

**The Influence That the Content in NFL Media Platforms Have  
On the Cognitive Development of Our Youth**

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### ***Introduction and Media Content Selection:***

The specific media content that will be explored is the dramatic commentary, exaggerated reactions, and injury glorifications that are directly associated with YouTube videos and channels that surround the NFL. Content guidelines that YouTube must agree to are far less strict than traditional television, which essentially means that all types of content can be accessible to younger viewers. This tolerance signifies that “YouTube videos that should be consumed by older audiences based on their specific content, can easily be viewed by younger audiences” (Melendres, 2019). Platforms can profit greatly from this leniency, and because of this, attracting *young audiences* is a matter of survival (Shelton, 2017).

There are multiple ramifications to how dramatic commentary, exaggerated reactions, and injury glorification can contribute to the cognitive development of the youth that watches this content. Videos that are reaction-based (like NFL highlight videos), play a large part in influencing teens’ actions and behavior (Melendres, 2019). They can contribute to emotional desensitization, normalization of violence, and the difficulty in distinguishing entertainment vs. reality that is associated with these channels.

### ***Issue Identification and Detailed Analysis:***

Emotional desensitization, the normalization of violence, and difficulty in distinguishing entertainment vs. reality because of dramatic commentary, exaggerated reactions, and injury glorifications that are directly related to YouTube channels that surround the NFL is a significant concern. This issue is very diverse because not only does it involve YouTube and the NFL’s

marketing strategies, but the consumption of this media also has the potential to be a direct cause of detrimental cognitive development for our youth.

Over exposure to content that is violent, especially when portrayed as entertainment, can cause emotional desensitization. This is when people become less susceptible to violence individually, including the ramifications of it. The NFL has been trying to pull in young viewers through multiple media channels, and according to a study conducted on the NFL's intensive campaign to target children, the league has an online marketing center for youth from age 6 to 13 called NFLRUSH, which occupies over *3 million* users. Adding on to that, the NFL created an animated television series called "NFL Rush Zone" which is tailored especially to the youth. These programs and incentives completely engross the youth into NFL content, which show off plays that are extremely aggressive, or hits that are incredibly dangerous. This therefore normalizes and desensitizes our youth to violence, showing our youth that it is acceptable, even though it is not (Wilking et al., 2015).

Going even further than content sponsored by the NFL, YouTube videos glorify the most violent parts of football a lot of the time. Hard tackles that are replayed in dramatized slow-motion, with even more dramatic fan and commentator reactions to follow, show this violence as something to be praised or excited about, instead of a cause for worry or concern. This therefore takes the reality away from real life injuries that can be extremely heartbreaking and career-ending. This goes to show even further how this type of content not only can desensitize youth to violence but lead to a lack of compassion as well.

The overblown commentary and dramatic presentation of violent content that was mentioned previously also has the potential to confuse our youth between entertainment and reality. Shelton (2017) brings up how sports leagues, the NFL included, have escalated their

marketing tactics toward the youth with the intention of creating a culture of lifelong fandom and more profit for the leagues. The NFL combines a wide range of marketing platforms, including television, online and mobile marketing, gaming, and in-person functions to engage the youth in its brand. This widespread and universal occupancy of content from the NFL makes it difficult for children to separate entertainment from real-life consequences of football, particularly regarding injuries and aggressive behavior, whether physical or verbal (Shelton, 2017).

For many children and adolescents, their main source of sports content comes from YouTube, which is also known for having popular clips that highlight huge outbursts and intense physical activity that can lead to injury. Since the consumption of YouTube videos is so frequently replayed, these moments are glorified when they should not be, which diminishes their true, raw and real-life consequences. When YouTube creators prioritize entertainment over sportsmanship or safety, it takes away from what our youth should actually be learning from the game, which can lead to reckless habits and aggressive attitudes on and off the field.

There is a complicated relationship between media consumption and behavioral outcomes. According to a study done on the relationship between media use and sports participation behavior, there is a positive correlation between the two. With that being said, the report shows that while exposure to the media could motivate sports participation, the type of content that is consumed plays an important part in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of the youth that is consuming it. For example, if the media content that the youth watches is promoting bad sportsmanship, laziness, etc., the youth who watches it will reflect those behaviors in their own sports journey. Exposure to negative content promotes a warped idea of sportsmanship and morally correct conduct in sports (Tian et al., 2023).

To add, there is another layer to what was previously mentioned regarding how the violence in NFL YouTube content creates the idea that aggressiveness should be praised. Youth athletes who consume these types of messages have the potential to internalize the idea that the only way to be successful in sports is to be overly aggressive and overlook injuries, instead of basing success off good sportsmanship, teamwork, and discipline. This framing in NFL YouTube content could lead to not only more dangerous behavior in youth sports but also manipulate the youth's ideas to resolving conflict far beyond the field.

***Theoretical Application:***

The dramatic commentary, glorification of injuries, and exaggerated reactions that have an influence on our youth through NFL YouTube content are directly related to multiple media theories. Utilizing these theories can give families a much better grasp of how this type of content can contribute to the normalization of violence, emotional desensitization, and trouble in separating entertainment from reality amongst our youth.

The Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, highlights that people learn certain behaviors from observing and imitating things around them. Strasburger, Wilson, and Jordan (2014), state that "children can learn new behaviors from the media and that these behaviors can become permanent over time" (p. 36). The youth who are exposed to content from the NFL and YouTube are susceptible to the negative content that the NFL and YouTube bring, and due to this specific theory, there is a real change that these behaviors can become adopted and permanent.

The Cultivation Theory by George Gerbner suggests that prolonged or over-exposure to the media shapes an audience's perception of reality. Strasburger et al. (2014) goes into depth on

how “heavy exposure to media content can lead to the 'cultivation' of attitudes more consistent with the media version of reality than with actual reality" (p. 42). This directly relates to the issue at hand, because when adolescents consume content from the NFL or YouTube, they could start to see aggression and violence as the standard behavior in sports, which is simply not the reality at all.

### ***Recommendations***

There are several recommendations that would be successful in combatting this issue. First, making it a priority to push media literacy into the education system's curriculum would definitely improve media interpretation and critical thinking skills in adolescents. High schools and middle schools in particular should add media literacy education that hits on analyses of sports content. These lessons, if applied, would give students the ability to recognize exaggerated reactions, glorified injuries, and the difference between entertainment and real-world consequences of aggressive behaviors in sports.

For example, teachers and administrators could use published NFL highlight videos as case studies to catapult productive discussions that would help students grasp how violence is portrayed and praised in the media. Strasburger, Wilson, and Jordan (2014) highlight that media literacy is of the utmost importance in encouraging our youth to analyze media messages, which creates a culture of healthier engagement and interpretation. To add, a meta-analysis on media literacy interventions found that the education surrounding media literacy contributes to a lower amount of aggression and more responsible behaviors in media consumption for our youth (Jeong et al., 2012).

Also, it is essential to encourage content regulation and smart, ethical messaging in NFL YouTube channels. NFL digital media teams, YouTube content creators, and platform facilitators would be targeted with this recommendation. It is recommended that these groups work together to apply and carry out regulations that reduce the romanticizing of violent and aggressive plays in their content. Certain strategies would be to limit the excessive use of replays, especially those in slow-motion, because they exaggerate violent tackles. Including commentary about player safety, sportsmanship, and sports education would also be beneficial. An important thing to add would also be embedding age-appropriate filters and content warnings for younger audiences.

The Social Cognitive Theory proves that it is highly likely for children and adolescents to mirror the behaviors they see in the media, so enforcing more respectful and safer portrayals of sports is extremely important. By using responsible and safe content, the NFL and the media surrounding it can create a healthier idea of what physical content and competition looks like, which would ultimately reduce emotional desensitization for younger audiences.

### ***Conclusion:***

The research conducted went into depth on how dramatic commentary, exaggerated reactions and glorified injuries that NFL-related YouTube content highlights can emotionally desensitize the youth, normalize violence, and confuse the youth between entertainment and reality. From what was gathered from the Social Cognitive Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Desensitization Theory, children and adolescents who are exposed to this type of media are more prone to adopt aggressive behaviors and see violence as something that is acceptable.

To combat this issue, research found that enforcing media literacy programs in the education system and encouraging the NFL and media surrounding it to employ responsible content regulation are realistic and attainable recommendations. These ideas would consequently give children and adolescents responsible viewing skills and the ability to recognize the fact that violence should not be romanticized. This research is incredibly important because of how saturated the media is in today's youth culture. As media platforms like YouTube continue to grow, understanding how the content that these platforms portray affects the development of youth is essential.

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