaviors with laughter or recognition. Thus, children appear not as passive viewers but as active participants in a behavioral modeling process that goes beyond the screen into their daily interactions.

The findings also broaden the scope of existing theory by indicating that media violence operates interactively with the child's social environment. Mothers often attributed aggressive behaviors not solely to the content consumed, but also to how children shared and reenacted violent content with friends. This suggests that exposure to media violence functions as a social learning cue within groups of peers, where imitating aggression becomes mutually reinforced. Such observations align with extensions of the Social Learning framework that emphasize reciprocal determinism (22) that is, the continuous interaction between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. Nonetheless, these conclusions should be taken into consideration with caution as the study's small sample size and results indicate associations rather than definitive causations.

Gendered Interpretation of Violence

Gender emerged as a salient factor shaping how aggression was expressed rather than whether it occurred. Research conducted in terms of violent media content has shown that women mostly use verbal violence, whereas men use physical violence in response to violent media exposure (23). The findings of this study support that distinction. One possible explanation to the pattern in the present study, drawn from Bandura's framework of observational learning, is that children tend to identify with same-sex characters in media (15). Boys may therefore model the physical assertiveness or dominance displayed by male heroes, while girls may reproduce the verbal competitiveness of female characters. This mechanism of selective identification offers a psychological basis for the observed behavioral divergence.

An additional contributing factor concerns content preferences, which mothers consistently described as gendered. Such variation in media exposure may help explain why the aggressive style mirrors the nature of the content consumed. The data of the present study might suggest an indirect pathway: rather than gender itself determining type of aggression, media choices conditioned by gender norms channel children toward different types of modeling experiences.

At the same time, the findings highlight the importance of considering alternative explanations beyond modeling alone. Socialization processes and parental expectation bias may contribute to how parents perceive and report aggression. For instance, mothers may be more likely to interpret a boy's assertive behavior as physical aggression and a girl's outspoken behavior as verbal hostility, reflecting broader societal assumptions about gendered expression.

Implications and Future Research

The results of this study suggest that the relationship between violent media and children's aggression is interactive rather than linear, shaped by screen exposure, peer influence, and parental response. A primary implication of this study concerns the role of parental engagement. The mothers interviewed viewed open conversation and alternative activities as the most effective way to address media influence. Structured extracurricular activities, from sports to creative play, can redirect energy and provide non-aggressive avenues for expression. For instance, practicing martial arts was given as an example in interviews as an activity that can help children control their emotions and reduce

aggression by releasing energy. Such recreational activities can help in the regulation of aggressive behavior but can also help promote empathy and solidarity in children's social encounters, even proving more sustainable than strict screen-time limits (24).

For policymakers and educators, these findings point to the value of integrating media literacy with emotional education. Educational programs, the promotion of positive role models as well as content rating systems, are significant factors that empower children to critically analyze media content. These initiatives also educate them to question the motives and meanings behind portrayals and learn the consequences of violence (25-27). Thus, such education can decrease the likelihood of imitation of such behavior and thus mitigate the impact of media violence. Considering that parents have a profound impact on their children and may be the most influential factors in their lives, it is vital that they actively monitor and discuss the content their children are exposed to. This is a regulation strategy that seems to work for some interviewees. For instance, many of them mentioned co-viewing and having conversations about the often-unrealistic nature of media violence. This activity can help children understand the difference between fiction and reality. In the case that parents do not intervene, children can receive unfiltered messages that subconsciously influence their perception of violence and media.

Future research should build on these insights using larger, longitudinal samples to examine how aggressive behaviors evolve across developmental stages. Comparative studies across cultural contexts could clarify how differing expectations of parenting and gender norms influence both children's behavior and parental interpretation, without assuming universal patterns. For instance, this study's Greek cultural context and the inherent influence of traditional gender expectations may amplify these differences in perceived aggression. Mixed-method designs combining interviews, behavioral observation, and physiological measures would also help distinguish actual aggression from parental perception, providing a fuller picture of how social learning evolves in modern media environments.

Limitations

Due to ethical concerns, the interviews conducted were not with the target group, namely children, but rather with their mothers, affecting the reliability of the data on media violence exposure and aggression in children. Furthermore, other factors besides gender identity such as family environment, peer relationships, and individual differences have not been taken into consideration in this study but could affect the results. These external factors likely influence children's aggression and how they interact with media violence exposure. Identifying causal relationships between media violence and aggression can be difficult. This research cannot determine whether exposure promotes aggression or whether more aggressive children are drawn to violent content.

Further research using multi-informant, mixed method designs with clearer measures of media exposure is needed. Despite the fact that qualitative research is meaningful for in- depth data collection, there are numerous limitations (28). Findings obtained by a qualitative study cannot be generalized to other populations with the same certainty that quantitative research can because qualitative findings are not measured for statistical significance or the role of chance (28). Thus, whether such findings are representative across a wider population becomes questionable. The ambiguity of language can also affect the reliability of findings stemming from qualitative research. Since meanings often depend on context, certain phrases and words can be understood differently, introducing a degree of subjectivity, as researchers may interpret qualitative data based on their own perspectives (28).

CONCLUSION

Media violence is shown to influence children's behavior, with a particular emphasis on differences across the genders. Findings suggest that, while media violence is associated with increased aggressive behavior, there is a dimorphic response between genders. Data collected from the interviews lead to three fundamental conclusions. First, children have been heavily affected by media violence and have shown aggressive behaviors that can be correlated to their screen time. Second, the different content preferences across the two genders can lead to different types of aggressive reactions. Finally, regulation strategies by parents seemed to mitigate the effects of media violence and, when supplemented by proper education, may significantly alter children's aggressive behaviors.

In conclusion, examining the impact of media violence demands an approach involving parental control, education, positive role model portrayal, and encouragement of social engagement. Future research

should continue to explore these dynamics and use interventions to better support children's well-being in the digital world. This is even more significant nowadays that social media and the internet have replaced television in the exposure of violence. Future research should examine the long-term impact of exposure to media violence and the degree to which this may lead to an escalation of aggressive behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you for the guidance: Ms. Sasha C. Mejia-Bradford, mentor from the University of Pennsylvania and Ms. Sophie Dixon from the University of Cambridge.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

REFERENCES

1. Huesmann LR & Miller LS. Long-term effects of repeated exposure to media violence in childhood. In L. R. Huesmann (Ed.), Aggressive behavior: Current perspectives. *Plenum Press.* 1994; pp. 153–186. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4757-9116-7_7
2. Bandura A, Ross D & Ross SA. Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. 1961; 63 (3): 575. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045925
3. Fowers BJ & Richardson FC. Individualism and aggression: A hermeneutic analysis of Huesmann and Eron's cognitive theory of aggression. *Theory & Psychology.* 1993; 3 (3): 351–374. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354393033005
4. Hunter SC & Riggs DW. Men, Caregiving and the Media. *Routledge*. 2019. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429455476
5. Doyle JA. The Male Experience. Mc Graw-Hill Inc. 1989.
6. Tannen D. Gender and Conversational Interaction. *Oxford University Press*. 1993; pp.165-188.
7. Shields SA. Speaking from the heart: Gender and the social meaning of emotion. *Cambridge University Press*. 2002.
8. Rudman Laurie A, et al. Status Incongruity and Backlash Effects: Defending the Gender Hierarchy Motivates Prejudice against Female Leaders. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 2012; 48 (1): 165–79. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.10.008.
9. Signorielli Nancy. Children, Television, and Gender Roles. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*. 1990; 11 (1): 50–58. https://doi.org/10.1016/0197-0070(90)90129-p.
10. Anderson CA & Bushman BJ. The effects of media violence on society. *Science*. 2002; 295 (5564): 2377-2379. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1070765
11. Mann S, Calvin A, Lenhart A, and Robb MB. The Commonsense census: Media use by kids zero to eight, 2025. *San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media*. 2025.
12. Nemours Kids Health. (2022). How media use affects your child. https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/tv-affects-child.html. (accessed on 2025-7-13)
13. Bandura A, Ross D & Ross SA. Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. 1961; 63 (3): 575. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045925
14. Norfleet F. How theory and research are connected: Bandura's Bobo Doll Experiment. FB Norfleet Publishing. Retrieved from ResearchGate. 2020, March 15.
15. Huesmann, et al. Longitudinal relations between children's exposure to TV violence and their aggressive and violent behavior in young adulthood: 1977–1992. *Developmental Psychology*. 2003; 39 (2): 201-221. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.39.2.201
16. Bushman BJ & Huesmann LR. Short-term and long-term effects of televised violence on aggression in children and adults. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine.* 2006; 160 (4): 348–352. https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.160.4.348
17. Anderson CA & Dill KE. Video games and aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior in the laboratory and in life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2000; 78 (4): 772-790. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.78.4.772
18. Hartmann T, Möller I & Krause C. Factors underlying male and female use of violent video games. *New Media & Society*. 2014; 17 (11): 1777–1794. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814533067
19. Kvale S. Doing interviews. Sage Publications-Ltd. 2007. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208963.
20. Stamou AG, Maroniti K & Schizas D. Greek young children's engagement with media in the home: Parents' and children's perspectives. *Studies in Media and Communication.* 2014; 2 (2): 92–104. https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v2i2.572
21. Bustamante JC, et al. Relation between executive functions and screen time exposure in under 6-year-olds: A meta-analysis. *Computers in Human Behavior.* 2023; 145: 107739. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107739

22. American Psychological Association. (n.d.-a). Apa PsycNet. American Psychological Association. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1979-08427-001)
23. Hess NH & Hagen EH. Sex differences in indirect aggression. *Evolution and Human Behavior*. 2006; 27 (3): 231–245. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2005.11.001
24. Teques AP, de Oliveira RF, Bednarikova M, Bertollo M, et al. Social and Emotional Skills in at-Risk Adolescents through Participation in Sports. *Sports (Basel, Switzerland).* 2024; 12 (7): 181. https://doi.org/10.3390/sports12070181
25. Media Literacy Education Can Effectively Combat Media Violence (From Violence in the Media, P 127-129, 1995, Carol Wekesser, ed. -- See NCJ-160238) | Office of Justice Programs. (n.d.). https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/media-literacy-education-can-effectively-combat-media-violence. (accessed on 2025-7-13).
26. Hoffner C & Buchanan M. Young adults' wishful identification with television characters: The role of perceived similarity and character attributes. *Media Psychology*. 2005; 7 (4): 325–351. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0704_2
27. Gentile DA, Lynch PJ, Linder JR & Walsh DA. The effects of violent video game habits on adolescent hostility, aggressive behaviors, and school performance. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2004; 27 (1): 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2003.10.002
28. Atieno W. An analysis of the strengths and limitation of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. Problems of Education in the 21st Century. 2009; 13: 13–18. https://scientiasocialis.lt/pec/files/pdf/Atieno_Vol.13.pdf

APPENDIX

These were the interview questions that I asked my participants.

Screen time:
- How many hours of screen time does your child have each day for different types of media (e.g., TV, tablet, video games)?

Content and Genre:
- What types of shows or genres does your child prefer to watch?
- Do you notice a preference for violent or aggressive content in the shows/games they choose?

Devices:
- What devices does your child commonly use for entertainment?

Observed Behavior:
- Have you observed any changes in your child's behavior that you believe might be influenced by their media consumption? Can you provide specific examples?

Parental Role:
- What do you believe should be the role of parents in regulating their child's media exposure?

Parental Oversight:
- Do you actively oversee or monitor your child's media activities? If so, how?

Imitation of Media Characters:
- Have you noticed your child imitating behaviors or actions of characters from the media? If yes, could you describe these instances?

Media Influence on Aggression:
- Have you noticed any specific aggressive behaviors that seem to occur after your child has been exposed to violent media content?

Gender Differences (only for mothers with a boy and a girl):
- Have you observed any differences in how your son and daughter respond to the same media content, particularly in terms of aggressive behavior?

Content Comparison (only for mothers with a boy and a girl):
- How does the content your daughter watches differ from what your son watches? Do you see any variations in their preferences for violent or non-violent content?

Behavior Comparison (only for mothers with a boy and a girl):
- Can you compare the frequency and intensity of aggressive behaviors in your son and daughter? Do you notice any patterns or differences based on the type of media they consume?

Parental Concerns:
- What concerns do you have about the impact of media violence on your child's behavior?

Media Regulation Strategies:
- What strategies do you employ to regulate or control your child's exposure to media violence?