

# Aggressors or Victims: Gender and Race in Music Video Violence

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**ABSTRACT.** *Objective.* To examine portrayals of violence in popular music videos for patterns of aggression and victimization by gender and race.

*Design and Setting.* Content analysis of 518 music videos broadcast over national music television networks, Black Entertainment Television (BET), Country Music Television (CMT), Music Television (MTV), and Video Hits-1 (VH-1) during a 4-week period at randomly selected times of high adolescent viewership.

*Main Outcome Measures.* Differences in the genders and races portrayed as aggressors and victims in acts of violence.

*Results.* Seventy-six (14.7%) of the analyzed music videos contained portrayals of individuals engaging in overt interpersonal violence, with a mean of 6.1 violent acts per violence-containing video. Among the 462 acts of violence, the music video's main character was clearly the aggressor in 80.1% and the victim in 17.7%. In 391 (84.6%) of the violence portrayals, the gender of the aggressor or victim could be determined. Male gender was significantly associated with aggression; aggressors were 78.1% male, whereas victims were 46.3% female. This relationship was influenced by race. Among whites, 72.0% of the aggressors were male and 78.3% of the victims were female. Although blacks represent 12% of the United States population, they were aggressors in 25.0% and victims in 41.0% of music video violence. Controlling for gender, racial differences were significant among males; 29.0% of aggressors and 75.0% of victims were black. A logistic regression model did not find direct effects for gender and race, but revealed a significant interaction effect, indicating that the differences between blacks and whites were not the same for both genders. Black males were more likely than all others to be portrayed as victims of violence (adjusted odds ratio = 28.16, 95% confidence interval = 8.19, 84.94).

*Conclusions.* Attractive role models were aggressors in more than 80% of music video violence. Males and females were victims with equivalent frequency, but males were more than three times as likely to be aggressors. Compared with United States demographics, blacks were overrepresented as aggressors and victims, whereas whites were underrepresented. White females were most frequently victims. Music videos may be reinforcing false stereotypes of aggressive black males and victim-

ized white females. These observations raise concern for the effect of music videos on adolescents' normative expectations about conflict resolution, race, and male-female relationships. *Pediatrics* 1998;101:669-674; violence, media, television, music videos, race, gender.

ABBREVIATIONS. MTV, Music Television; BET, Black Entertainment Television; CMT, Country Music Television; VH-1, Video Hits-1.

Injury and death by violence has been the greatest public health threat to American adolescents in the latter half of the 20th century. Violence, in the form of accidents, homicides, and suicides, was the cause of death for 55% of 10- to 14-year-olds and 80% of 15- to 19-year-olds in 1991.<sup>1</sup> In 1994, 3569 young people between 15 and 19 years old were murdered,<sup>2</sup> and an estimated 357 000 assaulted severely enough to require emergency medical care,<sup>3</sup> many of them by other adolescents. The rate at which young black males were murdered rose 300% between 1950 and 1980,<sup>4</sup> with 134.6 of every 100 000 black male adolescents dying at the hands of others in 1991.<sup>5</sup> There were 150 200 arrests of adolescents for violent crimes in 1994, including 3700 for murder, 6000 for rape, and 85 300 for aggravated assault.<sup>6</sup> The number of 15- to 17-year-old murderers increased by 195% between 1984 and 1994, when 94% of juveniles arrested for murder were male and 59% were black.<sup>6</sup> Studies of violence and homicide have found that aggressors and victims are both likely to be young, male, poor, of the same race, abusers of alcohol or drugs, depressed, and to have witnessed or been victimized by violence in the past.<sup>7</sup> Recent research has found that previous exposure to violence is the strongest correlate with violence and weapon-carrying in adolescents.<sup>8-12</sup>

The etiology of violence is complex and multifactorial. Although aggression has always been a key feature of human behavior, the rapid increase in the prevalence of interpersonal violence in the United States is as concerning as its causes are unclear. Social conditions, such as poverty, racial discrimination, substance abuse, inadequate schools, joblessness, family conflict and dissolution, all contribute to an environment that fosters violence. Another powerful social influence, whose rise in importance parallels the surge in violence, is television. An increase in homicides and violent crime in the early 1950s led to early concern among physicians about the health consequences of the proliferation of televisions in American homes.<sup>13</sup> Since that time, research into the

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relationship between televised and real-life violence has resulted in more than 3000 studies that have found a consistent association between the viewing of televised violence and subsequent aggressive behavior.<sup>14,15</sup>

Since 1981, music videos have been an important part of adolescents' television viewing. Research done before the introduction of music videos demonstrated that although both television and music captured adolescents' attention, it was music that powerfully engaged their emotions.<sup>16</sup> Seeing both media as one-way transmissions of sequenced content with expressive systems of symbolic and explicit meanings, the researchers accurately anticipated that music television would prove particularly potent at evoking feelings, attitudes, and social values. Designed for and aimed at teenagers between 12 and 19 years old, the largest music television network, MTV, is watched by 73% of boys and 78% of girls in this age group for an average of 6.6 and 6.2 hours each week, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Early content analyses of small numbers of music videos broadcast on MTV found that as much as 56.6% of broadcast music videos contained portrayals of violence.<sup>18-20</sup> Recent research with a larger sample size of videos from four major music television networks showed that violence portrayals in music videos varied between 11.5% and 22.4% by network and between 9.7% and 20.4% by music genre, with young adults shown engaging in violence in 63.0% of the violent videos.<sup>21</sup> Previous research has found that music video viewers are exposed to a significant amount of violence, but we know little about the interpersonal dynamics of those portrayals. This content analysis examined the frequency with which attractive role models were portrayed as aggressors or victims of violence in music videos and analyzed the patterns of aggression and victimization by gender and race.

## METHODS

### Sample

As previously described,<sup>21,22</sup> broadcast music videos were recorded from the four major music television networks, BET, CMT, MTV, and VH-1. During a 4-week period between May 26, 1994 and June 23, 1994, 550 music videos were recorded during times of highest adolescent viewership (Monday through Thursday 3 PM to 9 PM, Friday 3 PM to 1 AM, and Saturday and Sunday from 10 AM to 12 AM). Equal length recording time slots were assigned to the networks using a random numbers table, resulting in each network having a similar number of recordings from each time slot. If a video received repeated airplay on a network, only its first broadcast was analyzed. All repeat broadcasts of the same video were not encoded. When duplicated videos were eliminated, 518 videos from the four networks, BET ( $n = 182$ ), CMT ( $n = 101$ ), MTV ( $n = 152$ ), and VH-1 ( $n = 83$ ) remained for analysis.

### Data Collection Instrument

Based upon established approaches for the content analysis of television,<sup>23</sup> the data collection instrument developed for this study examined interpersonal rather than natural violence,<sup>24</sup> the prosocial and antisocial qualities of the video,<sup>25,26</sup> weighted the violent acts for severity,<sup>27</sup> and placed them into human context in terms of intention to harm and who was harmed.<sup>28,29</sup> Because concept (ie, nonconcert) music videos tend to be short, theme-driven, and abstract, this instrument, like previous music video analyses, categorized by content rather than by narrative<sup>18</sup> and encoded elements such as the setting of the scene and the demographics of its characters.<sup>19</sup> The instrument specifically recorded

the frequency and nature of individual scenes of adolescent health risk behaviors, including violence, weapon-carrying, tobacco use and advertising, and alcohol use and advertising. Details about the music video, such as the title, artist or group, duration, musical genre, and network on which it was aired were noted. Only the visuals observed in the music video, rather than contents of the lyrics, were encoded on the data collection instrument.

In our previous content analyses of music videos, the units of analysis were the music videos. In this study, the units of analysis were the violent aggressors or victims of violence in each violent act. Based on Gerbner's<sup>30</sup> description, we defined violence as the overt expression of physical force or threat, with or without a weapon, against self or other, compelling action against one's will, threatening or resulting in pain, injury, or death. The act of violence was defined as a single violent interchange, of which there might be several in an individual video or scene. For example, if Person A punches Person B, this was a single violent act in which Person A would be encoded as the aggressor, Person B as the victim. However, if Person B retaliates by stabbing Person A, this was a separate violent act, with Person B encoded as the aggressor and Person A as the victim. For each act of interpersonal violence, the genders and races of the aggressors and victims of each violent act were encoded.

### Content Analysis

The content analysis was conducted by four male and four female undergraduate college students under the supervision of the investigators. To approximate the diversity of the adolescents viewing music videos, the students ranged in age from 17 to 24 years and in racial/ethnic backgrounds: three Anglo-Americans, two African-Americans, two Asian-Americans, and one East Indian-Canadian. The students were given 12 hours of training in the use of the data collection instrument while viewing music videos. In two-person male-female teams, they were then asked to view and encode 10 sample videos that had previously been scored by the investigators. The two-person content analysis team needed to reach agreement on each behavior or variable observed before it was encoded. This technique yielded a mean percent of agreement of  $89.25 \pm 7.1\%$  and a mean  $\kappa$  of  $0.73 \pm 0.20$ .

To conduct the content analysis of the study videos, the eight students were randomly assigned to rotating two-person male-female teams, resulting in each male teaming with each female with approximately equal frequency. The videos were viewed by the teams in a private office on a viewer-controlled TV/VCR. The teams encoded videos during 2-hour viewing periods. No one person encoded videos for more than two viewing periods a day and these were separated by a rest period of at least 1 hour. As before, the team had to agree on the behavior or variable observed before it could be encoded. The video could be replayed as many times as was necessary to reach agreement and could be stopped so that the team could encode the data without missing other portions of the video. If the team could not reach agreement, one of the investigators viewed the scene and decided whether and how the behavior in question should be encoded.

### Statistical Analysis

Pearson  $\chi^2$  tests were used to compare differences in genders and races portrayed as aggressors and victims. Within scenes, independent observations resulted in individuals being encoded as either aggressors or victims of violence. However, among scenes in the same video, an individual may have been observed and encoded more than once as aggressor or victim, or both. To compensate for the violation of the  $\chi^2$  test assumption of the independence of observations, the probability level was reduced from 0.05 to 0.01 for results to be considered significant. Confirmatory analyses were performed with multiple logistic regression. All analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows, version 6.1.<sup>31</sup>

## RESULTS

Of the 518 different music videos analyzed, 76 (14.7%) contained one or more scenes of overt interpersonal violence. These yielded a total of 462 acts of violence, with a mean of 6.1 violent acts in each music video that portrayed violence. The protagonist

of the music video was clearly the aggressor in 80.1%, the victim in 17.7%, and not involved in 2.2% of these portrayals of violence ( $P < .0001$ ). The genders and races of aggressors and/or victims of violence could not always be clearly determined, resulting in smaller sample sizes for the gender- and race-specific results. Gender and race of aggressors could be identified nearly four times as frequently as those of the victims. Because the numbers of aggressors and victims of races other than black and white were small, the data analysis was restricted to comparisons between blacks and whites.

Among the 391 acts of violence (84.6%) in which the gender of the aggressors and/or victims could be determined, male gender was significantly associated with aggression (Table 1). The aggressors were 78.1% male, whereas the victims were 46.3% female ( $P < .0001$ ). The relationships between gender and violent aggression or victimization were influenced by race. The race of the aggressor and/or victim could be identified in 360 (92.1%) of the violent acts in which gender was known (Table 2). Among whites, males were aggressors in 72.0% and females were victimized in 78.3% of the acts of violence ( $P < .0001$ ). Among blacks, 91.3% of the aggressors and 96.8% of the victims were males, but these results did not achieve statistical significance.

In 81.0% (374) of the portrayals of overt violence, the race of the aggressors and/or victims could be clearly determined as black or white (Table 3). The aggressors were black in 25.0%, whereas the victims were white in 59.0% of the violent acts ( $P = .0079$ ). Controlling for gender, racial differences were significant among males (Table 4); 29.0% of the aggressors and 75.0% of the victims were black ( $P < .0001$ ). Among females, 90.9% of the aggressors and 97.3% of the victims were white, but these results did not achieve statistical significance.

The likelihood of being an aggressor or victim of music video violence varied among black males, white males, black females, and white females differently than by race or gender alone, suggesting an interaction effect between race and gender. Tested with multiple logistic regression analysis, the direct effects of race and gender became nonsignificant ( $P$  gender = 0.38,  $P$  race = 0.63), whereas a significant interaction effect was found ( $P = .0051$ ). Black males were more likely than all others to be portrayed as victims of violence (adjusted odds ratio = 28.16, 95% confidence interval = 8.19, 84.94).

## DISCUSSION

Although previous research has found that a significant amount of violent behavior is portrayed in

**TABLE 2.** Gender Differences in Aggressors and Victims of Music Video Violence, Controlling for Race (N = 360)

	Aggressor		Victim		<i>P</i>
	N	%	N	%	
Whites					
Males	154	72.0	10	21.7	<.0001
Females	60	28.0	36	78.3	
Total	214	100.0	46	100.0	
Blacks					
Males	63	91.3	30	96.8	=.32
Females	6	8.7	1	3.2	
Total	69	100.0	31	100.0	

**TABLE 3.** Race Differences in Aggressors and Victims of Music Video Violence (N = 374)

	Aggressor		Victim		<i>P</i>
	N	%	N	%	
Race					
Black	74	25.0	32	41.0	=.0079
White	222	75.0	46	59.0	
Total	296	100.0	78	100.0	

**TABLE 4.** Racial Differences in Aggressors and Victims of Music Video Violence, Controlling for Gender (N = 360)

	Aggressor		Victim		<i>P</i>
	N	%	N	%	
Males					
Black	63	29.0	30	75.0	<.0001
White	154	71.0	10	25.0	
Total	217	100.0	40	100.0	
Females					
Black	6	9.1	1	2.7	=.22
White	60	90.9	36	97.3	
Total	66	100.0	37	100.0	

broadcast music videos, this study is the first detailed examination of the interpersonal nature of music video violence. Adolescents, who experiment with adult roles and behaviors, often idolize and model themselves after popular music stars. From a public health perspective, it is of great concern that these attractive role models were overwhelmingly portrayed in music videos as the perpetrators of interpersonal violence. In a society in which role models for our youth are increasingly represented by stars of the entertainment and sports worlds, matter-of-fact portrayals of aggression by admired stars serve to normalize, make acceptable, and romanticize the use of interpersonal violence to resolve conflicts, to release anger, and to prevail in the pursuit of personal goals. The justified use of violence by the hero is a pervasive and powerfully influential concept in American entertainment narratives. The entertainment industry and others who dispute the powerful influence of the media on aggressive behavior cite similar levels of media violence in Japan which has a far lower level of real life violence. However, research has revealed that Japanese media violence differs from its American counterpart in that it is perpetrated by bad guys rather than heroes, the violence is not portrayed as justifiable, and that it results in real suffering to the victims and real con-

**TABLE 1.** Gender Differences in Aggressors and Victims of Music Video Violence (N = 391)

Gender	Aggressor		Victim		<i>P</i>
	N	%	N	%	
Male	243	78.1	43	53.8	<.0001
Female	68	21.9	37	46.3	
Total	311	100.0	80	100.0	



sequences to the aggressors.<sup>32</sup> The more realistic Japanese portrayal of violence as a hurtful and frightening behavior with significant negative outcomes for both aggressors and victims is less likely to produce imitators among its viewers than the repercussion-free violence typical of American entertainment.

The association between viewing media violence and subsequent aggression has been repeatedly demonstrated. Laboratory and field studies have found both short-term and long-term effects. In a double-blind prospective cohort study of first- and second-graders in a small Canadian town to which television was first introduced in 1973, a 160% increase in the level of the children's physical aggression was found after 2 years of television exposure.<sup>33</sup> A 1960 survey of 875 8-year-old children in New York found a strikingly positive relationship between children's viewing of violence on television and their levels of aggression.<sup>34,35</sup> Ten years later, the researchers reinterviewed more than one-half of their original subjects and, in boys, found a strong relationship between the level of media violence viewing at age 8 and a history of aggression at age 19.<sup>36</sup> This correlation was consistent, even when IQ, social status, parental aggression, social and geographic mobility, church attendance, and the child's baseline aggression level were controlled. In fact, the boys who at age 8 were rated as low aggressive but watched high levels of television were more aggressive at 19 than those who were rated high aggressive but did not watch violent television. Twelve years after that, in 1982, repeat interviews and review of criminal justice records revealed that the greater the amount of violent television watched by the children at age 8, the more aggressive they were while under the influence of alcohol, the more harshly they disciplined their children, and the more serious the crimes of which they had been convicted at age 30.<sup>37</sup> The study was repeated in other American communities as well as four other countries, Australia, Finland, Israel, and Poland, yielding similar results to the original study with both males and females.<sup>38,39</sup>

Epidemiological data also support the association between media violence and aggression. The United States and Canada saw homicide rates among whites increase by 93% and 92%, respectively, between 1945 and 1974.<sup>40</sup> In each country, there was a lag of 10 to 15 years between the introduction of television and the near-doubling of homicide rates, theorized by researchers to reflect the coming of age of television-influenced children.<sup>40</sup> In support of this hypothesis, rates of serious violence rose in children first, then among adolescents, followed by young adults, before being reflected in the adult homicide rate. Regional differences in the rise in homicide rates paralleled the region-by-region introduction of television in the United States. In addition, exposure to television has been associated with a doubling in rates of rape, assault, and other forms of interpersonal violence during the same time period. By contrast, South Africa, which banned television until 1975 for political reasons, experienced a 7% decrease in homicides among whites between 1948 and 1974. However, from 1975, when television was intro-

duced, until 1987, the homicide rate among whites increased by 130%.<sup>41</sup>

Although these studies and numerous others have found that exposure to television violence increases the likelihood of later aggressive behavior,<sup>42</sup> a correlation that has been substantiated by rigorous meta-analysis<sup>43</sup> and formal epidemiology,<sup>44</sup> there are differing theories as to the mechanism of the relationship between media violence and real life aggression. The cultivation theory proposes that media portrayals inflate the prevalence of violence in the world, cultivating in viewers the mean world syndrome, an unrealistic perception of the world as a violent and dangerous place.<sup>45,46</sup> Fear of being the victim of violence is a strong motivation to carry a weapon, to be more aggressive, to "get them before they get me." Another proposed causal mechanism, based in social learning theory,<sup>47</sup> holds that violence and other antisocial behaviors are learned through imitation of observed models.<sup>48-50</sup> This hypothesis has been supported by field research<sup>51,52</sup> and meta-analysis.<sup>53</sup> Others theorize that prolonged exposure to media violence results in an increased acceptance of violence as an appropriate means of conflict resolution.<sup>54,55</sup> Studies designed to test the theory that experiencing media violence leads to a catharsis, a reduction in actual aggression because of the vicarious release of hostility, actually found increased overt aggression because of lowered inhibitions after experiencing media violence.<sup>56</sup> Finally, many researchers propose that the most insidious and potent effect of media violence is to desensitize all of us to real life violence and to the harm caused its victims, a position supported by numerous studies.<sup>57-62</sup> These theories complement each other in explaining the complex relationship between exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior. Music videos are short, nonlinear, impressionistic, and even more likely than narrative television or film to use violence for its arousal effect,<sup>63</sup> rather than revealing its realistic consequences. Previous research has documented desensitization to aggression after viewing music videos<sup>64</sup> and significant decreases in aggressive behavior after the cessation of music video broadcasts.<sup>65</sup>

Limitations of this study included its evaluation of music videos broadcast only on the four most widely-viewed music television networks. The randomly selected broadcast times at which the video recordings were made may not accurately parallel adolescent viewing patterns. After duplicates were eliminated, BET videos represented 35% of the sample, which may have contributed to the proportions of black males portrayed as both aggressors and victims of violence. However, as previously reported in our study of the frequencies of violence portrayals by network and music genre,<sup>21</sup> violence was least frequent on BET (11.5%), as compared with MTV (22.4%) and other major music television networks. Multiply-broadcast videos were counted only once, which would result in an underestimation of the impact of repeated exposure to violent music videos. Repeated acts of violence are thought to have a cumulative effect on the viewer, thus each violent act

was counted separately. Although quantifying the aggressors and victims portrayed in each act of violence may more accurately reflect the complex and progressive nature of violence, it violates the assumption of the independence of observations which underlies the  $\chi^2$  test. Our reduction of the probability level from 0.05 to 0.01 should result in a conservative test of the null hypothesis and reduce the chance of Type II error.

In our findings, the gender and racial characteristics of the aggressors and victims of music video violence were especially concerning. Males and females were portrayed as victims with equivalent frequency, raising concern for the cultivation of the perception that nobody is safe. It is notable that the gender and race of aggressors were recognizable nearly four times as often as those of the victims, further inflating the prominence of aggressors and dehumanizing and diminishing the importance of the victims and their suffering. Males, often the star of the music video, were more than three times as likely as females to be portrayed as aggressors. Blacks were portrayed as aggressors in music video violence at more than twice the frequency of their 12% representation in the United States population. Among males, blacks were three-fourths of the victims, 28 times more likely to be victimized than other groups, reinforcing commonly-held preconceptions of black men leading short, dangerous lives. White females were the single largest race-gender group portrayed as victims. Previous studies have found significant levels of sexism and sex role stereotyping in music videos.<sup>66-69</sup> Our findings indicate that music videos may be perpetuating and reinforcing false stereotypes of aggressive black males and easily victimized white females. Of concern from a public health standpoint, these portrayals may change the attitudes of young males toward women and male-female relationships. Multiple laboratory and field experiments have demonstrated that exposure to sexual violence in music videos and other media desensitizes male viewers to violence against women<sup>70-74</sup> and heightens a sense of disempowerment among female viewers.<sup>75</sup> These effects may have profound implications for the nature of adolescent male-female relationships and for both genders' expectations for and conduct in those relationships.

In the context of the powerful association found between media violence and real-life aggression during the past 45 years, our findings raise concern for the effect of violent portrayals in music videos on adolescents' normative expectations about their own safety and what they must do to secure it. Adolescents' approaches to interracial interactions and male-female relationships, and their strategies for conflict resolution are vulnerable to the effects of these portrayals in music videos. The plethora of media violence is becoming an urgent focus of public health and medical professionals.<sup>76-79</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and other medical organizations have recommended that health care professionals address media exposure as a risk factor to their patients.<sup>42,80-83</sup> Parents and teens should be encouraged to limit media

use and to watch television together. With the help of the schools, they can learn to read the media message critically, and to advocate for and watch prosocial rather than antisocial programming. The findings of this study suggest that it may not be simply the amount of violence in the media, but the nature of that violence and its effects on interpersonal relationships that are critical factors in adolescent health and risk behaviors. In addressing violence as a health issue, clinicians, educators, and public policy makers must be aware of and respond to the potent messages and role models in music videos and other mass media.

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