

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACCEPTANCE OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOR AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE INVOLVEMENT: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PEER-GROUP CONTEXT

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Received: 02/3/2026; Received in revised form: 19/3/2026; Accepted: 22/6/2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines how acceptance of violent behavior translates into school violence involvement among lower secondary students in Hue, Vietnam, and whether this relationship is conditioned by peer-group context. Drawing on survey data collected in 2024 from three schools, the analysis moves beyond a simple norm-behavior framework to conceptualise acceptance as subjective legitimation embedded in social environments. Results show that acceptance is positively associated with involvement in all three forms of violence, with the strongest effects observed for psychological/relational aggression and weaker associations for cyber violence. Interaction models further indicate that the acceptance-behavior link becomes stronger when students perceive their peer group as more violence-prone, suggesting a process of contextual amplification. However, the moderating effect modestly increases overall explanatory power, indicating that peer-group context conditions rather than replaces individual acceptance. The findings highlight that the translation of tolerant attitudes into behavior does not occur in isolation but unfolds within proximate peer dynamics. Effective prevention strategies should therefore address both attitudinal legitimation and the peer-group environments in which violent practices are reinforced.

Keywords: School violence, peer groups, cyber violence, lower secondary students.

1. INTRODUCTION

School violence is a persistent and multifaceted social phenomenon within educational settings. International reports indicate that school violence encompasses physical aggression, psychological or relational aggression, and cyber aggression, with

substantial prevalence across diverse national contexts [9]. In the context of digital transformation, violent behaviors are no longer confined to face-to-face interactions but increasingly extend into online spaces, blurring the boundaries between school life and the digital environment [5], [6]. In Vietnam, school violence remains a matter of public and academic concern, manifesting in verbal humiliation, peer exclusion, dissemination of harmful online content, and physical altercations among students. These behaviors not only generate immediate harm but may also produce long-term consequences for adolescents' psychological well-being and processes of socialisation [10]. Understanding the social mechanisms associated with violent behavior is therefore essential for fostering safe and supportive school environments.

Rather than conceptualising norms as abstract collective structures, this study focuses on individual-level acceptance of violent behavior, defined as the extent to which students tolerate or regard specific forms of violence as acceptable under certain circumstances. From this perspective, acceptance may be understood as a form of subjective legitimization of behavior, and thus as a potential driver of behavioral engagement [2]. This approach allows norms to be examined not merely as generalised social expectations, but as concrete behavioural orientations at the individual level. At the same time, extensive research highlights the central role of peer groups as agents of socialisation during adolescence [8]. Peer-group contexts not only influence behavior directly but also shape how individuals interpret and enact behavioral norms [3]. Our previous study conducted in Hue City found that peer group characteristics were significantly associated with lower secondary students' involvement in school violence [1]. However, that analysis primarily treated peer influence as a direct predictor, leaving unexamined the potential interaction between individual orientations and peer-group context.

This gap raises a critical question: does the peer environment operate solely as an independent predictor of school violence involvement, or can it function as a moderator in the relationship between acceptance of violent behavior and actual engagement in violence? In other words, when a student exhibits a higher level of acceptance of violent behavior, does this acceptance translate more strongly into behavioral involvement within peer groups characterised by higher levels of violent tendencies? Conceptualising peer-group context as a moderating variable shifts the analytical focus from a model in which peers directly predict behavior to an interactional model that captures the interplay between individual-level orientations and proximate social environments.

Building on this framework, the present study examines the relationship between acceptance of violent behavior and involvement in three forms of school violence, namely physical, psychological/relational, and cyber, among lower secondary students. It further investigates the moderating role of peer-group context in this

relationship. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (1) To what extent does acceptance of violent behavior predict involvement in different forms of school violence? (2) Does the association between acceptance and behavior vary according to the level of violent tendencies within peer groups?

By doing so, this study moves beyond a direct-effect model toward an interactional perspective that situates behavioral enactment within structured peer environments. In doing so, it contributes to a sociological understanding of how subjective legitimation becomes translated into behavioral involvement under conditions of peer amplification, particularly across the distinct contexts of offline and online aggression.

2. METHODS

2.1. Data

This study draws on quantitative data collected in 2024 as part of a broader research project examining students' perceptions and behaviors related to school violence in Hue City, Vietnam. The survey was conducted in three lower secondary schools, namely Nguyen Chi Dieu, Chu Van An, and Tran Cao Van, with a total of 499 participating students. Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire completed by students under the supervision of the research team. After excluding cases with missing values on key variables, the final analytical sample comprised 470 observations included in the regression analyses. The survey instrument consisted of four main components: (i) frequency of involvement in different forms of school violence, (ii) level of acceptance of corresponding violent behaviors, (iii) characteristics of peer-group context, particularly the presence of violent tendencies within peer groups, and (iv) selected individual and family background characteristics of respondents.

2.2. Variables and measurements

School violence involvement was measured through students' self-reported frequency of engagement in specific behaviors during the recent period. Based on content and situational context, behaviors were grouped into three categories: (1) Physical violence (four items), including direct acts such as hitting, pushing, or damaging property; (2) Psychological/relational violence (eight items), including insulting, threatening, spreading rumours, social exclusion, or coercive peer behaviors; (3) Cyber violence (two items), including sending hurtful messages or posting offensive content on online platforms. Frequency was assessed using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never; 5 = Very frequently). Items within each category were averaged to construct composite indices representing each form of school violence involvement. Internal

consistency was satisfactory, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.861 for physical violence, 0.892 for psychological/relational violence, and 0.807 for cyber violence.

Rather than measuring norms as abstract collective constructs, the study operationalises acceptance of violent behavior at the individual level, defined as the extent to which students regard specific violent acts as acceptable under certain circumstances. For each corresponding behavior, students reported their level of acceptance on a five-point scale (1 = Completely unacceptable; 5 = Completely acceptable). The acceptance items were structured in parallel with the behavioral items, enabling the construction of three matching indices: (1) Acceptance of physical violence (four items; $\alpha = 0.836$); (2) Acceptance of psychological/relational violence (eight items; $\alpha = 0.873$); (3) Acceptance of cyber violence (two items; $\alpha = 0.648$). Although the reliability coefficient for the cyber acceptance scale is lower than for the other two scales, this level remains acceptable given the brevity of a two-item measure. Composite scores were calculated as the mean of component items, with higher values indicating stronger subjective legitimization of violent behavior.

The primary moderating variable captures students' perception that their current peer group tends toward violent behavior, reflecting subjective assessments of behavioral tendencies within close peer networks. To reduce potential confounding, the models include several control variables: gender, the presence of academically positive peer tendencies, self-assessed family economic status, self-reported family relationship quality, grade level, and most recent academic performance. Descriptive statistics and measurement details for all analysed variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Measurement and Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variables	Measurement	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Physical violence involvement	Mean index of 4 items; 5-point scale (1 = Never; 5 = Very frequently)	1.49	0.74	1	5	498
Psychological/relational violence involvement	Mean index of 8 items; 5-point scale (1 = Never; 5 = Very frequently)	1.56	0.73	1	5	499
Cyber violence involvement	Mean index of 2 items; 5-point scale (1 = Never; 5 = Very frequently)	1.40	0.78	1	5	498
Acceptance of physical violence	Mean index of 4 items; 5-point scale (1 = Completely unacceptable; 5 = Completely acceptable)	1.40	0.60	1	5	499
Acceptance of psychological/relational violence	Mean index of 8 items; 5-point scale (1 = Completely	1.48	0.59	1	5	499

	unacceptable; 5 = Completely acceptable)					
Acceptance of cyber violence	Mean index of 2 items; 5-point scale (1 = Completely unacceptable; 5 = Completely acceptable)	1.33	0.57	1	5	499
Peer-group violent tendency	4-point agreement scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 4 = Strongly agree)	1.35	0.63	1	4	494
Peer-group academic positivity	4-point agreement scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 4 = Strongly agree)	3.43	0.99	1	4	491
Gender	Binary (0 = Male; 1 = Female)	0.46	0.50	0	1	498
Family economic status (self-assessed)	10-point scale (1 = Very poor; 10 = Very wealthy)	6.23	1.70	1	10	485
Family relationship quality (self-assessed)	5-point scale (1 = Very poor; 5 = Very good)	4.37	0.97	1	5	492
Grade level	Categorical (1 = Grade 6; 2 = Grade 7; 3 = Grade 8; 4 = Grade 9)	2.44	1.11	1	4	499
Academic performance	5-point scale (1 = Poor; 5 = Excellent)	2.30	0.83	1	5	496

2.3. Analytical strategy

The study employs ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with robust standard errors to examine the association between acceptance of violent behavior and corresponding involvement in school violence. Separate models are estimated for each outcome: physical violence, psychological/relational violence, and cyber violence. The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, baseline models estimate the direct association between acceptance and behavioral involvement, controlling for individual characteristics and family-school contextual factors. Second, to test the moderating role of peer-group context, interaction terms between acceptance and perceived peer group violent tendency are introduced. The general model specification is as follows:

$$Violence_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Acceptance_i) + \beta_2(Peer_i) + \beta_3(Acceptance_i \times Peer_i) + \beta_4(Controls_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

The coefficient β_3 captures whether the association between acceptance and behavioral involvement varies according to the level of violent tendency within the peer group. A statistically significant interaction term indicates that peer-group context conditions the translation of subjective legitimization into behavioral engagement. By adopting this approach, the analysis shifts from examining the independent effects of individual and contextual factors to modelling their interaction. This interactional

perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how individual orientations are either amplified or attenuated within proximate social environments.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Acceptance of violent behaviour and school violence involvement

Table 2 shows that acceptance of violent behavior is positively and significantly associated with all three forms of school violence, strongest for psychological/relational violence ($\beta = 0.396$), followed by physical ($\beta = 0.371$), and weaker for cyber violence ($\beta = 0.210$). These results indicate that higher acceptance corresponds to greater behavioral involvement, particularly in direct interpersonal contexts. The findings support the view that subjective legitimization can translate into concrete behavior [2], and are consistent with research highlighting the embedded nature of relational aggression in everyday peer interactions [8]. The stronger effect for psychological/relational violence suggests that such behaviors may be more readily normalised within routine school life than overt physical aggression.

Model fit follows a similar pattern, explaining 23.5% of the variance in psychological/ relational violence, 20.1% in physical violence, and 10.5% in cyber violence. The weaker explanatory power in the digital domain is consistent with research showing that cyber violence is shaped not only by interpersonal norms but also by features of online environments such as anonymity and technological affordances [3], [5]. Perceived peer-group violent tendency is positively and significantly associated with all three outcomes, supporting evidence on peer reinforcement of deviant behavior [6], [8] and prior findings from Hue [1]. By contrast, peer-group academic positivity is not statistically significant, suggesting that peer influence may operate in a norm-specific rather than uniformly protective manner.

Table 2: Effects of acceptance of violent behavior on school violence involvement (N = 470)

Variables	Physical Violence	Psychological/ Relational Violence	Cyber Violence
Acceptance of physical violence	0.371*** (0.068)	–	–
Acceptance of psychological/ relational violence	–	0.396*** (0.067)	–
Acceptance of cyber violence	–	–	0.210** (0.087)
Peer-group violent tendency	0.213*** (0.066)	0.223*** (0.058)	0.218*** (0.076)
Peer-group academic positivity	-0.033 (0.037)	-0.036 (0.041)	-0.085+ (0.046)

Family relationship quality		-0.080* (0.037)	-0.083* (0.041)	-0.048 (0.046)
Family economic status		-0.019 (0.021)	-0.022 (0.020)	-0.028 (0.024)
Gender (ref: Male)	Female	-0.119* (0.060)	-0.129* (0.060)	-0.106 (0.065)
Grade level (ref: Grade 6)	Grade 7	0.010 (0.090)	0.040 (0.088)	-0.021 (0.099)
	Grade 8	-0.148+ (0.083)	-0.040 (0.084)	-0.015 (0.099)
	Grade 9	-0.136 (0.090)	-0.068 (0.084)	-0.094 (0.102)
Academic performance		-0.036 (0.044)	-0.029 (0.040)	-0.029 (0.047)
Constant		1.520*** (0.292)	1.478*** (0.327)	1.686*** (0.386)
Observations		470	470	470
R ²		0.201	0.235	0.105

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses; + $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

Among the control variables, female students report significantly lower involvement in physical and psychological/relational violence, while no gender difference appears for cyber violence. Positive family relationships are negatively associated with direct forms of aggression. Higher grades show a slight tendency toward lower physical violence, and academic performance is negatively but not significantly related to violence involvement. Consistent with ecological perspectives [4], these findings reinforce that acceptance of violent behavior is closely linked to behavioral engagement, particularly in direct, face-to-face interactions.

3.2. Peer-group context as a conditional amplifier of the acceptance-behavior relationship

Unlike the baseline models presented in Table 2, where acceptance of violent behavior shows a direct and relatively consistent association with behavioral involvement, the interaction models reported in Table 3 suggest a more explicitly context-dependent mechanism once peer-group context is incorporated as a moderating variable. When the interaction term is introduced, the main effect of acceptance is no longer statistically significant for any of the three outcomes: physical violence ($\beta = 0.126$, $p = 0.384$), psychological/relational violence ($\beta = 0.140$, $p = 0.278$), and cyber violence ($\beta = -0.064$, $p = 0.659$). This pattern is characteristic of moderation models. In the presence of an interaction term, the coefficient of acceptance reflects its effect when peer violent tendency is at its reference (i.e., lowest) level, rather than the average effect across the entire sample [3], [6]. The attenuation of the main effect therefore does not imply that acceptance is irrelevant, but that its behavioral translation depends on contextual conditions.

The interaction effects vary across forms of violence. Acceptance interacts significantly with peer violent tendency for psychological/relational violence ($\beta = 0.135$,

$p < 0.05$) and cyber violence ($\beta = 0.160$, $p < 0.05$), and marginally for physical violence ($\beta = 0.125$, $p = 0.054$). These results indicate that acceptance is more likely to translate into behavioral involvement within peer groups perceived as violence-prone, suggesting a process of contextual amplification through peer reinforcement [3], [6], [8]. Extending earlier findings from Hue that focused on direct peer effects [1], the results show that peer-group context not only predicts behavior but also conditions the strength of the acceptance-behavior relationship, particularly for relational and cyber forms of aggression embedded in peer interaction.

Table 3: Interaction models: Acceptance of violent behavior and peer context (N = 470)

Variables		Physical Violence	Psychological/ Relational Violence	Cyber Violence
Acceptance of physical violence		0.126 (0.144)	–	–
Acceptance of psychological/ relational violence		–	0.140 (0.129)	–
Acceptance of cyber violence		–	–	-0.064 (0.145)
Peer-group violent tendency		0.015 (0.128)	-0.011 (0.116)	-0.024 (0.152)
Acceptance $\times$ Peer violent tendency (physical)		0.125+ (0.064)	–	–
Acceptance $\times$ Peer violent tendency (psych./rel.)		–	0.135* (0.054)	–
Acceptance $\times$ Peer violent tendency (cyber)		–	–	0.160* (0.080)
Peer-group academic positivity		-0.028 (0.036)	-0.033 (0.041)	-0.080+ (0.045)
Family relationship quality		-0.086* (0.037)	-0.087* (0.041)	-0.051 (0.046)
Family economic status		-0.022 (0.022)	-0.025 (0.020)	-0.031 (0.024)
Gender (ref: Male)	Female	-0.109+ (0.061)	-0.122* (0.059)	-0.096 (0.065)
Grade level (ref: Grade 6)	Grade 7	-0.003 (0.091)	0.021 (0.087)	-0.046 (0.099)
	Grade 8	-0.165* (0.084)	-0.056 (0.084)	-0.034 (0.100)
	Grade 9	-0.158+ (0.092)	-0.098 (0.086)	-0.120 (0.103)
Academic performance		-0.028 (0.043)	-0.021 (0.038)	-0.019 (0.045)
Constant		1.884*** (0.372)	1.888*** (0.391)	2.066*** (0.421)
Observations		470	470	470
R ²		0.210	0.245	0.116

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses; + $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

At the same time, the increase in explained variance is modest (e.g., R² rises from 0.235 to 0.245 for psychological/relational violence and from 0.105 to 0.116 for cyber

violence), indicating that moderation effects, although statistically significant, do not dramatically alter overall model fit. This pattern supports the interpretation that peer-group context does not substitute for individual acceptance, but rather conditions and intensifies its behavioral expression in specific social environments. Such an interpretation is consistent with ecological perspectives on school violence, which conceptualise behavior as emerging from the interaction between individual orientations and proximate social contexts [4].

From a sociological perspective, these findings can be interpreted through a two-layered mechanism. Acceptance reflects subjective legitimization of violence at the individual level [2], whereas peer-group context constitutes a space of validation and diffusion in which implicit signals of approval or encouragement may lower the threshold for behavioral enactment [5], [8]. In this sense, individual orientation provides the normative readiness, while the peer environment supplies the situational reinforcement. The clearer moderating effects observed for psychological/relational and cyber violence are consistent with the characteristics of these forms of aggression. Such behaviors are typically less impulsive and more embedded in relational dynamics, group alignment, and, in the case of cyber aggression, the relative invisibility or mediated nature of interaction [5], [7]. By contrast, physical violence is more visible and more readily subject to institutional sanction within school settings. As a result, the amplifying role of peer-group context may be partially constrained by formal disciplinary structures, which could explain why the interaction effect for physical violence remains only marginally significant.

Overall, Table 3 does not negate the importance of acceptance; rather, it demonstrates that its impact is context-dependent. Acceptance becomes more behaviorally consequential in peer environments conducive to violence, yet the magnitude of this moderating effect is insufficient to substantially transform the overall explanatory power of the model.

3.3. Direct and cyber violence: Differential pathways from acceptance to behavior

Comparing the models in Sections 3.1 and 3.2 reveals a consistent pattern, namely that the association between acceptance and violence involvement is stronger for offline forms of aggression, specifically physical and psychological/relational forms, than for cyber violence. In the direct-effect models, the coefficient for acceptance is highest for psychological/relational violence ($\beta = 0.396$), followed by physical violence ($\beta = 0.371$), and lowest for cyber violence ($\beta = 0.210$). The explanatory power of the models reflects a similar ordering: offline models account for approximately 20–24% of the variance, whereas the cyber model explains only 10.5%.

From a sociological standpoint, this suggests that in face-to-face contexts, tolerant attitudes are more tightly anchored in everyday interaction and reinforced by clearer

social cues, thereby facilitating behavioral enactment [2], [8]. By contrast, cyber violence is shaped by features of the digital environment, such as interactional distance, relative anonymity, and situational opportunity, which attenuate the direct linkage between acceptance and behavior [5], [7]. However, the interaction models indicate that cyber violence is particularly sensitive to peer moderation (interaction $\beta = 0.160$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that when individual acceptance coexists with a violence-prone peer environment, online aggression may be substantially amplified through peer influence and normative alignment [3], [6].

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that acceptance does not operate uniformly across contexts. In offline settings, its association with behavior appears more stable and directly embedded in routine interaction. In online environments, by contrast, its behavioral consequences are more contingent upon peer dynamics and patterns of group socialisation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between acceptance of violent behavior and involvement in different forms of school violence among lower secondary students in Hue, while assessing the moderating role of peer-group context. The analysis focused on how subjective legitimation at the individual level becomes translated into behavior within specific social environments. The findings show that acceptance is positively and significantly associated with all three forms of violence, with the strongest effects observed for psychological/relational aggression and the weakest for cyber violence. This suggests that the normalisation of violence at the individual level is particularly likely to manifest in direct interpersonal interactions. Interaction analyses further indicate that this association becomes stronger in peer groups perceived as more violence-prone, although the increase in explained variance is modest. Peer-group context thus operates as a conditional amplifier rather than a universal determinant.

The results underscore the need for school violence prevention strategies that address both tolerant attitudes toward violence and the peer-group environments in which such attitudes may be reinforced. At the same time, these strategies should be complemented by school-level measures aimed at monitoring, intervening in, and addressing concrete instances of violent behavior, thereby combining attitudinal change, peer environment improvement, and direct behavioral regulation. The study is limited by its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, and geographically restricted sample. Future longitudinal or mixed-method research could further clarify the mechanisms through which acceptance is translated into behavior within concrete social structures. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the movement from acceptance to

action does not occur in isolation but is shaped by the proximate interactional contexts in which students are embedded.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge Nguyen Dang Minh Nhat and Tran Le Khanh Nhi for sharing the data used in this study.

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**MỐI LIÊN HỆ GIỮA CHẤP NHẬN HÀNH VI BẠO LỰC
VÀ SỰ THAM GIA BẠO LỰC HỌC ĐƯỜNG:
VAI TRÒ ĐIỀU TIẾT CỦA MÔI TRƯỜNG NHÓM BẠN**

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này phân tích mối liên hệ giữa mức độ chấp nhận hành vi bạo lực và mức độ tham gia bạo lực học đường của học sinh trung học cơ sở, đồng thời xem xét vai trò của môi trường nhóm bạn trong mối quan hệ này. Dữ liệu được thu thập năm 2024 tại ba trường trung học cơ sở ở thành phố Huế. Kết quả cho thấy học sinh có mức độ chấp nhận bạo lực cao hơn có xu hướng tham gia bạo lực nhiều hơn, rõ nhất ở các hành vi bạo lực tâm lý/quan hệ và thấp hơn ở bạo lực trực tuyến. Phân tích cũng cho thấy, trong bối cảnh nhóm bạn học sinh tham gia có xu hướng bạo lực cao, mối liên hệ giữa sự chấp nhận và hành vi có xu hướng mạnh hơn. Nghiên cứu gợi ý rằng các biện pháp phòng ngừa bạo lực học đường cần chú trọng đồng thời đến việc định hình thái độ của học sinh và môi trường nhóm bạn, thay vì chỉ tập trung vào kiểm soát hành vi riêng lẻ.

Từ khóa: Bạo lực học đường, nhóm bạn đồng lứa, bạo lực trực tuyến, học sinh trung học cơ sở.