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Violent Media, Children's Drawings, and Emotional Desensitization: A Visual-Emotional Counseling Framework

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how digital content featuring horror and violence becomes internalized in a symbolic-emotional manner within early childhood imagination and manifests in children's imaginative drawings, along with its implications for expressive counseling practice within Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling. Employing a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design, the research focuses on an eight-year-old boy (AP) with intensive digital exposure as the primary participant and a five-year-old girl (MFR) as a contrast. Data were collected through analysis of imaginative drawings, behavioral observation, and parental interviews conducted from May to August 2023 and were analyzed using NVivo-based inductive thematic analysis, yielding 42 codes across seven themes. The findings identify four sources of digital media exposure—horror games, YouTube, television, and TikTok—manifested in nine horror-violence-themed objects, patterns of creative modification as evidence of deep internalization, the dominance of black as an emotional indicator, and three concrete instances of content transfer into real-world behavior. The absence of parental mediation was found to significantly exacerbate the impact of such exposure. This study offers three contributions: (1) validation of imaginative drawing as a valid nonverbal assessment instrument; (2) empirical evidence of the connection between drawing content and children's actual behavior; and (3) the Visual-Emotional Counseling Framework (VECF) as a foundation for Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling practice responsive to the challenges of digital childhood.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Children today are growing up as a digital generation immersed in a screen-based ecosystem from infancy—a condition referred to as digital childhood (Fleer, 2020; Fedonkina, 2025). Exposure to screen media actively shapes early childhood brain development (Hutton et al., 2024), with effects extending well beyond surface-level behavioral change. In the specific context of horror and violent content, these effects include the learning of aggression, emotional desensitization, and the formation of what has been termed "thoughtless vigilantes"—individuals who lose empathy toward violence (Murray, 2014; Scharrer, 2022; Anderson et al., 2017). In Indonesia, 38.92 percent of children aged 0–6 years have already used a mobile phone (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023), with screen time increasing by 150 percent during the pandemic (Nopembri et al., 2023). Behind these figures lies a further reality: horror games and violent content have become part of young children's daily digital diet, consumed by minds not yet equipped to filter their emotional weight.

Imagination—the process through which children temporarily detach from reality to explore alternative experiences (Zittoun and Pedersen, 2024)—first emerges in pretend play around age two and develops into complex role-play by age three (Woolley and Gilpin, 2020), with a genuine physiological substrate underlying it (Thibodeau-Nielsen et al., 2021). Media content featuring favored characters shapes this imaginative expression more powerfully than neutral content (Richert et al., 2024), and within digital childhood specifically, children integrate digital characters and narratives into meta-imaginary play through repeated consumption, including horror and violent material (Fleer, 2020). Bandura's Social Learning Theory explains the underlying mechanism: behavior is learned through observation and imitation of a model across four stages—attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Daugherty, 2012; Saka, 2024)—with symbolic learning from film, games, and mass media being especially relevant, since children need not interact directly with a model to absorb its behavior (Daugherty, 2012). Media characters with strong emotional appeal are particularly effective models, whether prosocial or antisocial (Vijayalakshmi and Rajakumari, 2025), meaning emotionally charged content such as horror games can be absorbed without parents' awareness. This internalization does not stop at behavior: repeated exposure to violent media gradually erodes children's emotional sensitivity through desensitization, producing aggression learning, emotional desensitization, and persistent fear (Scharrer, 2022), altering patterns of brain activation (Murray, 2014), and reducing reactivity and empathy even after brief exposure (Rudy and Linz, 2008; Anderson et al., 2017; Funk, 2005) — a risk compounded by young children's still-limited inhibitory capacity (Andrews, 2020). To access this internalized emotional state, authors have turned to children's imaginative drawings, which function as a symbolic expression of emotional and psychological experience not yet fully articulable through language (Farokhi and Hashemi, 2011; Wright, 2019), conveying complex emotions through symbol, color, and composition (Zhou, 2024; Burkitt and Watling, 2016) and granting children symbolic control over frightening experiences (Looman, 2006), with children as young as eight capable of expressing complex emotion through structured graphic cues (Brechet et al., 2007; Cannoni et al., 2023). These findings position imaginative drawing as a valid nonverbal assessment instrument within expressive counseling — an approach that draws on artistic expression, including visual art, to support emotional exploration and psychological recovery (Goslin-Jones, 2020; Bradley et al., 2008; Byxbee, 2024; Sesar et al.,

2022; Ibrahim and Abdullah, 2023), and which forms the basis of Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling practice.

Despite this body of work, three gaps remain unaddressed simultaneously. Methodologically, virtually no studies have used imaginative drawings as primary data to qualitatively trace how horror and violent digital content is internalized in a symbolic-emotional manner by young children. Substantively, no study has simultaneously linked the identification of digital content in children's drawings with concrete evidence of that content's transfer into observable real-world behavior. Practically, the relationship between empirical findings on digital media's effects and the expressive counseling framework within Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling has never been explicitly established within a single study. These gaps converge on one underlying problem: when young children are intensively exposed to horror and violent digital content without adequate parental mediation, the resulting internalization process cannot be captured through quantitative measurement alone, and qualitative research linking this process to counseling practice remains strikingly limited. To address this, the present study integrates the theoretical foundations above into a novel Visual-Emotional Counseling Framework (VECF), connecting source, mechanism, impact, detection, and intervention within a single causal chain, and answers two research questions: first, what digital media content can be identified as influencing young children's imagination; and second, how does this influence manifest in children's imaginative drawings and real-world behavior. This study employs an instrumental qualitative case study approach centered on an eight-year-old boy with intensive digital media exposure and inadequate parental mediation.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using an instrumental case study design, in which an individual case is examined in depth not for its own uniqueness but for the insight it offers into a broader phenomenon (Stake, 1995). The design was chosen to capture the depth and richness of a single case rather than to produce statistical generalization; it further allowed children's imaginative drawings to be treated as the primary analytical instrument within a visual-emotional counseling perspective, which positions artistic expression as a valid medium for accessing emotional and psychological processes not reachable through verbal instruments alone (Goslin-Jones, 2020).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, prioritizing data depth over sample breadth (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). The primary participant was AP, an eight-year-old boy, selected for his high daily exposure to digital media (online games, YouTube, TikTok, and television), the absence of adequate parental content mediation, and his parent's availability to participate as an informant. MFR, a five-year-old girl residing in a comparable geographic setting, served as a contrastive comparison case—selected for her non-intensive media exposure rather than as an equally weighted subject of analysis (Yin, 2014). The two children's mothers, as primary caregivers, served as key informants. Table 1 summarizes participant and informant profiles.

Table 1. Profile of Study Participants and Informants

Code	Age	Sex	Role	Digital Exposure	Media Involvement in the Study
AP	8 years	Male	Primary participant	Intensive; horror games, YouTube, TikTok, TV; no parental mediation	5 imaginative drawings; behavioral observation; verbal narration while drawing
MFR	5 years	Female	Contrastive comparison	Non-intensive; geographic environment relatively similar to AP's	4 imaginative drawings; behavioral observation; verbal narration while drawing
AP's mother	Adult	Female	Primary informant	Primary caregiver of AP; familiar with AP's digital media consumption patterns	In-depth pre- and post-intervention interviews (May and August 2023)
MFR's mother	Adult	Female	Comparison informant	Primary caregiver of MFR; media exposure context differing from AP's	In-depth pre- and post-intervention interviews (May and August 2023)

Note. AP = primary participant; MFR = contrastive comparison participant.

Data were collected over four months (May–August 2023) through three main instruments. The primary data source was imaginative drawings: AP voluntarily produced five drawings containing more than 35 identified objects, of which the first two (Figure 4 and Figure 7) were analyzed in depth for their thematic richness, while the remaining three (depicting a young man smoking, illegal motorcycle racing, and related follow-up images) served as supporting data; MFR produced four drawings. This choice of instrument is grounded in the concept of drawing as symbolic-emotional expression (Farokhi and Hashemi, 2011; Goslin-Jones, 2020). Observation took two forms: structured behavioral observation using a ten-item checklist (2–8 July 2023, outside the drawing sessions) and naturalistic observation during the drawing sessions themselves (July–August 2023), capturing spontaneous verbal narration and emotional expression as they occurred. In-depth interviews with both mothers were conducted twice, using a twelve-item guide, before the intervention (25 May 2023) and after it (9 August 2023), supplemented by photographic, video, and audio documentation. Data collection thus proceeded through five sequential stages—initial behavioral observation, initial interviews, the drawing activity, concurrent naturalistic observation, and final interviews—summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Collection Procedure and Structure (May–August 2023)

Stage	Activity	Timing	Instrument	Data Source	Objective
1	Structured behavioral observation	2–8 July 2023	10-item observation checklist	AP and MFR	Document baseline behavioral patterns and emotional expression
2	Initial in-depth interview	25 May 2023	12-item interview guide	AP's and MFR's mothers	Explore digital media exposure background and baseline condition
3	Imaginative drawing activity	July–August 2023	A4 paper, markers, pens, pencils, crayons	5 drawings by AP; 4 by MFR	Generate primary data: drawings as symbolic-emotional expression
4	Naturalistic observation during drawing	July–August 2023 (concurrent with Stage 3)	Field notes; photo/video recordings	Spontaneous verbal narration	Document emotional expression and contextual narration
5	Final in-depth interview	9 August 2023	12-item interview guide	AP's and MFR's mothers	Capture behavioral and emotional changes post-drawing

Note. All stages fell within May–August 2023; Stages 3 and 4 occurred concurrently.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic coding adapted from the NVivo approach, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases (familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting). Coding yielded 42 nodes across 7 themes, drawn from 140 references across 14 data sources (the two children's drawings, their behavioral observations, their mothers' pre- and post-intervention interviews, and their verbal statements while drawing). Of the more than 35 objects identified in AP's drawings, nine were retained for in-depth analysis of two criteria: traceability to a specific horror or violent digital media source and corroboration by AP's spontaneous verbal narration. Each node was assigned a unique code (e.g., MD-G1 for online game exposure, KV-1 for explicit violent content, PR-3 for the transfer of reactive aggression into behavior), following the open, axial, and selective coding procedures of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Trustworthiness was established through triangulation across drawings, behavioral observation, and interview/verbal data, with a code accepted as a substantiated finding only when corroborated by at least two of the three sources (Creswell and Miller, 2000); all coding and interpretation were carried out

through the lens of symbolic-emotional expression (Farokhi and Hashemi, 2011; Zhou, 2024). Table 3 summarizes the resulting thematic structure.

Table 3. NVivo Coding Table: Distribution of 42 Nodes across 7 Themes (May–August 2023)

Theme	Thematic Focus	Distribution of Key Nodes	Participant(s)	Ref.
T1	Identified digital media sources (8 nodes)	MD-G1 Skibidi War Toilets Attack; MD-Y1 young man smoking; MD-T1 martial-arts violence; MD-T2 illegal street racing; MD-K1 SpongeBob SquarePants; MD-TK1 egg-frying video; MD-L1 pocong decoration for Indonesian Independence Day; MD-C1 <i>tuyul</i> jokes	AP	30
T2	Manifestation of horror/violent content in drawings (10 nodes)	KH-1 pregnant pocong hanged; KH-2 SpongeBob possessed by a jinn; KH-3 <i>tuyul</i> hanged; KH-4 spider-legged Skibidi Toilet; KV-1 slaughtering a pocong; KV-2 killing a Skibidi Toilet; KV-3 killing a thief; KV-4 hanging a <i>tuyul</i> ; KN-1 young man smoking; KN-2 illegal street racing	AP	34
T3	Creative modification as evidence of internalization (5 nodes)	MK-1 SpongeBob → possessed by a jinn; MK-2 pregnant pocong with two children; MK-3 infected Skibidi Toilet; MK-4 smiling Squidward; MK-5 dragon kite, swerving truck, king turtle	AP	16
T4	Color choice as psychological indicator (4 nodes)	IW-1 dominance of black; IW-2 SpongeBob ice cream as positive emotion; IW-3 MFR's bright color palette; IW-4 yellow on a defecation-themed object	AP and MFR	12
T5	Transfer of content into real-world behavior (6 nodes)	PR-1 hitting a friend; PR-2 smoking and street-racing re-enactment; PR-3 retaliating against wrongdoing; PR-4 laughing when a friend falls; PR-5 laughing when punished; PR-6 TikTok experimentation	AP	23
T6	Absence of parental mediation (5 nodes)	OT-1 unfiltered phone access; OT-2 phone addiction; OT-3 parents unfamiliar with positive-emotion cues; OT-4 verbal advice vs. actual access; OT-5 unscreened media access	AP and MFR	17

Theme	Thematic Focus	Distribution of Key Nodes	Participant(s)	Ref.
T7	MFR as contrastive comparison (4 nodes)	MFR-1 family/friendship themes; MFR-2 all objects circled; MFR-3 absence of horror patterns; MFR-4 self-assigned score of 1000	MFR	8
Total	7 themes	42 nodes · 14 sources	AP and MFR	140

Note. AP = primary participant; MFR = comparison participant.

The study observed standard ethical principles for research involving children. Parental consent was obtained before data collection, covering participation, observation, interviews, and use of the children's drawings for scholarly publication. Both children's identities were anonymized using initials (AP and MFR) throughout the report, and the drawing process took place in a free, non-coercive atmosphere entirely at the children's own volition, avoiding any psychological pressure on participants.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Nine Horror- and Violence-Themed Objects in AP's Drawings

Inductive thematic analysis identified nine horror- and violence-themed objects distributed across AP's two primary drawings (Figure 4 and Figure 7). Each object was accompanied by spontaneous verbal narration from AP explaining its context and storyline. The nine objects were grouped by severity into three categories—supernatural horror, contextual violence, and explicit violence—a categorization consistent with thematic patterns found in drawings by children exposed to intense emotional experiences (Jabbar and Betawi, 2019).

Supernatural Horror (Code: KH)

The first and second objects were two variations of Skibidi Toilet (code KH-4), the central character from the horror game *Skibidi War Toilets Attack*. The first variation reproduced the original character's "evil grin" expression; the second (Spider Skibidi Toilet) was AP's own independent creation, not found in the game itself.

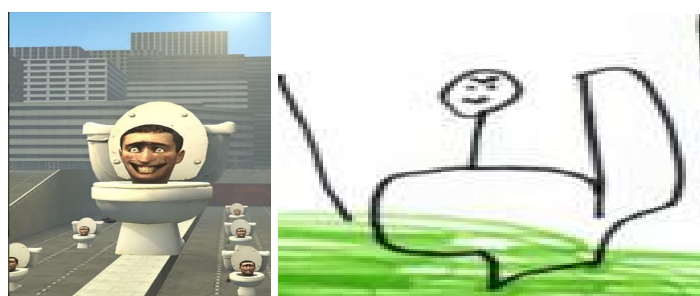


Figure 1. Comparison of the original *Skibidi Toilet* character (left) with AP's reproduction (right). AP achieved a high degree of resemblance in the "evil grin" expression without directly copying a reference image during the drawing process (code: KH-4).



Figure 2. AP's Spider *Skibidi Toilet*—a variant independently created by AP that does not appear in the original game (code: KH-4).

The third object was a hanged pregnant *pocong* (a shrouded-corpse ghost figure; code KH-1), sourced from a *pocong* decoration for the 78th Indonesian Independence Day anniversary, which AP passed each day on his way to school.



Figure 3. Comparison of the original visual stimulus (left) with AP's drawing (right). AP added a pregnancy detail not present in the source (code: KH-1).

The fourth object was SpongeBob possessed by a jinn (KH-2)—the cheerful character transformed into a horned, attacking entity.

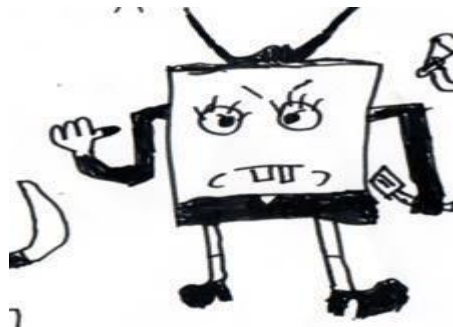


Figure 4. AP's drawing depicting SpongeBob SquarePants "possessed by a jinn"—horned, with a menacingly angry face, in an attacking posture. A stark contrast to the character's original innocent and cheerful demeanor (code: KH-2).

Contextual Violence (Code: KV)

The fifth object was a hanged *tuyul* (a child-spirit ghost figure; code KH-3). AP constructed a structured and detailed narrative: "*Tuyul* is being hanged because he stole a man's money" (AP's statement, July 2023). The source of this imaginative content traced back to jokes told by adults about *tuyul*, which AP absorbed literally.

The sixth object depicted a man hanging the *tuyul* with a satisfied expression (code KV-4).



Figure 5. AP's sequential narrative of the *tuyul* and his punishment. The left image shows the *tuyul* hanged as punishment for theft; the right image shows the perpetrator of the punishment with a joyful expression (codes: KH-3, KV-4).

The seventh object depicts a person throwing an object at a thief (code KV-3). According to AP's account, this action was taken as an act of self-protection against crime (AP's statement, July 2023).

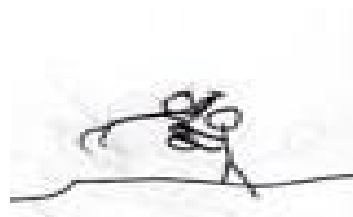


Figure 6. AP's drawing depicts a person throwing an object at a thief as a form of self-protection. The resolution AP chose was an act of direct violence (code: KV-3).

Explicit Violence (Code: KV)

The eighth object depicted a man about to slaughter a *pocong* (code: KV-1). AP described it directly: "This is a picture of a man who is about to slaughter a *pocong*" (AP's statement, July 2023). In his commentary on a related drawing, AP recounted that the figures in his drawing: "If they're caught, their parents will scold them, so they smoke in secret" (AP's statement, July 2023). AP then confirmed that the source of this imaginative content came directly from something he had watched on YouTube: "AP said he got the idea for this drawing from something he watched on YouTube" (AP's statement, July 2023).



Figure 7. AP's drawing depicts an adult figure dressed entirely in black, wearing a backwards cap, smoking, and armed with a machete and a sword—imagery AP confirmed he had seen on YouTube (code: KV-1).

The ninth object depicted the killing of a Skibidi Toilet with a machete (code KV-2)—the only one of AP's drawings that directly represents the game's core mechanic: a human figure with a camera for a head, wielding a machete and striking a Skibidi Toilet on the head. AP

confirmed: "He got the idea for the motorcycle racing from television" (AP's statement, July 2023).



Figure 8. AP's drawing directly represents the core mechanic of the game Skibidi War Toilets Attack—a human figure with a camera for a head, wielding a machete aimed at a Skibidi Toilet's head. The object with the highest level of explicit violence across the whole of AP's work (code: KV-2).

Across the nine objects, three patterns stand out: an escalation of content from the supernatural toward concrete violence; every source traceable to AP's digital media diet (horror games, YouTube, television); and an emotional pattern within the drawings consistent with AP's everyday behavior. "Angry for no reason, talking to himself for no reason, expressing things that had already passed" (Interview with AP's mother, 25 May 2023). Further, when asked why AP would suddenly start laughing to himself, his mother explained: "I once asked him, why did you suddenly laugh? He said he remembered his friend at school who suddenly slipped" (Interview with AP's mother, 25 May 2023). These findings confirm that AP's drawings are a genuine reflection of his media exposure, with an internalization deep enough that AP was able to creatively modify characters—rather than merely imitate them (Richert et al., 2024; Fleer, 2020).

3.2 Creative Modification as Evidence of Deep Internalization

Finding 3.2 addresses the extent to which the content identified in 3.1 has been internalized to the point that AP is able to creatively reconstruct it, rather than merely imitate it. This capacity aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) view that children do not simply reproduce experience, but actively construct new meaning from material that has been internalized through interaction with their environment.

The principle underlying all of AP's modifications is captured in a single statement: "If someone does something bad, you have to pay them back with something bad" (AP's statement, corroborated in the interview with AP's mother, 25 May 2023). Coding identified four especially significant cases of creative modification (codes: MK-1 through MK-4).

Cheerful SpongeBob into SpongeBob Possessed by a Jinn (Code: MK-1)

"SpongeBob SquarePants possessed by a jinn" (AP's statement, July 2023). AP's reactive principle is evident in his response: "*Da kamari B-na ngahina AP, jadi abi hina deui ayeuna* (because he insulted me yesterday, so I'm insulting him back now)" (Observation of AP, 8 July 2023). Even when asked whether he would forgive the friend who had mocked him, AP answered firmly: "In a year (*setahun lagi*)" (Observation of AP, 8 July 2023).



Figure 9. Three versions of SpongeBob: the original character (left), AP's initial reproduction with a flat expression (center), and AP's modification into a horned "possessed by a jinn" figure with an attacking expression (right). The comparison of all three shows an escalating transformation of the character reflecting AP's reactive principle (code: MK-1).

Ordinary Pocong into Pregnant Pocong (Code: MK-2)

AP recounted: "This is a picture of a *pocong* who is pregnant with two children" and continued: "That *pocong* is being hanged" (AP's statement, July 2023).



Figure 10. Comparison of the original visual stimulus (left) with AP's creative modification (right). A clear incorporation of new elements not present in the source—evidence of imaginative elaboration that goes beyond mere imitation (code: MK-2).

Ordinary Skibidi Toilet into Spider Skibidi Toilet (Code: MK-3)

AP created a variant with its own lore not found in the game: "Spider Skibidi Toilet is a Skibidi Toilet that has been infected, or bitten, by a spider" (AP's statement, July 2023). Thibodeau-Nielsen *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that children's imagination is an active process involving a genuine physiological substrate—far exceeding mere repetition of an original stimulus.

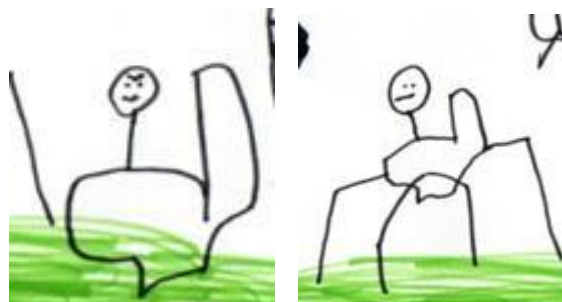


Figure 11. Two variations of *Skibidi Toilet* in AP's work: the standard version from the game (left) and the modified "spider-infected" version independently created by AP (right). This new variant does not appear in the original game (code: MK-3).

Gloomy Squidward into Smiling Squidward (Code: MK-4)

The fourth case reveals a pattern moving in the opposite direction: Squidward, gloomy in the original show, was drawn by AP with a smiling expression.

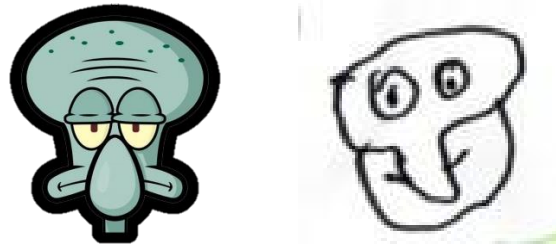


Figure 12. Comparison of the original, gloomy and sardonic Squidward character (left) with AP's smiling version (right). The only one of AP's modifications to move in a more positive direction, indicating that AP's reinterpretation of characters was active and deliberate (code: MK-4).

All four modification cases reveal a consistent pattern of internalization: AP never reproduced a character identically—creative elaboration was always present, demonstrating that the content had been genuinely internalized. The dominant direction of modification was from positive to negative—a pattern consistent with Anderson *et al.* (2017) finding that exposure to violent content affects how children read and respond to social stimuli around them. All modifications were accompanied by coherent verbal narration from AP himself, demonstrating that digital content was not merely watched but actively reconstructed within his cognition (Jabbar and Betawi, 2019).

3.3 The Dominance of Black as an Emotional Indicator

The third finding raises a different dimension entirely—not content or depth of internalization, but a visual element present consistently across almost all of AP's work yet never explicitly stated: color choice. AP drew spontaneously, without any predetermined visual agenda or theme—a condition that strengthens the validity of the following color-choice analysis as an authentic form of expression. Analysis of AP's color choices identified a consistent pattern: the dominance of black extended beyond thematic boundaries—applied to both horror-themed and neutral objects alike—indicating that it was not a contextual choice but a reflection of an underlying emotional state. Burkitt and Watling (2016) demonstrated that color selection in children's drawings consistently reflects the emotional state they are experiencing, while Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) confirmed that color choice is one of the most reliable psychological indicators in children's drawings.



Figure 13. Overall comparison of AP's work (left) and MFR's work (right). The dominance of black across all of AP's drawings stands in stark contrast to the rich, bright colors used throughout MFR's work (codes: IW-1, IW-3).

What makes this finding significant is that the dominance of black in AP's work was not thematic—it was not confined to objects with dark content. Zhou (2024), in an analysis of drawings by children in high-stress situations, found that the use of dark colors beyond thematic boundaries marks a generally underlying emotional state—rather than a response to any single specific object. Yet AP used black even for objects that, narratively, could have been drawn in brighter colors. A Toyota Alphard car—which AP himself described as something he wished to own—was drawn in black. The sun in the background of a kite-flying scene was drawn in black. Even the kite string spool, which he narrated with great enthusiasm, was drawn in black.

This pattern also appears in the drawing of a kite shaped like a king turtle in AP's second work. AP recounted: "King rules over the *Skibidi Toilets*" (AP's statement, July 2023). AP drew the king's facial expression as angry—and the entire drawing, including this powerful, angry-faced figure, remained dominated by black (Zhou, 2024). Precisely because the dominance of black was so consistent, the two exceptions that emerged are highly informative. Looman (2006) demonstrated that drawing grants children symbolic control over a range of emotional experiences—meaning that a shift in color occurring alongside a shift in emotion is a meaningful signal. The first exception was SpongeBob eating ice cream (Figure 14). This drawing depicted a simple wish of AP's—the only object in his entire body of work entirely free of horror or violent content.



Figure 14. AP's drawing of SpongeBob eating ice cream—the only object across the whole of AP's work depicting a consistently positive character expression, rendered in colors different from the prevailing black. It stands out amid a series of otherwise dark-themed objects (code: IW-2).

The second exception was a drawing of a person defecating (Figure 15). This was the only object in AP's second drawing to use a color other than black—yellow, representing feces.

AP laughed uproariously while drawing it and explaining it to the authors. The appearance of yellow in the very object that made him laugh hardest is a striking pattern: color emerged alongside heightened emotional intensity—regardless of its valence.



Figure 15. AP's drawing of a person defecating — the only object in his second drawing to use a non-black color (yellow). The use of color coincided with AP laughing uproariously as he drew and explained it (code: IW-4).

In stark contrast to AP, MFR's work consistently used a rich and varied color palette—green, pink, red, blue, and various bright color combinations. MFR even consciously assigned different colors to each person she drew—an active, varied, and deliberate use of color. This striking contrast between AP's and MFR's color palettes reflects not merely a difference in aesthetic preference between the two children, but a far more fundamental difference in the emotional states each brought to the drawing process. Brechet *et al.* (2007) empirically demonstrated that eight-year-old children are capable of expressing complex emotion through structured graphic cues—making the color contrast between the two children in this study valid and interpretable psychological data.

3.4 Transfer of Content into Real-World Behavior

The fourth finding moves beyond the drawings themselves to address the most practically critical question of all: whether this internalized digital content translates into AP's actual, everyday behavior.

Hitting Friends Under the Guise of "Wrestling or Martial Arts"

The authors' observations found that AP frequently acted roughly toward his friends and when confronted, he would claim he was wrestling or practicing martial arts—a justification drawn from martial-arts content he watched on television. Violent content did not remain confined to viewing; it transformed into a justifying narrative for AP's physical behavior. Anderson *et al.* (2017) confirm that exposure to violent media produces increased aggressive behavior alongside decreased empathy, while Carnagey *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that even 20 minutes of exposure to a violent game is sufficient to reduce physiological responses to real-world violence.



Figure 16. AP's drawing representing the killing mechanic from *Skibidi War Toilets Attack*. This drawing is linked to AP's real-world behavior of frequently hitting friends under the guise of "wrestling or martial arts", a justification sourced from martial-arts content he watched on television (codes: PR-1, KV-2).

Normalization of Negative Behavior, from Screen to Everyday Narrative

Two of AP's drawings explicitly depict content sourced directly from what he had watched on media—young men secretly smoking (Figure 9) and a group of young men engaged in illegal street racing (Figure 18). AP directly confirmed the source of both: "AP said he got the idea for this drawing from something he watched on YouTube" and for the motorcycle-racing drawing: "He got the idea for the motorcycle racing from television" (AP's statement, July 2023). AP perceived this negative content not as wrong, but as appealing—evident in how the figures smoke in secret so as not to be caught by their parents (Scharrer, 2022).

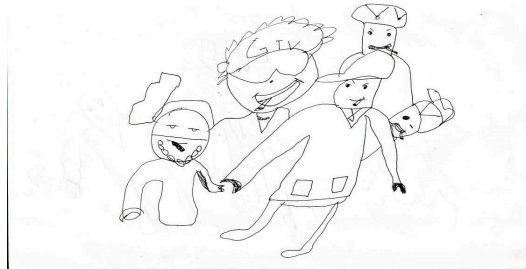


Figure 17. AP's drawing depicts young men secretly smoking. AP gave these figures mischievous expressions and confirmed that the source of this drawing's imagery came from something he watched on YouTube (codes: PR-2, KN-1).



Figure 18. Two of AP's drawings depict a group of young men engaged in illegal street racing. AP drew motorcycles partly on the road and partly airborne. AP confirmed that he got the idea for this drawing from something he watched on television (codes: PR-2, KN-2).

Laughing When a Friend Slipped: An Indication of Diminished Empathy

The third piece of evidence is more subtle, but no less significant. AP's mother reported an incident that left her puzzled: "I once asked him, 'Why did you suddenly laugh?' He said he remembered his friend at school who suddenly slipped" (Interview with AP's mother, 25 May 2023). This response runs counter to the empathy one would expect, consistent with the desensitization effect resulting from repeated exposure to violent content (Fanti *et al.*, 2009; Murray, 2014). This corresponds with a broader pattern reported by AP's mother: "He's told to be patient, to say *istighfar*, and to not retaliate against others' wrongdoing" (Interview with AP's mother, 25 May 2023).

Meanwhile, AP's access to digital content continued without any content screening: "Once he's on the phone, it's hard [to stop him]. Especially since his father often gives him the phone when he gets home" (Interview with AP's mother, 9 August 2023). This contradiction reflects the absence of active parental mediation—the most effective protective factor against the impact of problematic digital content (Pfetsch, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2024). It is important to note that AP retained the capacity for empathy in certain situations—upon hearing that a friend from his Qur'an class was moving away, he asked:

“Why is Bro moving away?” (Observation of AP, 2 July 2023). AP even apologized for his own behavior on one occasion—empathy was present, though not consistently active.

Across these three pieces of evidence, transfer occurred through both active (behavioral imitation) and passive (emotional desensitization) pathways, without AP's awareness, and was confirmed by three independent sources: the authors' observations, AP's mother's reports, and AP's own statements (Creswell and Miller, 2000). This pattern is consistent with Bandura's mechanism of symbolic learning, operating through four stages—attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation—all of which AP had undergone in the process of internalizing digital content (Daugherty, 2012).

3.5 Emotional Expression During the Drawing Process

The fifth finding raises a different dimension altogether: not the finished drawings, but what occurred during and after the drawing process itself—spontaneous emotional expression that confirms the authenticity of AP's inner state. It is important to note that the entire drawing process was entirely voluntary. As AP himself stated his own motivation: “I draw because I am bored” (Chapter IV narrative, July 2023).

Wright (2019) refers to this as *performative literacy*—emotional expression and artistic action occurring simultaneously. The researchers observed: “While drawing, he displayed expressions of sadness, anger, happiness, even laughter, depending on the object he was drawing” (Researcher's observation narrative, Chapter IV, July 2023).

The first moment: AP drew his cousin with bamboo legs (Figure 19) while spontaneously laughing mischievously.



Figure 19. AP's drawing depicts his cousin with his legs replaced by bamboo. AP recounted this drawing to the researcher while laughing mischievously—one of the most spontaneous emotional expressions to emerge during the drawing process (code: MK-5).

The second moment: AP drew a person defecating (Figure 20)—the loudest laughter of the entire session. The researcher noted: “While explaining this drawing, AP was laughing uproariously” (Researcher's observation narrative, Chapter IV, July 2023).



Figure 20. AP's drawing of a person defecating—AP's loudest laughter throughout the entire drawing session. The only object in his second drawing to use a non-black color, appearing alongside the highest emotional intensity observed (code: IW-4).

The third moment: while drawing SpongeBob eating ice cream (Figure 21), AP's expression displayed genuine, warm enjoyment—distinct from the mischievous laughter of the two preceding moments.



Figure 21. AP's drawing of SpongeBob eating ice cream—a moment of genuine, warm enjoyment during the drawing process. The only object across the whole of AP's work to display a consistently positive expression on the character depicted (code: IW-2).

AP and MFR returned voluntarily, repeatedly, without being asked.

"AP and MFR came back and forth, or together, without anyone telling them to, and they were happy about it. This showed in their faces as they chatted with each other while drawing, or occasionally sang together. In a single visit, they could draw multiple times without ever growing bored" (Researcher's observation narrative, Chapter IV, July 2023).

This intrinsic motivation indicates that the drawing activity functioned as an authentic medium of emotional processing for the children (Goslin-Jones, 2020).

AP's mother reported a change she noticed following the drawing activities. "AP often tells me he's drawn many things and feels happy once he's drawn. I feel relieved, because AP's behavior outside [the home] has gotten better" (Interview with AP's mother, 9 August 2023). More specifically, AP's mother reported the most notable change in his behavior following the drawing activities: "Up to now, AP hasn't shown any unexplained anger. Usually there'd be at least one such episode every day" (Interview with AP's mother, 9 August 2023). This decline corresponds directly with the pattern of unexplained anger identified as early as the initial interview—a change directly felt by AP's primary caregiver (Sesar *et al.*, 2022; Bradley *et al.*, 2008).

MFR's mother likewise reported a positive response: "*Kegiatannya bagus, positif, daripada barudak teh arulin teh paruguh mening ngagambar. Puguh-puguh kahibur ku lucuna gambar barudak nu aneh-aneh* (the activity is good, positive, rather than the kids just playing around aimlessly, it's better for them to draw. [I'm] genuinely entertained by how funny and quirky the children's drawings are)" (Interview with MFR's mother, 9 August 2023).

MFR's mother also reported a specific behavioral change in MFR observed during the drawing activities: "*Anak-anak menjadi lebih anteng, teu sering teuing minta jajan... Lamun aya kegiatan ngagambar mah henteu* (the children became calmer, and did not ask for snacks as often... When there's a drawing activity, that doesn't happen as much)" (Interview with MFR's mother, 9 August 2023).

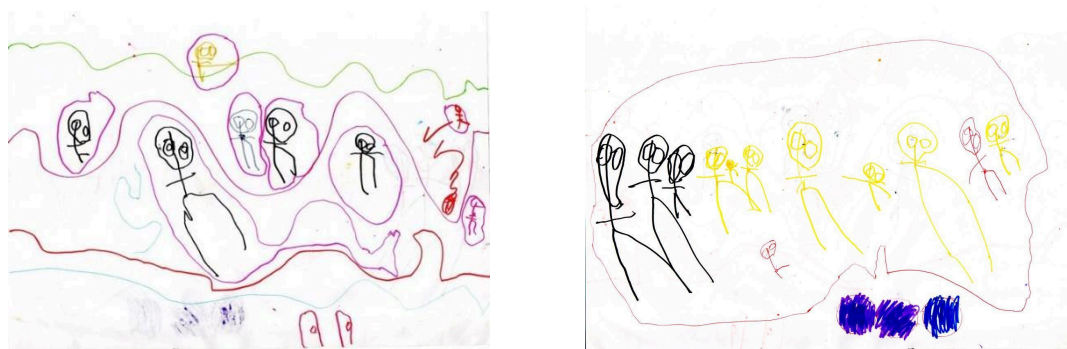


Figure 22. Two of MFR's imaginative drawings depicting people close to her, rendered in bright, spirited colors. MFR's work reflects a warmer and more enthusiastic emotional state compared with AP's work, which is dominated by black (codes: MFR-1, IW-3).

These findings correspond with evidence of the effectiveness of creative expressive approaches in child counseling within the Southeast Asian context (Ibrahim and Abdullah, 2023). Bradley *et al.* (2008) affirm that within an expressive counseling framework, artistic expression enables the externalization of emotional experience that cannot be accessed through verbalization alone—precisely as observed in AP within this study.

4. DISCUSSION

The five findings presented in the Results section together construct a cohesive and mutually reinforcing picture of how horror- and violence-genre digital content is internalized in a symbolic-emotional manner by young children and manifests in their imaginative drawings and real-world behavior. Within the Visual-Emotional Counseling Framework (VECF), these five findings operate as a single causal chain: Finding 3.1 identifies the source and form of the internalized content; Finding 3.2 demonstrates the depth of internalization through patterns of creative modification; Finding 3.3 reads the underlying emotional state through color indicators; Finding 3.4 demonstrates the transfer of content into real-world behavior as the ultimate manifestation of internalization; and Finding 3.5 reveals imaginative drawing as a space for authentic emotional expression and, simultaneously, a therapeutic medium.

Imagination as Medium and Bandura as Mechanism: How Digital Content is Internalized

Before Bandura's symbolic learning can operate, one condition must first be met: digital content must be able to permeate a child's imagination. This is what child imagination theory — the first dimension of the VECF — explains. Fleer (2020) showed that children construct meta-imaginary play by integrating digital characters and narratives into everyday creative expression, while Richert *et al.* (2024) demonstrated that media content featuring children's favored characters shapes imaginative expression more powerfully than neutral content. Findings 3.1 and 3.2 confirm this empirically: AP did not merely watch a horror game—he integrated its characters into a living imagination, complete with narrative, guiding principles, and independent creative modification. In the context of digital childhood, children's imagination functions as fertile ground that receives and processes digital content before it is internalized more deeply. It is here that Bandura's Social Learning Theory assumes its role as the mechanism explaining this internalization process. The

findings of this study offer strong empirical confirmation of that mechanism in the context of digital media use among young children.

Daugherty (2012) explains that social learning occurs through three types of modeling: live learning (directly demonstrated behavior), verbal learning (verbal explanation of behavior), and symbolic learning (behavior transmitted through books, film, and mass media). AP's case demonstrates that symbolic learning via digital screens operates just as effectively as direct modeling—all without any explicit instruction from a real human figure.

Vijayalakshmi and Rajakumari (2025) demonstrated that media characters with strong emotional appeal — precisely like the horror-game and cartoon characters AP favored — function as effective behavioral models, for both prosocial and antisocial behavior. Within digital childhood, this mechanism operates with unprecedented intensity, making the digital screen an arena of modeling no less influential than the real human figures around a child (Fleer, 2020; Fedonkina, 2025). Andrews (2020) confirms that children's still-limited inhibitory capacity makes emotionally potent content easier to absorb—allowing Bandura's symbolic learning mechanism to operate all the more effectively in AP's case.

Imaginative Drawing as Symbolic-Emotional Expression: A Methodological Contribution

This study also offers a significant methodological contribution: children's imaginative drawings prove to be a valid and informative instrument for identifying digital media influence and children's emotional states. Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) affirm that children's drawings are a means by which children communicate their deepest hopes and fears to the world. Wright (2019) refers to drawing as performative literacy, a semiotic tool linking emotion, body, and artwork within a single expressive act. The methodological implication of this finding is that imaginative drawing deserves to be treated as primary data—not merely supporting data—in research on young children's emotional states and environmental influences. Zhou (2024) demonstrated that children's drawings consistently express complex categories of emotion through a combination of symbol, color, and structure, while Burkitt and Watling (2016) add that color selection in drawings reflects the emotional state a child is experiencing.

Patterns of Desensitization: When Horror Becomes "Normal"

One of the most concerning findings of this study is the evidence of emotional desensitization in AP. Anderson *et al.* (2017), in their comprehensive review, confirm that exposure to violent media produces increased aggressive behavior alongside decreased empathy and prosocial behavior. Fanti *et al.* (2009) demonstrated that repeated exposure to violent content is sufficient to diminish sympathy toward victims. Carnagey *et al.* (2007) showed that even 20 minutes of playing a violent game is enough to reduce physiological responses to real-world violence. Murray (2014) refers to this condition as “thoughtless vigilantes”—individuals who have lost their sense of empathy for the impact of violence on others. Scharrer (2022) identifies three pathways of harm from violent media—the learning of aggression, emotional desensitization, and persistent fear—all of which appear to operate simultaneously in AP; this condition warrants vigilance from an early age, as it has the potential to establish patterns of emotional response that are difficult to reverse later in life (Funk, 2005).

The Role of Parents as a First Filter That Is Not Functioning Optimally

A factor that significantly worsened the impact of exposure on AP was the absence of effective parental mediation. Pfetsch (2018) and Wang *et al.* (2024) confirm that parental

mediation—active engagement, discussion of content, and media selection—is the most effective protective factor, far more influential than mere duration limits. In AP's case, the opposite occurred: AP's father provided access to horror games without any screening, while AP's mother admitted she was unable to limit his use. Eirich *et al.* (2025) emphasize that it is the family's overall media ecology—not duration alone—that determines media's impact on a child. Bourne *et al.* (2022) add that non-selective parenting carries real consequences for children's emotion regulation and executive function. Fedonkina (2025) cautions that within digital socialization, parents need to act as guides rather than merely as gatekeepers of access—a role that was absent in AP's case.

Nuance: Not All Digital Media Influence is Negative

Not all of the digital media influence on AP was negative—TikTok, for instance, prompted AP to fry an egg under direct sunlight, a positive exploratory act. Richert *et al.* (2024) note that findings on digital media's influence on children's imagination are mixed, and that high-quality media content can support the development of creativity and imagination. More significantly, MFR—who lives in a geographic environment relatively similar to AP's—did not exhibit a similar pattern of horror and violence in her work. Thibodeau-Nielsen *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that children's imaginative capacity is shaped by individual factors, including emotion regulation and physiological conditions unique to each child. The findings of this study are therefore not deterministic—digital media is a significant risk factor, not the sole determining one. In other words, digital media constitutes a significant risk factor, but a child's imagination, individual personality, and the quality of parental mediation determine how deeply its influence takes hold.

Implications for Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling: An Expressive Counseling Perspective

Among all the contributions of this study, this section presents what is most original and most distinct from prior research: a practical framework for Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling that directly responds to the challenges of digital childhood. Where prior research has stopped at quantitatively documenting the effects of digital media, this study moves further—providing an operational instrument for detection and a pathway for intervention through an expressive counseling approach. Within the VECF, expressive counseling constitutes the fifth component and the closing link of the causal chain: once the source is identified, the mechanism understood, the impact detected through drawing, and its transfer into real-world behavior confirmed, Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling counselors have a solid foundation on which to act. Imaginative drawing is not merely research data—it is a valid, nonintimidating, nonverbal assessment instrument that can be directly applied in practice (Goslin-Jones, 2020; Bradley *et al.*, 2008).

Operationally, Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling counselors can implement these findings through three concrete steps within an assessment session. First, provide a free drawing session with no predetermined theme—this condition of spontaneity has been shown to produce more authentic emotional expression than drawing under specific instructions, as observed in both AP's and MFR's cases. Second, attend to three key visual indicators in children's drawings: (a) the dominance of a single color extending beyond thematic boundaries, marking an underlying emotional state; (b) horror- or violence-themed objects accompanied by the child's verbal narration, marking the internalization of media content; and (c) patterns of creative modification applied to characters familiar to the child, marking the depth of internalization. Third, combine drawing analysis with the child's spontaneous verbal narration during the drawing process—treating the two as a single,

inseparable unit of data (Deguara and Nutbrown, 2024; Søndergaard and Reventlow, 2019). Where all three indicators are identified, counselors may proceed with in-depth interviews with parents to map patterns of digital media exposure and the quality of mediation occurring at home. This study opens a new methodological pathway for developing Early Childhood Guidance and Counseling practice that is responsive to the challenges of digital childhood—a contribution that distinguishes it from prior research focused on quantitative measurement alone.

5. CONCLUSION

This study yields two principal findings that answer the research questions posed. First, four sources of digital media were explicitly identified as influencing AP's imagination: horror-genre online games (*Skibidi War Toilets Attack*), YouTube, television, and TikTok—with TikTok being the sole source to produce a positive influence, in the form of encouraging experimentation. Second, this influence manifested across three mutually reinforcing layers: nine horror- and violence-themed objects in the imaginative drawings; patterns of creative modification demonstrating deep internalization that goes beyond mere imitation; and three concrete instances of content transfer into real-world behavior—hitting friends under the guise of self-defense, the normalization of negative behavior, and diminished empathic response. The absence of active, selective parental mediation was found to be a factor that significantly amplified the impact of this exposure.

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