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Cartoon Violence in YouTube Shorts: A Qualitative Content Analysis on Children's Potential Imitation of Violent Behavior

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Abstract

Background: YouTube Shorts has rapidly become one of the most consumed digital formats among children due to its short duration, fast-paced visual stimuli, and algorithm-driven recommendations. While these characteristics make Shorts highly engaging, they also increase the risk of repeated exposure to violent cartoon content, which may influence children's behavior through imitation and desensitization.
Aims: This study aims to identify the forms of violence present in popular YouTube Shorts cartoons and analyze their potential to be imitated by early childhood–aged children, as well as examine the role of YouTube's algorithm in reinforcing repeated exposure.
Method: A qualitative content analysis approach was employed to examine 90 YouTube Shorts videos selected through purposive sampling from three popular categories: *Roblox* animations, Squid Game parody animations, and *Tung-Tung Sahur* meme-style animations. Each video was coded based on indicators of physical, symbolic, and verbal violence.
Results: All analyzed videos contained recurrent violent cues, with physical chasing sequences accounting for 32%, symbolic harm for 29%, threat-based elimination for 21%, and verbal aggression for 18%. These elements were often presented humorously or as challenges, increasing their likelihood of being imitated by children. Algorithmic reinforcement further intensified exposure by repeatedly recommending similar content, contributing to desensitization and the strengthening of aggressive behavioral scripts.
Conclusion: The findings indicate that YouTube Shorts cartoons contribute to the development of aggressive tendencies in young viewers through repeated portrayals of violence. The study underscores the need for stronger parental mediation, improved platform moderation, and digital literacy education. Future research should include larger samples and cross-platform analyses to better understand long-term behavioral impacts.

A. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital platforms has significantly transformed children's media consumption patterns, with YouTube Shorts emerging as one of the most dominant formats among early childhood audiences (Alieksieienko, 2025; Renés-arellano et al., 2022). The short duration, fast-paced editing style, and visually stimulating presentation of YouTube Shorts make the format particularly appealing to young viewers who are drawn to quick, entertaining content (Rajendran et al., 2024; Yifei, 2024). However, this appeal also

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carries potential risks. Previous studies consistently show that repeated exposure to media violence can increase aggressive tendencies in children and weaken their ability to distinguish between fictional portrayals and real-world consequences. These effects become even more concerning in contexts where children have easy and often unsupervised access to digital platforms. In Indonesia, children's media consumption continues to rise sharply, with YouTube serving as a primary source of entertainment and information (Imaniah et al., 2020; Simanjuntak et al., 2023; Zubaidi, 2024). Many children access YouTube content without adequate parental guidance, increasing the likelihood of exposure to inappropriate or harmful material (Alqahtani et al., 2023; Garlen & Hembruff, 2021; Saleem, 2022). This trend underscores the urgency of studying how emerging digital formats shape children's perceptions and behaviors (Ali & Pasha, 2024; Isteniˇ et al., 2023; Li, 2025).

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), as discussed by Firmansyah & Saepuloh (2022), explains that children acquire behaviors by observing and imitating models they find appealing, entertaining, or influential. In the context of digital media, cartoon characters often serve as powerful models because their exaggerated actions, lively expressions, and humorous scenarios capture children's attention (Ashari et al., 2025; Sheikh et al., 2023; Sobkin et al., 2024). When violence is portrayed as comedy or framed as part of a playful narrative, it can normalize harmful behaviors and make them seem acceptable, harmless, or even fun to imitate. This effect is heightened in short-form videos, where aggressive actions are presented rapidly and repeatedly without moral context or consequences. A substantial body of research supports these concerns, with studies demonstrating that exposure to media violence increases children's likelihood of displaying aggressive thoughts and behaviors. Similarly, repeated viewing of violent content contributes to desensitization, reducing emotional responsiveness to real-life harm. Children who frequently watch violent cartoons tend to exhibit lower empathy and a greater propensity to replicate aggressive conduct. Together, these studies highlight the strong influence of media violence on children's behavioral development and emotional regulation.

Although previous researches have explored violent content in traditional television cartoons and long-form YouTube videos, there remains limited scholarly attention on violence within short-form formats like YouTube Shorts, which rely heavily on algorithmic recommendations. This gap is significant because short-form videos are consumed more frequently and at a rapid pace, creating strong behavioral imprinting through rapid, repeated exposure to violent cues. Recent studies indicate that algorithm-driven platforms significantly amplify children's exposure to specific patterns of content, particularly those designed to maximize engagement. Short-form videos heighten this effect because their rapid scene changes, exaggerated audio effects, and instant emotional stimuli make them highly captivating and easily consumed in large quantities. The speed and intensity of these videos leave little room for reflection, increasing the likelihood that children absorb and internalize aggressive or sensationalized behaviors presented to them. Papadamou et al. (2020) further demonstrate the risks of this algorithmic amplification, finding that within just ten recommended clicks, children have a 3.5% chance of encountering disturbing or violent content even when starting from a video deemed child-friendly. This means that exposure to harmful content is not solely the result of direct searches but is also driven by the platform's automated recommendation system, which may unintentionally guide young viewers toward increasingly inappropriate material.

Algorithmic systems on platforms such as YouTube Shorts prioritize user engagement, which causes children to be funneled into loops of similar content once they view a single violent clip (Cakmak et al., 2025; Dagtas et al., 2025; Starks & Reich, 2024). This engagement-driven mechanism creates an echo chamber in which violent themes are repeatedly reinforced, gradually normalizing aggression within the child's viewing experience. As Bishop (2019) notes, such algorithmic filtering reduces exposure to non-violent or educational alternatives, thereby increasing the risk that children will internalize aggressive behaviors and accept them as part of everyday entertainment.

This study aims to identify and categorize the various forms of violence present in popular YouTube Shorts cartoons, analyze the extent to which these violent actions may be imitated by children, and examine how YouTube's algorithm reinforces repeated exposure to such content. By addressing these objectives, the study contributes valuable insights that can inform the development of digital media safety policies for children, strengthen parental mediation strategies, and support the advancement of media literacy programs that help young audiences critically interpret and navigate online content

B. Research Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to systematically examine violent cues embedded within YouTube Shorts cartoons. This method was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of both explicit acts of aggression and more subtle, symbolic forms of violence that may not be immediately apparent to casual viewers. By focusing on short-form audiovisual content, qualitative content analysis provides a structured way to identify, classify, and interpret recurring violent themes, allowing the researcher to uncover patterns and meanings that shape how children may perceive and internalize violent behavior.

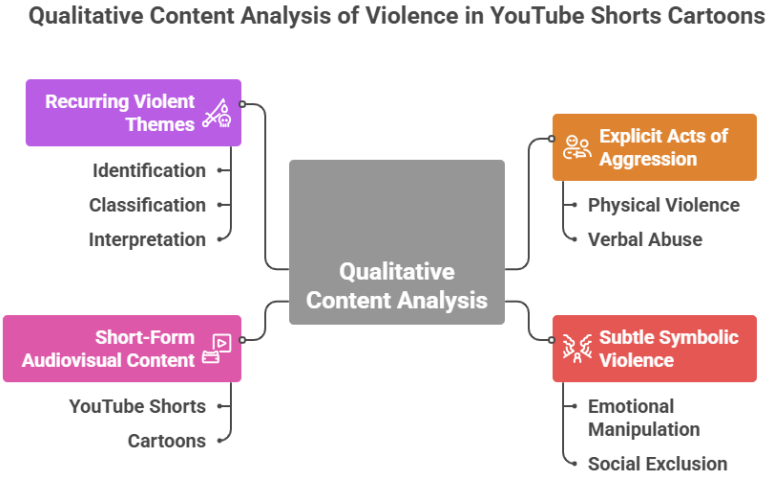

Figure 1. Qualitative Content Analysis Design

Sample and Data Collection

A total of 90 YouTube Shorts videos were selected through purposive sampling based on four criteria: the videos had to be categorized as children's animation or cartoons, have a minimum of 100,000 views to ensure popularity, be uploaded between June and August 2024, and contain elements suspected of depicting violence. To provide balanced coverage across different content types, the sample was divided into three categories, each consisting of 30 videos: *Roblox*-based animations, Squid Game parody animations, and *Tung-Tung Sahur* or similar meme-style animations. This sampling strategy allowed the study to capture a diverse yet representative range of short-form animated content commonly viewed by children on the platform.

Unit of Analysis and Coding Procedure

The unit of analysis in this study consisted of individual scenes or visual actions, resulting in a total of 394 analyzed scenes across all selected videos. These scenes were coded according to four primary categories of violent content: physical violence, which included actions such as hitting, chasing, and falling as a result of aggression; symbolic violence, such as cutting objects resembling bodies, the use of needles, or exaggerated blood visuals for comedic effect; verbal violence, including mocking, shouting, or threatening expressions; and psychological horror cues, such as jump scares or distorted, creepy faces. To ensure coding accuracy, two independent coders analyzed all scenes using the same coding framework. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a value of 0.81, which indicates a strong level of agreement and supports the consistency and reliability of the coding procedure.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved several systematic steps to ensure accurate interpretation of violent content within YouTube Shorts. First, each video was examined through scene identification to isolate specific moments depicting aggressive actions or cues. These scenes were then categorized into predefined types of violence, such as physical, symbolic, verbal, or psychological. After categorization, frequency calculations were conducted to determine how often each type of violence appeared across the data-set. Finally, the findings were interpreted using established theoretical frameworks: Social Learning Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Desensitization Theory to understand how repeated exposure may shape children's behavioral scripts, perceptions of violence, and emotional sensitivity.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

Table 1. Frequency of Violence in the Sampled Content

Type of Violence	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
Physical	126	32%	Chasing, pushing, falling from heights
Symbolic	113	29%	Cutting wood like a body, large needles, blood splashes
Threat-Based	82	21%	"Elimination" scenes (Squid Game parody)
Verbal Aggression	73	18%	Mocking, shouting, taunting

All 90 videos contained at least one form of violence.

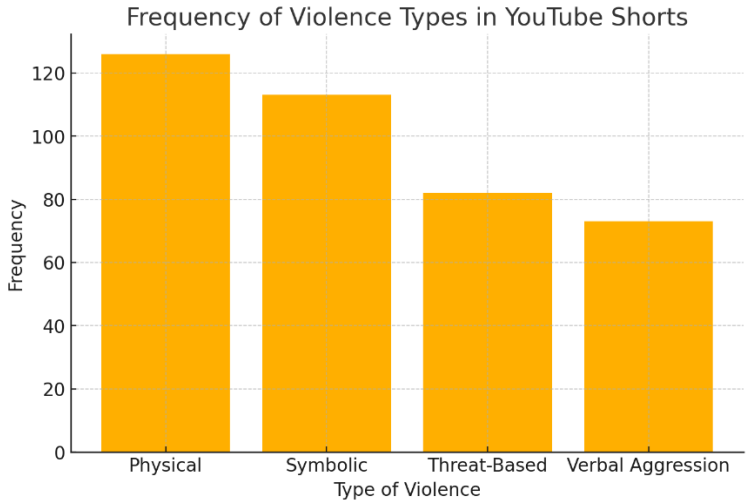

Figure 2. Frequency of Violence

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of violence types found in the analyzed YouTube Shorts content. Physical violence appears most frequently, with 126 occurrences, followed by symbolic violence with 113 instances. Threat-based violence is recorded 82 times, while verbal aggression has the lowest frequency at 73 occurrences. This pattern indicates that physical and symbolic forms of violence dominate short-form animated content, making them more prominent and potentially more imitable for young viewers.

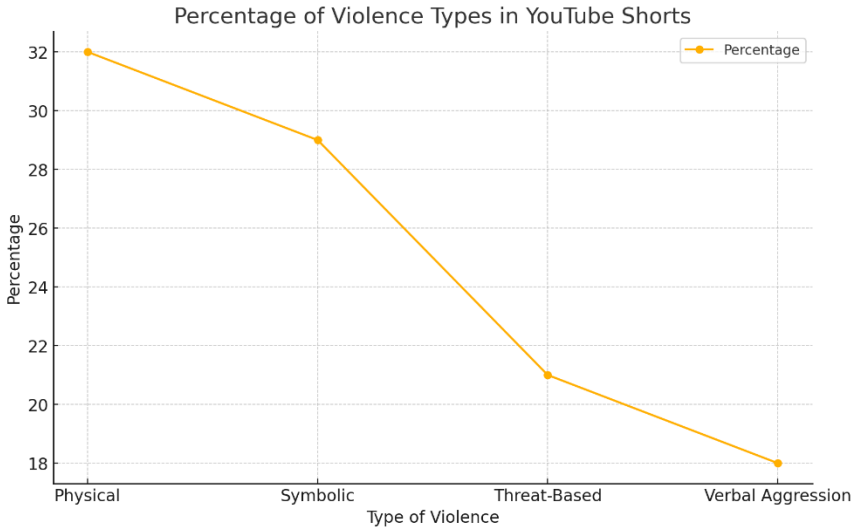

Figure 3. Percentage of Violence Type in YouTube Shorts

Figure 3 presents the percentage distribution of each type of violence, revealing a consistent downward trend from physical to verbal aggression. Physical violence accounts for 32% of all recorded instances,

symbolic violence for 29%, threat-based violence for 21%, and verbal aggression for 18%. This declining pattern shows that although all forms of violence are present, physical and symbolic violence constitute the largest share of the content. The trend highlights how YouTube Shorts tend to emphasize fast-paced, visually impact forms of aggression within a short viewing duration.

Table 2 below presents an overview of four popular categories of YouTube Shorts content and the types of violence they display, along with the potential for children to imitate these behaviors. *Roblox*-themed animations exhibit a range of physical violence, including chasing, scaring, pushing, and dropping characters from significant heights. These actions are highly imitable because they closely resemble common forms of physical play among children. Similarly, *Squid Game* parody animations display threatening behavior, creepy stalling scenes, and elimination-style violence, all of which have a high likelihood of being reenacted by young viewers due to their dramatic and competitive nature. *Tung-Tung Sahur* animations demonstrate a combination of symbolic and physical violence, such as cutting, piercing, injecting, and mocking, resulting in a medium-to-high imitation risk. These scenes often involve exaggerated actions that may encourage children to mimic them playfully without understanding their harmful implications. Meanwhile, *Horror Meme/Parody* content contains disturbing visual elements including blood, dismembered bodies, and frightening faces. Despite being stylized, such scenes present a high imitation risk because children may replicate fear-inducing behaviors or incorporate horror-based actions into their play. Overall, the table highlights that all four content categories contain violence with varying degrees of imitation potential, with physical and horror-based visuals posing the highest risks.

Table 2. Classification and Description of Violence Based on Impression Examples

No	Impressions	Forms of Violence Displayed	Potential to be imitated by children	Example Action/Visualization
1	Roblox	Chasing, scare, pushing, dropping	High	Character chased by monsters, dropped from high places, or struck
2	Squid Game	Threats, creepy pauses, physical elimination	High	Puppet shooting or cornering moving characters
3	Tung-Tung Sahur	Cutting, piercing, injecting, mutilation, mocking	Medium-High	Scenes of wood being cut, injections, or rough treatment
4	Horror Meme/Parody	Creepy scenes, sadistic apparitions, extreme fear	High	Characters shown with blood, dismemberment, or spooky faces

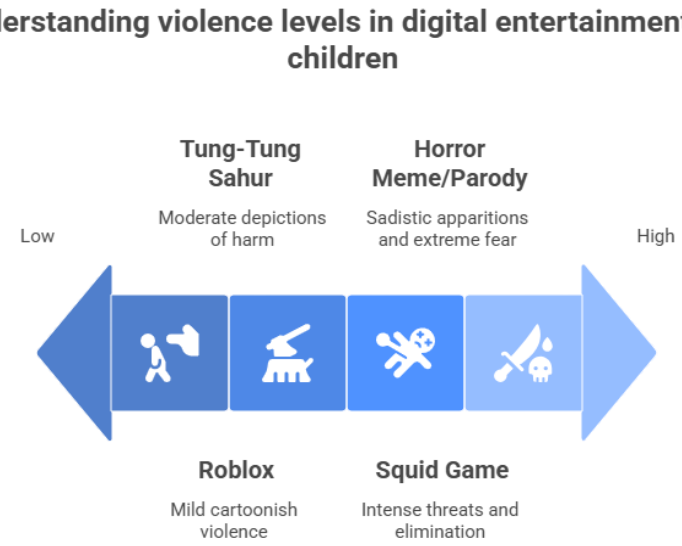

Figure 3. Understanding Violence Levels in Digital Entertainment for Children

The data presented in the table were obtained from two primary sources. First, observational data were collected through qualitative content analysis of selected YouTube Shorts videos, which served as the main source for identifying forms of violence and their visual representations. Second, supporting insights were gathered through interviews with key informants, including parents *(wali murid)* and a professional psychologist. These interviews provided contextual understanding regarding children's tendencies to imitate violent behaviors and how such contents influence emotional and behavioral responses. The combination of video analysis and stakeholder interviews strengthens the validity of the findings by integrating both media-based evidence and real-world observations from individuals directly involved in children's daily behavior and development.

Thematic Findings

Theme 1: Violence as Humor or Challenge

Many YouTube Shorts present violent actions in a comedic or playful manner, which significantly increases the likelihood of imitation among young viewers. When aggression is framed as humor, children are more inclined to interpret these behaviors as entertaining rather than harmful, blurring the line between acceptable play and dangerous actions. This comedic framing reduces children's awareness of potential risks and consequences, making them more prone to replicate the violent behaviors they observe in real-life interactions with peers.

Theme 2: Reinforcement through Repetition

Characters in these animations frequently revive or return unharmed after experiencing severe physical harm, creating the misleading impression that violent acts carry no real consequences. This repeated portrayal diminishes the perceived seriousness of aggression and can lead children to believe that dangerous behaviors are harmless or easily reversible. As a result, young viewers may develop distorted expectations about the outcomes of violence in real-life situations, increasing the likelihood that they will imitate such actions without understanding the potential risks or harm involved.

Theme 3: Algorithm-Driven Exposure

Once a child views a single violent clip, the platform's recommendation system immediately interprets this as a signal of interest and responds by pushing a continuous stream of similar videos, thereby intensifying the child's exposure to violent content. This automated mechanism narrows the diversity of materials available on the child's feed and rapidly creates a viewing pattern dominated by repetitive aggressive themes. Rather than allowing accidental or isolated encounters with violent content, the algorithm reinforces and amplifies these exposures, making it increasingly difficult for children to avoid such videos and heightening the risk of normalization and imitation of aggressive behavior.

Theme 4: High Imitation Risk

Observations from this study indicate that children frequently imitate behaviors depicted in YouTube Shorts, such as chasing games, "elimination" role-play, fake stabbing or injection gestures, and various forms of mocking expressions. These imitative actions emerge because the violent cues in short-form videos are often presented as humorous, exciting, or socially rewarding. When violence is framed as entertainment, children are more likely to replicate it in their daily interactions without fully understanding the potential harm or social consequences. These patterns of imitation strongly align with Bandura's concept of behavioral modeling, which posits that children learn and reproduce behaviors by observing models they perceive as engaging or influential. In the context of YouTube Shorts, animated characters and exaggerated scenarios serve as powerful models that children view repeatedly through rapid, algorithm-driven exposure. As a result, children internalize these aggressive scripts and incorporate them into their play and communication, reinforcing the link between media violence and real-world behavioral imitation.

2. Discussion

2.1 Violence in Shorts and Behavioral Modeling

The findings of this study confirm that repeated exposure to short-form violent cues significantly strengthens children's aggressive behavioral scripts. Unlike traditional long-form media, which often provides narrative context, moral lessons, or consequences for harmful actions, YouTube Shorts compress violent acts into rapid, high-impact visual bursts. This condensed format intensifies the salience of aggression, making violent behaviors more memorable and emotionally stimulating. As children encounter these cues repeatedly within a short time-frame, the likelihood of internalizing and normalizing aggressive

patterns increases substantially. Moreover, the micro-format of Shorts aligns closely with Bandura's theory of observational learning, in which children imitate behaviors displayed by models they perceive as entertaining, powerful, or rewarded (Fuente et al., 2023; Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022). Because many Shorts portray violent actions as humorous, heroic, or devoid of negative consequences, children are more inclined to replicate what they see. The absence of contextual framing further accelerates imitation, as young viewers are left without guidance on evaluating or questioning the appropriateness of such behaviors. Collectively, these factors make short-form violent content uniquely potent in shaping children's perceptions and increasing their propensity to imitate aggressive actions.

2.2 Desensitization and Emotional Numbing

Symbolic violence such as exaggerated gore, cutting scenes, or humor involving mutilation plays a subtle yet powerful role in shaping children's emotional responses to harm. Although these depictions may appear less explicit than direct physical violence, their stylized and often comedic presentation can gradually reduce children's sensitivity to real-life pain and suffering. When such imagery is repeatedly consumed, especially in short-form videos that prioritize rapid and sensational visual impact, children may begin to perceive harmful actions as amusing or inconsequential. This distortion of reality weakens their ability to recognize violence as something serious or morally problematic. Continuous exposure to symbolic violence contributes to the process of desensitization, where emotional responsiveness to aggression becomes diminished (Hermawan et al., 2025). As empathy decreases, children may show a greater tolerance for harmful behaviors and a higher likelihood of accepting aggression as a normal part of social interaction. Over time, this reduced emotional reactivity can influence not only how children interpret media content, but also how they behave toward peers in real-world settings.

2.3 Algorithmic Amplification and Risk of Echo Chambers

The algorithmic structure of YouTube Shorts plays a crucial role in amplifying children's exposure to violent content by pushing them into repetitive cycles of similar videos. Once a child interacts with a single violent clip, whether through viewing, liking, or even pausing the recommendation system interprets this as user interest and responds by displaying more content with comparable themes. This mechanism gradually narrows the range of media the child encounters, creating a viewing environment saturated with violence and limiting opportunities for exposure to non-aggressive or educational alternatives. This pattern aligns with the "positive feedback loop" described by Papadamou et al. (2020), in which algorithmic recommendations reinforce and intensify the very behaviors they detect. As a result, exposure to violent content becomes not incidental but systematically sustained by the platform's engagement-driven design. Over time, this feedback loop increases the likelihood that children will repeatedly encounter violent imagery, heightening the risks of normalization, imitation, and desensitization.

2.4 Why Shorts Are More Dangerous than Traditional Cartoons

YouTube Shorts pose greater risks to children compared to traditional cartoons due to their ability to stimulate rapid dopamine responses through fast-paced, visually intense content (Idyan, 2025). This phenomenon, often described as "popcorn brain" conditions children to seek constant instant gratification, reducing their patience, impulse control, and attention span. The ultra-short format also enables a higher frequency of repeated violent cues per minute, making aggressive actions more salient and memorable. Without adequate time for reflection, children are more likely to internalize and imitate these behaviors. Additionally, Shorts often lack contextual narrative or moral framing typically found in traditional cartoons, where story-lines provide explanations, consequences, or lessons. Instead, violence in Shorts is commonly presented as humor, challenge, or spectacle, making it appear harmless and entertaining. The rapid auto-play feature further accelerates exposure, encouraging binge consumption that reinforces aggressive behavioral scripts. These combined factors make short-form content uniquely potent in shaping children's perceptions of violence and increasing imitation risks.

2.5 Implications

The findings of this study underscore the importance of strong collaboration between parents and educators in reducing children's exposure to violent content on YouTube Shorts. Parents play a crucial role by practicing active co-viewing, managing screen time effectively, and discussing the differences between fictional portrayals and real-world consequences. At the same time, educators are encouraged to integrate digital literacy and empathy-building activities into learning environments, while also addressing bullying behaviors that may emerge as a result of imitating digital content. Together, parents and educators help shape children's understanding so that violence is not perceived as harmless entertainment. Digital

platforms such as YouTube also hold significant responsibility for creating a safer viewing ecosystem for young audiences. This includes strengthening automated detection of violent scenes, improving child-friendly content recommendation filters, and enforcing clearer and more consistent age-restriction labels. Collaboration among families, educational institutions, and platform providers is essential to minimize the risks of digital violence exposure and reduce the likelihood of imitative aggressive behavior in children.

2.6 Research Contribution

This study provides several notable research contributions. It advances scholarly understanding by illustrating how short-form, algorithm-driven content creates unique exposure patterns that differ markedly from traditional television or long-form digital media. By identifying the interaction between explicit violence, symbolic aggression, and psychological cues embedded in rapid audiovisual formats, this study expands the conceptualization of violence in the contemporary digital environment. Methodologically, it demonstrates the usefulness of qualitative content analysis in ultra-short media formats that are often overlooked in academic literature due to their fast-paced and fragmented structure. The study also proposes an integrated explanatory framework, combining role internalization, desensitization, and algorithmic reinforcement to explain why young children are particularly susceptible to imitating violent behaviors depicted in such content. Finally, these findings offer a foundational empirical basis for future research on digital risk exposure in early childhood, providing initial evidence to inform longitudinal studies, cross-platform comparisons, and the development of child-focused digital safety policies.

2.7 Limitations

This study is limited by its relatively small sample size of 90 videos, which may not fully represent the vast and continuously evolving landscape of YouTube Shorts content. The analysis also focuses primarily on short-term behavioral indicators, making it difficult to draw conclusions about long-term developmental effects. Moreover, because the study examines only one platform, YouTube Shorts, the findings may not generalize across other short-form video platforms. A broader comparison involving TikTok, Instagram Reels, and similar services is needed to better understand the cross-platform dynamics of violent content exposure.

2.8 Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions can be proposed. Parents are encouraged to practice active co-viewing, regulate screen time, and engage in reflective discussions with children to strengthen their ability to differentiate between fictional content and real-world risks. Schools should integrate digital literacy and emotional regulation programs into learning activities to equip children with critical thinking skills when interacting with digital media. Digital platforms must prioritize child safety by enhancing automated detection of violent imagery, refining algorithmic recommendation pathways, and developing stricter child-friendly modes for short-form content. Future research is advised to expand the scope of analysis to multiple platforms, involve larger and more diverse participant groups, and employ longitudinal designs to evaluate long-term behavioral and psychological impacts. Through collaborative efforts among families, schools, researchers, and digital platforms, a safer and more constructive digital ecosystem for children can be achieved.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that YouTube Shorts cartoons contain pervasive forms of physical, symbolic, and verbal violence that pose a significant risk of imitation among young viewers. The rapid, visually intense nature of short-form videos, combined with algorithmic reinforcement, causes violent acts to seem normal and entertaining. As a result, children are repeatedly exposed to aggressive cues that can shape their behavioral scripts, weaken their ability to distinguish between play and harm, and gradually reduce their empathetic responses toward others. Given these risks, proactive intervention is essential. Parental mediation plays a critical role in helping children interpret and contextualize violent content, while digital literacy education can equip them with the cognitive skills needed to evaluate media messages responsibly. At the same time, digital platforms must strengthen their moderation systems and implement stricter safeguards to limit children's exposure to harmful content. Through combined efforts involving families, educators, and platform providers, it is possible to mitigate the negative impacts of violent digital content and promote a safer media environment for children.

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F. Author Contribution Statement

M.A. developed the theoretical formalism, performed the analytic calculations. Both S.A. and L.A. contributed to the final version of the manuscript. Y.R. supervised the project.

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