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Game Changer: Taylor Swift and the NFL’s Gendered Turf Wars

# Introduction

The 2023 NFL season started off customarily as ever, as teams began the journey to the Super Bowl LVIII Champion title. Football fans were eager; NBC, CBS, ABC, ESPN and ESPN2 all topped 20 million viewers, the first time five broadcasts have done so on opening weekend since 2015 (Porter 1). With record high viewership, the NFL season appeared as if it would carry on as usual, but Week 3 would change the game. On September 24, 2023, internationally renowned pop star Taylor Swift attended the Chiefs-Bears match-up at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City in support of her new boyfriend, Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce. The unprecedented coverage of Swift’s attendance at the games immediately sparked interest in the sport for a new demographic as NFL game viewership among girls between the ages of 12 and 17 increased by 53% (Li 1). But it wasn’t this audience that threw the relationship into the spotlight. It was the unbridled vitriol from men complaining on social media that their football watching experience was being interrupted by a celebrity they had no interest in.

Everything about Taylor Swift deviates from the brutal and hyper-masculine sport of football, implying that the NFL’s male audience isn’t upset because a celebrity is taking up screen time but because a woman is taking up space. Using feminist criticism as a framework, this paper aims to explore how the social media discourse surrounding Taylor Swift’s media coverage in the NFL perpetuates the narrative that a woman’s role is to be subordinate on and off the field.

# Literature Review

The NFL is no stranger to criticism regarding the intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation. When it was founded in the 1920s, the NFL catered to white men, the remnants of which, are still perceptible today (Marquez-Velarde, et al. 2). Even though the majority of modern football players are people of color, media representation of football is overwhelmingly whitewashed as the NFL is complicit in glorifying a culture in which white men (e.g., owners and coaches) largely control black men (e.g., players). Similarly, portrayals of the NFL reveal an exclusion of women by emphasizing the hyper-masculine domination of the sport through imagery of male to male, specifically white male to male, comradery. In doing so, the NFL has normalized viewing women and people of color as obstacles to brotherhood (Nagel 101). Thus, women, specifically the wives and girlfriends of the players, have come to serve a very limited role in the NFL: to elevate the status of the man that they’re with.

Research has proven again and again that a woman’s value in a sporting arena is unfairly diminished, whether she is playing or merely observing (Marks 435). The understanding that football is commonly upheld as the standard of American masculinity is central to this critique. Due to the hyper-masculine nature of the sport of football, anything that bolsters masculinity is accepted, while anything that challenges it is rejected. In their 2017 journal article entitled *Adrian Peterson and the “Wussification of America: Football and Myths of Masculinity*, Justin Gus Foote, Michael L. Butterworth, and Jimmy Sanderson give a definition to hegemonic masculinity as well as the tenets that uphold it:

Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally idealized form of masculine character, often defined in terms of strength, aggression, and control. Masculine norms are constructed

and promoted most systematically through competitive sport. More specifically, there are five central characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: (1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontier-smanship, and (5) heterosexuality (Foote et al. 270).

When a woman steps into the space that is characterized by this hegemonic masculinity, she is immediately scrutinized.

Foote, Butterworth, and Sanderson’s work is consistent with the analysis of Shawna Marks, who in 2019 applied their understanding of hegemonic masculinity to Australian rules football. Marks highlights how male-dominated sports create a culture that forges bonds based on the devaluation of women, particularly women in sporting spaces (Marks 436). She specifically emphasizes how the media exacerbate this issue by instrumentalizing women in sports to communicate hierarchies between men, thus, holding up narrow ideals of masculinity and femininity (Marks 439). The critical role of the media is echoed by Foote et al. as their article accentuates how patterns of Twitter comments, now X, suggest that football fans feel a need to defend the norms of hegemonic masculinity when it is endangered by female presence in the sports industry (Foote et al. 280). While it is true that men are more prone to engage in fan behavior of sports because the activities align with male identity, it should not function as a reason to devalue and exclude women in the space (Clark et al. 168.)

Beyond female presence, female appearance is instrumentalized to uphold the tenets of masculine norms. As discussed previously, women are traditionally rejected from the sports industry. However, they are accepted when their appearance sustains the hegemonic male culture of athletics. A woman’s only acceptable role in a sporting arena is to elevate the heterosexual

prowess of the men in that arena. In short, the only time women in sports are celebrated is when they conform to the narrow ideas of feminine presentation and embodiment (Marks 441). An explanation for how these expectations function come from Ben Clayton and John Harris’ 2004 journal article *Footballer’s Wives: The Role of the Soccer Player’s Partner in the Construction of Idealized Masculinity*. Through a pro-feminist analysis of media discourses, Clayton and Harris determine that in the press, women are only afforded subordinate or highly sexualized roles as they act as a confirmation of their partner’s own masculinity as well as the masculine institution of sports in general. The acceptable wife or girlfriend of an athlete is stereotypically beautiful, existing as a powerful image for the production of an individual masculine guise as well as the construction of a masculine sport. Thus, when women are successful in their own right, becoming more than just a pretty face, they derail this production by overstepping the boundaries of traditional manliness and subsequently emasculating their partner and the sport (Clayton and Harris 330).

It is within the context of Clayton and Harris’ examination of female objectification, as well as the other branches of feminist theory, that an analysis of social media reactions to women in sporting spaces reveals how the cultural norms of institutions like the NFL function on the basis of a patriarchal system that either excludes women entirely or uses them to uphold hegemonic masculine narratives. Female football fans are, thus, forced to fulfill a role that the NFL has not only created, but remains complicit in and even profits from through “Football 101” clinics and “pink versions” of team merchandise. Even in these acts that simulate inclusion, women are belittled and trivialized (Clark et al. 171). Not to mention, the NFL has a spotty record when it comes to domestic violence charges against players as research has proven that

the League’s Personal Conduct Policy does not properly address, nor does it appropriately penalize players involved in domestic violence incidents for fear of a decline in viewership (Lott 116).

# Feminist Criticism

In order to contextualize the arguments in this essay, feminist theory will be applied as a theoretical frame. The term “feminism” was first coined in France, combining the word for woman, *femme*, with the *-isme*, referring to social movement or political ideology (Freedman 3). Many individuals in Europe who supported women’s emancipation rejected the label as they hesitated to equate suffrage and property rights with the ability to work and make wages. This same conflict over meaning permeated the United States and split the movement for half a century. In the 1800s, first wave feminism or “the woman movement” advocated for education, property rights, and authority in motherhood. This maternal ideology was then rejected in the 1910s by a younger generation that favored women’s common human identity with men’s as a basis for equal rights. Thus, suffrage movements began, and women secured the right to vote in 1920, solidifying a rejection of female difference into the Constitution (Freedman 4). In the 1960s, the movement gained momentum again under the label “women’s liberation.” This second wave of feminism focused on equality with men in work and politics as well as a focus on reproduction and sexuality. These ideas persisted in the 1980s, as feminism remained aligned with the tenets of women’s liberation such as equal pay, sexual and reproductive choice, parental leave, and political representation (Freedman 5). By the 1990s, an overwhelmingly white, Western upper-class movement had been diversified by working-class women, lesbians, women

of color, and activists from the developing world. Today, the feminist movement takes into account a wide range of experiences and validates the ways in which women are both different from *and* similar to men, but that these aspects should not act as a motive for social exclusion (Freedman 6).

Feminist theory is the theoretical framework that offers an analysis for the way the society facilitates such exclusions. In spite of the strides made by the most recent waves of feminism, outdated ideas created by men pertaining to which gender is “the norm” for certain spaces continue to persist. Feminist theory as a whole works to acknowledge how this patriarchal system has labeled inherently nongendered objects or spaces as masculine or feminine, using such notions to exclude women.

The field of communication offers a forum for the application of feminist theory as the power structures that perpetuate division are often revealed through misogynistic rhetoric in the mainstream media (Dicker and Piepmeier 16). When it comes to popular culture, much of this discourse is had over social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or X, formerly known as Twitter. Under communications, feminist theory offers a more sophisticated and pointed analysis of power relations as well as an approach that accounts for the social and cultural construction of sexual difference represented within these media texts (Treichler and Wartella 1).

# Discourse Analysis of Negative Social Media Response

In this case, the media text in question is the discourse surrounding Taylor Swift’s NFL game attendance, specifically an analysis of the top comments under the most recent three posts containing images of Swift on the NFL’s official Instagram account as of January 2024. To

properly examine this artifact, discourse analysis will act as the method. A discourse analysis is appropriate in this scenario as its purpose is to reveal the way in which language constructs social identities, social relations and the knowledge and meaning systems of the social world (Nielson and Nørreklit 204). Thus, a discourse analysis will highlight how the rhetoric of the most-liked comments reflects the popular beliefs and values of the NFL fanbase. Using Nielson and Nørreklit’s three levels of discourse analysis, the communicative event itself will be examined, followed by the discourse practice, and finally, the wider social practice of which the communicative event exists.

After examining the comment section of three NFL Instagram posts featuring Taylor Swift, a list was compiled of the top sixty comments to act as the communicative event, the twenty most liked comments from each post. An investigation of the vocabulary used in each comment revealed that all of the comments fell into one of the two classifications discussed in the literature review: an attack on Swift’s presence or an attack on Swift’s appearance. An overwhelming 91.7% of the selected comments dealt with her mere existence in the space, while the remaining 8.3% focused on her looks. For the purpose of this paper, only the comments that reveal key themes and criticisms will be included; however, the comprehensive list of all sixty comments is located in the Appendix. To begin with, presence is at the center of the majority of the comments as they deal with a general rejection of Swift existing in the space. Examples include “The way this woman has ruined my Sundays,” “Why are you showing Taylor swift she isn’t related at all to the NFL!!!,” “Does anyone care about taylor swift entering the stadium,” “That’s enough for her she doesn’t know what football is,” “Can we talk about football please,” “Oh is she playing tonight?,” and “Can men have ANYTHING???” The comprehensive

comment list was run through a word counter processing system to reveal that the terms “stop,” “please,” “enough,” and “nobody [cares]” appeared the most frequently. Perhaps the most prevalent ideas surrounding Swift’s presence, communicated through these particular comments, are that the commenters have no interest in her attendance and feel that she should not be shown on the NFL’s social media platforms. Beyond that, this language communicates that Swift doesn’t have any relation to neither the sport of football nor the NFL, and that neither her nor her fans have the capacity to understand the sport of football. It is also important to note that, according to the semantics of these comments, the NFL loses value when Swift’s presence is acknowledged. The second most common theme present in the selected comments is appearance. Examples include “This is the NFL not a fashion show,” “Ugly af,” “Am I nuts, I don’t find her even remotely attractive……. I would date her wallet or bank account tho,” “She just doing this much cause she know she gon make it on camera if she does lol shawty you not in it for Trav you in it for the attention,” and “I hope they show a few snaps of the game tonight in between filming that average blonde singer.” The language used in these comments falls either on the side that Swift is not attractive enough or that she is trying too hard in terms of her looks. In both cases, her appearance acts as justification for her rejection by the NFL fanbase. Like the comments pertaining to presence, these comments also disregard any competence and autonomy on Swift’s part regarding football and the institution of the NFL.

These comments fit into the context of the discourse practice as they perpetuate existing ideas within the conversation surrounding gender dynamics in the sports industry. Twenty-first century discourses, particularly within the sports industry, have fabricated a new version of the “masculine crisis.” As mentioned previously, the sports industry, especially the NFL, has a

questionable history in terms of gender equality. The institution is built upon the notion that the white, masculine male is the standard. Any time this foundation is threatened by an individual outside the standard, social discourse like the comments above are produced, often with the male commenter casting themselves as the “victim” (Oates 21).

In terms of the wider social context, the specific discourse surrounding Swift’s presence and appearance in the NFL speaks to a larger issue about gender inequality in the United States. While it may seem inconsequential, the sport of football is central to the American identity (Oates 18). Sport is a fundamental aspect to culture; thus, the football subculture overlaps with the values held in American life (Falk 2). With this in mind, the discourse above sheds a light on the value of masculine power in the sports industry, which is also reflected in the larger American society.

# Negative Comments as Preservation of Hegemonic Masculinity

As mentioned previously, feminist theory isolates the way in which heterosexual masculinity has been labeled as the standard, which is especially prevalent in the sports industry as masculinity is highly revered in athletics. Thus, women, specifically the wives and girlfriends of the players, have come to fill a very restricted position in the NFL: to enhance the prestige of their partners. Taylor Swift, however, exists in complete opposition to this stereotype as a woman that has garnered immense success outside of her relationship, if not more than her partner. Swift’s unparalleled popularity in a male-dominated space that has never seen the likes of her has created a phenomenon in which she cannot be ignored, knocking the rose-colored glasses off an industry that thrives off of feigned inclusion and community. In this way, Taylor

Swift has exposed the palpable distress men experience when a woman steps outside of the realm that the masculine majority deems as acceptable. The discourse analysis above reveals how the comments surrounding the presence and appearance of Taylor Swift in the NFL act as an attempt to preserve such hegemonic masculinity.

In terms of presence, Swift’s mere existence in the NFL’s social sphere challenges the masculine standard of the space. Rather than bolstering masculinity, her presence defies it as the attention she has received and the success she has obtained distracts from the players and the sport. Therefore, Swift’s presence deviates from Foote, Butterworth, and Sanderson’s five tenets of hegemonic masculinity. First, she disrupts physical force and control. While Swift may not be physically dominant on the football field, her physical presence in the space has shifted the attention from the sport onto her, thus, taking control. Second, she counters Kelce’s occupational achievement. According to *Newsweek*, “She's estimated to be worth about $1.1 billion after more than doubling her wealth last year, while Kelce's estimated $50 million personal fortune pales in comparison,” (Power). With this comparison in mind, Swift completely overshadows the masculine standard that hegemonic masculinity favors. In the same vein, she disrupts the third characteristic of familial patriarchy by outperforming the traditionally dominant male partner.

Fourth, she disrupts frontier-smanship, which again, deals with power. By having mastery over collective power, Swift consequentially removes agency from the male players. Finally, she disrupts heterosexuality by, again, garnering more success than her male partner. Instead of being the submissive and dependent individual in the relationship, she has the capacity to prosper in the absence of a male partner.

In terms of appearance, the discourse surrounding Swift’s looks also demonstrates a desperation to preserve hegemonic masculinity. As discussed previously, women in sports are only accepted if they fulfill one of two embodiments: submissive or sexual. Swift deviates from both of these positions as she is neither dependent on Kelce nor does she conform to the constricting ideas of model femininity. Typically, women in sports media are routinely limited to objects of masculine validation. However, the posts used in this analysis feature Swift separately from her partner, hence breaking the confines of hegemonic masculinity. Rhetorically, the social media discourse regarding the presence and appearance of Taylor Swift in the NFL serves as an attempt to restore the masculine standard in the face of a woman that has threatened it.

# Conclusion

The sports industry, particularly the NFL, has a rocky history in terms of gender equality. This research process has yielded a multitude of sources critiquing fans, game coverage, and the sport of football itself for perpetuating negative stereotypes regarding gender roles. This research is important in understanding how the current system within the NFL is structured in a way that ostracizes women. However, there are very few sources documenting what happens when a woman who does not fulfill the NFL’s conventional female role actually pervades the space. The power, success, and downright femininity that Taylor Swift possesses is unlike anything the sports industry has seen before, exposing the massive discomfort men experience when a woman steps outside of the realm they have created for her. What should be celebrated as a step toward gender equality is instead being met with forceful confrontation by men who are threatened by the encroachment of women on spaces that they have been unfairly and intentionally excluded

from. Taylor Swift’s presence and appearance in the sports industry serve as an incarnation for everything the systemic patriarchy within the NFL rejects, not only eliciting contempt from fans, but also revealing severely entrenched misogyny that has continuously been overlooked and that deserves to be addressed. As one commenter put it, “This isn’t the nfl my father used to watch,” but maybe, that’s for the best.

# Appendix

**The following list is comprised of the sixty comments used for the discourse analysis. Each comment appears exactly as it does under the original post with no changes or edits.**

1. “The way this woman has ruined my Sundays”
2. “Can’t wait for the Chiefs to get knocked out so we don’t need to see Taylor Swift anymore”
3. “Why are you showing Taylor swift she isn’t related at all to the NFL!!!”
4. “Does anyone care about taylor swift entering the stadium”
5. “Omg nobody cares about Taylor swift”
6. “No more Taylor swift”
7. “Post about football please!!!!!!!!”
8. “This is the NFL not a fashion show”
9. “Literally this is football not the taylor swift page yall be into someone with actual talent please”
10. “As soon as you see a post about this Swift character people should stop commenting. This way when NFL sees no interest they will stop posting stuff about this irrelevant non football person”
11. “That’s enough for her she doesn’t know what football is”
12. “Can we talk about football please”
13. “Why is this on here”
14. “What does this have to do with football?”
15. “I can assure you no one gaf about Taylor swift”
16. “Just report this post until they’re forced to deleted lol”
17. “Can this just stop already. This is football, not the swifty show”
18. “Praying she gets hypothermia”
19. “I’m unfollowing nfl till they go a week without a Taylor post”
20. “Get her ass outta there”
21. “Thanks for this post, it has really ruined my night”
22. “Let’s hope there’s a sniper in the building”
23. “Why is her and his relationship still a hot topic. Get back to reporting football, not her walking into the stadium.”
24. “Oh is she playing tonight?”
25. “Who tf cares about her”
26. “BRO NOBODY CARESSS ABOUT HER IM TIRED OF YALL EVERY GAME !!

‘taylor swift isnt here she’s on tour’ who the hell careesss not us we here for the game every catch he makes the camera pans to her, again nobody cares let us watch our football in peace plz @nfl”

1. “The downfall of the NFL”
2. “Who else is tired of this broad?”
3. “Ugly af”
4. “Yeah and 95% of chicks still won’t know wtf is going on but this a big win for men because it will condition our girls to be more accepting and understanding of us men wanting to do jack shit every Sunday but watch football. Now they’re going to ask us tons of questions though and I feel attacked.”
5. “Am I nuts, I don’t find her ever remotely attractive……. I would date her wallet or bank account tho”
6. “Acting like she’s playing bruh”
7. “Football was the last thing we had man wtf”
8. “This isn’t the nfl my father used to watch”
9. “Nfl steady declining”
10. “The most insufferable storyline of the season, hands down”
11. “NFL turning into high school musical with these two…”
12. “I thought this was a football account”
13. “Cancel the NFL”
14. “Please stop…this is football for crying out loud.”
15. “NOBODY CARES!!!! REAL FOOTBALL FANS ARE SO SICK OF THIS FOOLISHNESS!!! PLEASE STOP IT!!!”
16. “Makes me want to die”
17. “Stop posting this bullshit, your ruining football”
18. “She just doing this much cause she know she gon make it on camera if she does lol shawty you not in it for Trav you in it for the attention”
19. “Is this just a Taylor swift fan page now? I don’t care she’s just some woman”
20. “This account must be run by a female”
21. “Show football”
22. “This is the worst thing that’s ever happened to the NFL”
23. “That made me want to bleach my eyes and shoot myself”
24. “Maybe wnba isn’t so isn’t so bad”
25. “National football league, not the National Taylor swift dickriding League”
26. “BRO WE DONT CARE WE WANT TOO SEE THE GAME NOT THIS LITTLE B-”
27. “Who cares. Taylor Swift is mediocre talent at best. This is making a mockery off the NFL.”
28. “Enough already! It’s ridiculous and embarrassing. Stop catering to people who don’t even care about football and remember your real fans that do! Can we not watch football anymore without being inundated by this 24/7?”
29. “Can men have ANYTHING???”
30. “Nfl turning into a drama series instead of a sport”
31. “Her fans are ruining football”
32. “I hope they show a few snaps of the game tonight in between filming that average blonde singer.”
33. “As a Die hard JETS fan shame on the NFL for selling out integrity of sport for ticket/merch/air time sales.”
34. “Get this broad off my screen enough is enough”

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