Violent Video Games and the Perception of Aggressiveness in Children: An Exploratory Study Considering the Proposed Tax in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how violent video games influence the perception of aggressiveness among Mexican children in the context of the Mexican government's 2025 proposal to impose a Special Tax on Production and Services (IEPS) on games deemed violent or for adults. The research adopts a qualitative, exploratory design with semi-structured interviews conducted among six boys aged 10 to 12. The analysis seeks to understand children's interpretations, emotional responses, and moral reflections derived from exposure to violent gaming content. Findings suggest that while participants recognize fictional violence as part of gameplay, repetitive exposure may normalize aggression and reduce emotional sensitivity to violence. However, results also highlight the mediating influence of parental guidance, social context, and emotional regulation. The study contributes to an ongoing debate on the ethical, educational, and policy implications of violent content in interactive digital media.

Keywords: violent video games, child aggression, perception, qualitative research, Mexico, digital media, public policy
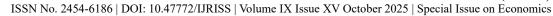
INTRODUCTION

The initiative presented by the Mexican government under President Claudia Sheinbaum in 2025 to apply an 8% Special Tax on Production and Services (IEPS) to video games considered violent, extreme, or adult-oriented reignited a longstanding public debate. This fiscal proposal, justified on grounds of national security and social well-being, does not aim to ban such games but to encourage responsible parental supervision and promote awareness of the content consumed by minors.

The discussion surrounding video games and violence is not new. Since the late 1990s, following tragic events such as the Columbine High School massacre, digital games have frequently been cited as contributing factors to aggressive behavior in youth. Yet, decades of research have failed to establish a clear causal relationship between violent gameplay and real-world violence. Much of the existing evidence points instead to complex, multifactorial interactions involving personality, family environment, and emotional regulation.

Within this context, the present study seeks to examine how children between the ages of 10 and 12 perceive and interpret violence in the video games they play. The focus is not merely on behavioral outcomes but on how children make sense of what they see, feel, and learn from these digital experiences. By privileging children's voices through qualitative inquiry, this research provides a grounded perspective that complements the predominantly quantitative literature on the topic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship between violent video games and aggressive behavior has been extensively studied, yet it remains one of the most contentious areas in media psychology. Balerdi (2011)) asserts that evidence suggests correlations between exposure to violent content and increases in aggressive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Similarly, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2005) identified five domains potentially affected by

such exposure: aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, anger, reduced prosocial conduct, and heightened physiological arousal.

Nonetheless, subsequent reviews have called these conclusions into question. García Cernaz (2018), for instance, highlighted methodological inconsistencies in early research, particularly concerning how "aggression" was measured. Ferguson (2013), cited by García Cernaz, criticized operational definitions that equated trivial laboratory tasks (such as filling in word fragments or measuring transient physiological responses) with genuine violent tendencies. Such limitations weaken causal claims and underscore the need for more ecologically valid approaches.

Later studies introduced moderating and mediating variables that complicate simplistic cause-effect assumptions. De la Torre-Luque and Valero-Aguayo (2013) identified emotional state, social environment, and personality as crucial moderators of post-exposure aggression. Unsworth, Devilly, and Ward (2007), also cited by García Cernaz, found that exposure to violent content could either increase, decrease, or have no impact on aggressiveness, depending on individual predispositions.

Dorantes Argandar (2017) examined the specific context of driving aggression among young adults and found no significant relationship between violent video game use and real-life driving behavior. However, he observed that prolonged exposure could shape one's perception of violence, suggesting that normalization rather than imitation might be the key effect.

Spanish-speaking researchers have provided further nuance. Lemos and Espinosa (2015) analyzed adolescents' aggression, cognition, and emotional states, finding moderate associations but emphasizing multicausality. Toribio (2019) acknowledged the coexistence of contradictory findings, arguing that methodological diversity partly explains the field's persistent lack of consensus.

Salazar Oré (2014) expanded the debate by comparing violent and prosocial games, concluding that games promoting cooperation and empathy can foster prosocial behavior. Pérez-Sánchez, Giusti-Mora, and SotoChavarría (2020) also found that the social dimension of gaming—playing collaboratively or competitively— significantly alters psychological outcomes.

Gender differences have likewise been documented. Euan, Quijano, Delgado, and Herrera (2020) observed that boys exhibit higher exposure to violent games than girls. Silva Trujillo (2024) proposed competitiveness as a mediating variable linking game violence and aggression among Peruvian players, adding further nuance to behavioral models.
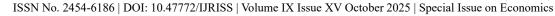
Fontan Franganillo (2023) examined potential links between violent gaming and suicidal ideation, concluding that such effects are indirect and heavily moderated by preexisting psychosocial risk factors. Vásquez (2019) contributed a philosophical lens, framing gameplay as a performative ethical act that compels players to engage in moral decision-making.

Carrasco (2023) introduced a motivational theory explaining why players are drawn to violent games, reframing the issue around desire rather than consequence. Meanwhile, Padilla, Morales, Luévano, and Mercado (2020) explored mental health implications among Mexican university students, calling for longitudinal studies to assess the persistence of observed effects.

Finally, De Miguel Pascual (2006) provided a historical synthesis, tracing the evolution of theoretical models from behaviorism to social-cognitive frameworks, while Carrillo and Esparell (2009) explored educational implications, questioning how schools can foster a culture of peace amid contradictory media influences.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative and exploratory design, appropriate for addressing complex social and psychological phenomena that cannot be fully captured through numerical indicators. Rather than testing hypotheses, the study aimed to understand meanings, emotions, and cognitive processes that children associate

with their experience of violent video games.

The interpretative paradigm guided this study, emphasizing the construction of subjective meanings rather than seeking causal generalizations. This approach aligns with Creswell's (2014) and Hernández Sampieri's (2022) conceptualization of qualitative inquiry as a systematic, inductive, and flexible process that privileges participants' voices and contextual understanding.

Participants

The participants were six male students between the ages of 10 and 12, all enrolled in a public secondary school in central Mexico. Their selection followed a non-probabilistic convenience sampling procedure, focusing on accessibility and the participants' regular engagement with video games featuring violent content (e.g., *Call of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Fortnite*, *Mortal Kombat*).

Parental consent and child assent were obtained prior to data collection, following ethical research guidelines for studies involving minors. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality.

Each participant was briefly profiled as follows:

Pseudonym	Age	Most Frequently Played Games	Average Daily Playtime	Preferred Device
Miguel	10	Fortnite, Minecraft, Call of Duty: Mobile	2 hours	Tablet
Ricardo	11	Grand Theft Auto V, Free Fire	3 hours	Smartphone
José	12	Call of Duty, Mortal Kombat	2.5 hours	PlayStation
Luis	10	Roblox, Fortnite	1.5 hours	Tablet
Andrés	11	GTA V, Red Dead Redemption II	3 hours	Console
Diego	12	PUBG, Resident Evil 4 Remake	3 hours	Console

Data Collection

Data was gathered in September 2025 through semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 25 and 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted individually in a quiet and familiar setting within the participants' school to ensure comfort and minimize social desirability bias.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions focused on the following thematic axes:

1. Game selection and preferences – What motivates the child to play certain games?

2. Exposure to violent content – What types of violence do they encounter, and how do they describe it?
3. Emotional and moral reactions – How do they feel during and after gameplay?

4. Social influence and context – How do peers, parents, and media shape their interpretations?

5. Perception of reality versus fiction – How do they distinguish between virtual and real aggression?

Interviews were audio-recorded with parental consent and later transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of inductive thematic analysis. The steps included:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.

2. Initial coding, identifying recurrent words, phrases, and ideas.

3. Theme generation, grouping codes into conceptual clusters related to aggression, morality, empathy, and fantasy-reality distinction.

4. Theme refinement to ensure internal coherence and mutual exclusivity.

5. Interpretation, integrating themes with existing theoretical frameworks from media psychology and moral development.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

• Credibility: Member checks with participants to validate interpretations.

• Transferability: Rich contextual description to enable analytical generalization.

• Dependability and Confirmability: Peer debriefing and audit trail documentation.

Ethical Considerations

Given the involvement of minors, ethical rigor was paramount. The study adhered to the principles of the Belmont Report (1979) — *Respect for persons, Beneficence,* and *Justice*. Parents provided written informed consent, and participants granted verbal assent. No sensitive or harmful topics were introduced; questions were oriented toward perception and interpretation rather than personal experiences of violence.

The anonymity of all participants was strictly maintained, and no personally identifiable data were recorded. Interview sessions were designed to conclude with a brief reflective dialogue to ensure that children left the experience in a neutral or positive emotional state.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis produced four major themes that collectively describe how participants perceive and internalize violence within video games:

1. Violence as entertainment and challenge

2. Emotional detachment and normalization

3. Moral reasoning and awareness of limits

4. Influence of family and peer context

1. Violence as Entertainment and Challenge

All participants associated violent content primarily with excitement, competition, and skill mastery. Violence was not perceived as a moral issue but as an aesthetic and ludic element. Games such as *Fortnite* and *Call of Duty* were described as "fun," "competitive," and "exciting," with players viewing combat as a test of reflexes and strategy.

"It's not like I want to hurt people. It's just part of the game, like scoring in soccer." (*Miguel, age 10*)

This reflects the instrumentalization of violence — aggression is valued not for its destructive meaning but for its function within the rules of play. Such responses align with Carrasco's (2023) motivational theory, where

violence is part of the challenge rather than an expression of hostility.

2. Emotional Detachment and Normalization

Several children expressed emotional indifference toward on-screen violence, particularly in games that use stylized or cartoonish graphics. While they could recognize brutality, they viewed it as unreal or exaggerated.

"When the characters die, I don't feel anything. It's just a game; they come back." (Ricardo, age 11)
However, this emotional detachment may simultaneously function as a desensitization mechanism, subtly diminishing emotional responses to aggression. Though no participant reported violent impulses, they frequently used humor or irony when describing violent scenes, revealing a normalization process similar to that described by Argandar (2017).

3. Moral Reasoning and Awareness of Limits

Despite apparent normalization, most children demonstrated an awareness of ethical boundaries. They articulated that in real life, violence carries consequences, whereas in games, it is part of the story or mechanics.

"In real life, you can't do that. In games it's allowed because it's fake." (*José, age 12*)

This distinction indicates that participants can differentiate fiction from reality, challenging deterministic models that assume exposure leads directly to behavioral imitation. Nevertheless, their reasoning also reveals contextual relativism: violence is acceptable within certain fictional frames.

4. Influence of Family and Peer Context

Parental involvement varied considerably. Some parents allowed unrestricted playtime, while others imposed clear limits. Participants with more engaged parental monitoring tended to show stronger moral awareness and empathy, whereas those with little supervision exhibited higher tolerance toward violent content.

Peers also played a decisive role in game selection. Social belonging motivated many participants to play games "everyone else was playing," regardless of their age classification.

"If you don't play GTA, they say you're boring." (Andrés, age 11)

These findings support the view that social environment mediates exposure effects, echoing De la Torre-Luque and Valero-Aguayo's (2013) assertion that individual and contextual factors jointly determine behavioral outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this exploratory study provide nuanced insights into the relationship between violent video games and preadolescent perceptions of aggression.

Firstly, participants consistently demonstrated the ability to distinguish between virtual violence and real-world behavior. This challenges the notion that children passively absorb violent content without critical processing. All participants exhibited interpretive frameworks that allowed them to categorize virtual aggression as separate from normative social conduct. While this does not preclude subtle influences, it substantially mitigates concerns regarding direct imitation.

Secondly, emotional activation during gameplay was evident but appeared transient and modulated by both individual characteristics and immediate social context. Notably, comparisons to competitive sports — as mentioned by participants — suggest that arousal may relate more to competitiveness and achievement than exposure to violent imagery itself, aligning with Silva Trujillo's (2024) proposal of mediating variables.

Thirdly, there was a lack of direct behavioral transfer to the school context. While social desirability could have influenced self-reports, several observations support authenticity:

1. References to peers with preexisting aggressiveness independent of video game exposure.

2. Transformations of violent content into cooperative, imaginative play.

3. The naturalness and spontaneity with which participants described their experiences.

Fourthly, parental mediation emerged as a critical variable. The spectrum ranged from active engagement and rule-setting to limited supervision due to work constraints. This variation underscores that public policy might be more effective if aimed at enhancing parental capacity for digital mediation rather than exclusively implementing economic deterrents like taxation.

Finally, participants expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of a tax on violent video games. Their understanding of digital distribution, free online alternatives, and account sharing illustrates practical limitations to policy efficacy. Suggestions for parental education rather than financial barriers reflect children's perception of where interventions could meaningfully influence behavior.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Qualitative evidence indicates that preadolescent children possess greater cognitive sophistication in processing violent video game content than is often assumed. This capability does not eliminate potential subtle influences but challenges alarmist narratives regarding uncritical imitation or automatic desensitization.

Parental mediation appears to be a more significant determinant of outcomes than the content itself. Families that establish clear rules, participate in gameplay, and maintain open dialogue create contexts that reduce potential risks while preserving benefits of digital entertainment.

Regarding the proposed tax, the findings suggest that isolated economic measures may have limited effectiveness in the era of digital distribution, where access is not exclusively determined by purchase. Interventions that enhance parental competencies, promote literacy regarding content ratings, and foster family communication around media consumption may yield more meaningful protection for children.

It is essential to recognize that the relationship between violent video games and aggressive behavior remains an empirically complex question, with no definitive conclusions despite decades of research. Heterogeneous findings in the literature reflect the multicausality of youth aggression, where video games constitute only one factor among many interacting nonlinearly.

Public policy should be grounded in nuanced evidence, acknowledging both potential risks and current knowledge limitations. Effective interventions require dialogue between scientific research, user experiences, family perspectives, and public safety considerations, avoiding simplistic demonization or naïve minimization of potential effects.

Future research could benefit from mixed-method designs that combine interpretive depth with quantitative generalization. Longitudinal studies, gender-diverse and socioeconomically varied samples, and multi-informant triangulation would provide a more robust understanding of this evolving phenomenon.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Block 1: Rapport and General Preferences (3 minutes)

- Do you like playing video games?
- What are your favorite games?
- How often do you play?
- Do you play alone or with friends?

Block 2: Perception of Violent Content (5 minutes)

- In the games you mentioned, are there situations where characters fight or exhibit violence?
- How do you feel when you see or participate in these scenes?
- Do you think what happens in the game is similar to real life or different?
- If someone did in real life what the characters do in the game, would it be right or wrong?

Block 3: Behaviors and Social Relationships (4 minutes)

- How do you feel after playing?
- Have you ever felt the urge to do something similar to what you did in the game?
- Do your school friends also play video games? Do you talk about them?
- Do you think video games change how children behave with their classmates?

Block 4: Family Mediation (2 minutes)

- Do your parents know what games you play?
- Do they set rules about how long you can play or which games you can play?
- Do you play with your parents or siblings?

Block 5: Closing (1 minute)

- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about video games?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Project Title: Violent Video Games and Perception of Aggression in Children: An Exploratory Study

Regarding the Proposed Tax in Mexico

Principal Investigator: [Researcher's Name]

Institution: [Institution Name]

Purpose of the Study: Your child is invited to participate in a research study aimed at understanding how children perceive and process violent content in video games. This research is conducted in the context of public debate regarding a proposed government tax on these products.

Procedures: If you agree to your child to participate, the following will occur:

- An individual interview lasting approximately 15 minutes in a Gesell chamber.
- The interview will be video recorded for later analysis.
- Questions will address gaming habits, perceptions, and experiences.
- Parents may observe the interview from an adjoining room.
- No invasive tests or procedures causing discomfort will be conducted.

Risks and Benefits: Risks are minimal. Some questions may prompt reflection on topics your child has not previously considered. There are no direct benefits for your child, but their participation will contribute to knowledge on this socially relevant topic.

Confidentiality: Information will be kept confidential. Data will be coded (P1–P6) and only the research team will access identifiable information. Recordings will be securely stored and destroyed after one year.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is entirely voluntary. Your child may refuse or withdraw at any time without negative consequences. They may choose not to answer specific questions.

Contact: If you have questions, contact [Researcher's Contact Information].

Consent Statement:

I have read (or have been reading) this form. I have had the opportunity to ask questions, which have been answered satisfactorily. By signing, I consent to my child's participation in this research. I will receive a copy of this form.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Child Assent:

Would you like to participate in this study? _____ Yes _____ No

Child's Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Additional Methodological Notes Considerations regarding the Gesell chamber:

The use of this specialized space serves multiple methodological and ethical objectives. First, it allows parents to supervise without interfering with the natural conversation between interviewer and child, reducing potential social desirability bias. Second, it enables observation of nonverbal communication and interaction dynamics by other research team members, enriching data interpretation. Third, it provides a controlled environment that minimizes external distractions affecting concentration.

The video equipment captured high-quality audio for accurate transcription, as well as facial expressions and gestures to complement verbal discourse analysis. Lighting was adjusted to maintain comfort and a casual conversational environment, avoiding the impression of interrogation.

Regarding thematic analysis:

The six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed: data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition/naming, and report production. The process was iterative, with multiple reviews to ensure themes reflected significant patterns.

An inductive analysis was prioritized, allowing themes to emerge naturally rather than imposing categories from existing literature. Two independent coders analyzed a sample of material to ensure interpretative consistency, discussing discrepancies until consensus was reached.

Researcher Reflexivity:

In qualitative research, the investigator is an instrument of data collection and analysis; their perspectives influence the research process. The principal investigator has prior experience in studies on childhood and technology but no direct ties to the video game industry or advocacy for government regulation, ensuring a balanced approach.

Awareness of the contemporary political debate required vigilance to prevent analyses from being guided by preconceived positions regarding the proposed tax. Sessions included reflective discussions on potential personal biases.

Additional Limitations:

Recruitment via schools may have biased the sample toward families with higher engagement in formal education. Children in more socially vulnerable situations are underrepresented.

The study was conducted during September 2025, coinciding with public debate on the proposed tax and post-COVID-19 digital behavior shifts, situating findings within this sociocultural context.

Finally, limiting interviews to 15 minutes, though justified to prevent fatigue, restricted the depth of discussion on certain topics. Some issues emerged briefly and would benefit from more extensive exploration.

Final Note:

This study contributes modestly but meaningfully to the public debate on video games and violence in Mexico. Empirical research helps complicate simplistic narratives, highlighting that children are active interpreters of media rather than passive consumers. Effective interventions should recognize children's agencies while ensuring safe contexts for development. Policies must move beyond unidimensional solutions like isolated taxes toward strategies that strengthen family capacities, promote critical digital literacy, encourage responsible industry practices, and maintain ongoing dialogue with scientific evidence.

Conflicts Of Interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest.

Note

This article is not derived from any previous publication.