

2024

Taylor-made Super Bowl:

Taylor Swift- Mania on Social Media Regarding the Big Game



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Researchers



Dr. Yi Luo

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Luo has conducted research in the areas of organizational change, sensemaking, leadership, social media and communication management, activism, organizational justice, and global public relations. Dr. Luo received her Ph.D in Communication from the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Luo's research has been published or accepted to be published in Public Relations Review, Journal of Public Relations Research, among many more. Dr. Luo teaches a variety of courses in organizational communication and public relations such as Cases and Campaigns, Communication Theories, Communication Research, Global Public Relations, Public Relations Ethics, New Media Applications in Organizations, and Digital Production.



Dr. Jin-A Choi

Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Choi received her PhD from the Stan Richards School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Choi's scholarship focuses on target advertising celebrity/social media influencer endorsements, digital advertising, text mining, and data analytics. Her research has been published in journals such as Journal of Global Marketing, Communication Studies, and others. Dr. Choi teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses such as Social Media Analytics, Influencers and Opinion Leaders and Integrated Communications.



Dr. Bond Benton

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Benton's doctorate is from the University of Vienna with his dissertation focusing on the influence of culture on meaning. A particular focus of Dr. Benton's research is the interaction of media, branding, and cross-cultural communication as it relates to the values and decisions of constituencies. Dr. Benton's essays and research articles have appeared in journals and anthologies including The Journal of E-Learning and Digital Media, Public Relations Tactics, and many more. His first book, The Challenge of Working for Americans: Perspectives of an International Workforce, was released in 2014.

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Overview and Study Focus

The Swifty Effect

Data collected for this study suggests Taylor Swift's connection to Super Bowl LVIII has elevated the meaning of the game beyond the stratospheric levels of cultural significance the Super Bowl already had. Kelly Whiteside, a professor of Sports Communication at Montclair State University, states "The Super Bowl always brings in a whole new audience because some people just come for the ads and halftime show while attending Super Bowl parties," said Professor Kelly Whiteside who leads the Sports Communication program in the School of Communication and Media. "But now you are adding the biggest pop star on the planet, almost guaranteeing this will be the most watched Super Bowl of all time. It will not surprise me if the viewership record (114.12M) is broken by more than 10%."

While interest in Swift is unsurprising related to such a large event, the scope of how much bigger social media interest is in the pop star than any players in the game is particularly noteworthy and merits study. Her global dominance and unprecedented influence extend to the hearts and heads of fans and haters. The super star's char is only surpassed by her ubiquity.

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Taylor Swift and the NFL: A History

Celebrity couples occupy a unique space in popular culture. Similar to the royal unions of history and the present, the combination of notoriety and the voyeuristic appeal of watching a relationship play out in public spaces, celebrity couples energize popular discourse and invite public commentary and interest. The opportunity to become a spectator in ongoing celebrity coupling invites a level of perceived intimacy in what feels like a relationship with famous people.

Rankin (2017) argues that celebrity couples feel as though they “belong to us.’ They are in our lives and we all feel like we truly know them, as if they were our own friends and family” (Rankin, 2017). Researchers in communication, psychology, and sociology have described this “belonging” impulse as a parasocial relationship which is a “one-sided relationship with media figures” (Scherer et al., 2022, p.128).

The emergence of a globally significant celebrity couple this year is that of Grammy award-winning superstar Taylor Swift and Super Bowl champion football player Travis Kelce. Public interest in the couple is particularly acute given the notoriety of both figures and seeming novelty of such a pairing. The significance was identified very early on in the relationship. Swift attending Kelce’s game as the Kansas City Chiefs defeated the Chicago Bears on September 24 produced a 400% increase in sales of the player’s jersey at the NFL’s online shop (Chappell, 2023).

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No stranger to notoriety, Kelce (beyond just being one of the best at his position of tight end) has had such a robust, varied, and frequently changing dating life that it inspired a reality show called “Catching Kelce” (Klee, 2023). Coupled with the legendary intensity of Taylor Swift fans, dubbed “Swifties,” the potential romantic pairing has unsurprisingly generated extensive social media discussion.

As political polarization and conspiracy rhetoric has also been normalized in the online space, the Kelce/Swift pairing has been contextualized in political terms. Taylor Swift’s recent initiative to increase voter registration among young people (resulting in 35,000 registrations in a single day) has been interpreted as an opposition action against the Republican party in some online sources (Smith, 2023). Travis Kelce encouraging vaccination against COVID-19 in a promotional campaign has similarly created an online backlash in anti-vaccination and conspiracy communities (Lloyd, 2023) with a prominent QAnon influencer calling for the execution of both Kelce and Swift for endorsing vaccine boosters (Hananoki, 2023).

As the Kansas City Chiefs advanced to Super Bowl LVIII, the presence of Swift invites more detailed analysis of the impact how her celebrity has affected social media discourse around the game.

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Overview and Study Focus ⁷

To that end, the following research questions emerge:

RQ1: How extensive is Swift's presence in social media discourse around Super Bowl LVIII?

RQ2: How do mentions of Swift compare with mentions of other key players in the game, specifically quarterbacks Patrick Mahomes and Brock Purdy along with her significant other Travis Kelce?

RQ3: What emerging topics and themes about Swift are present in social media discourse related to Super Bowl LVIII?

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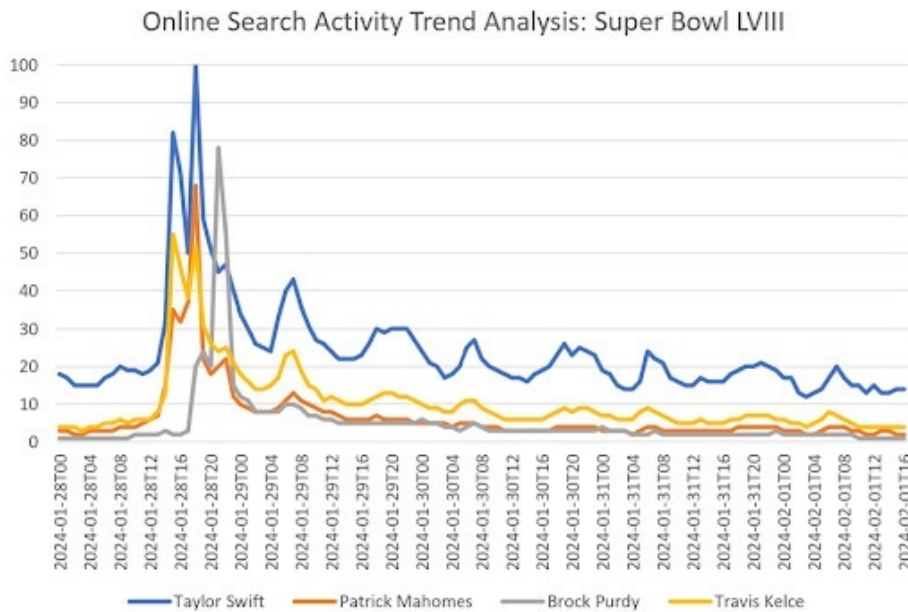
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Taylor Swift, Social Media, and Super Bowl LVIII



Data collection identifies several key items from a Trends Analysis related to search activity, which has been found to reliably forecast online activity, engagement, and interest (Nghiem et al., 2016; Silva et al., 2019). Results from Google Trends analysis indicate that searches suggest online activity related to Swift was more extensive than any key players from the game. Average online search activity related to Super Bowl LVIII was more than double for Swift when compared to her boyfriend Travis Kelce. Analysis showed that Swift generated more search interest than the two quarterbacks for the game (i.e., Patrick Mahomes and Brock Purdy) combined. Search frequency is calculated on a 100-point scale and Taylor Swift was the only figure evaluated to reach the 100-point level immediately after the Chiefs defeated the Ravens to advance to the Super Bowl.

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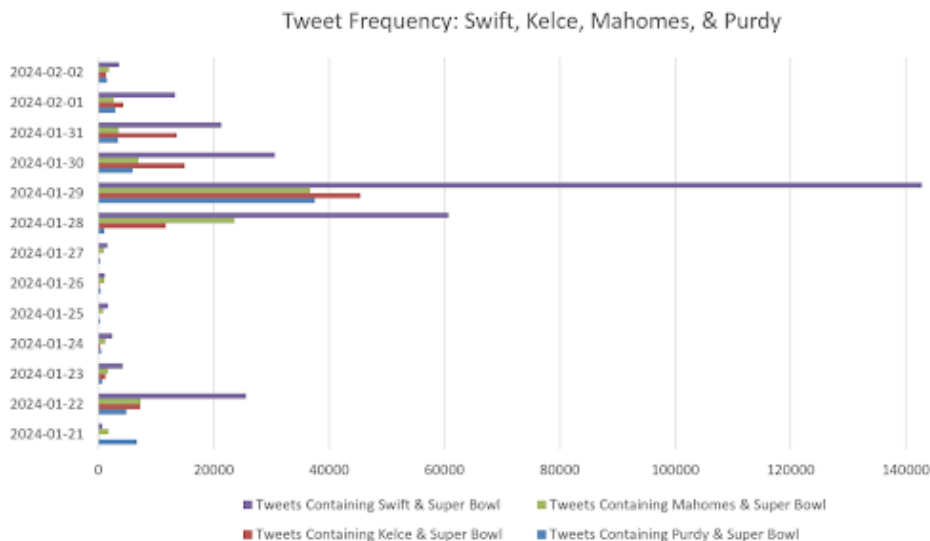
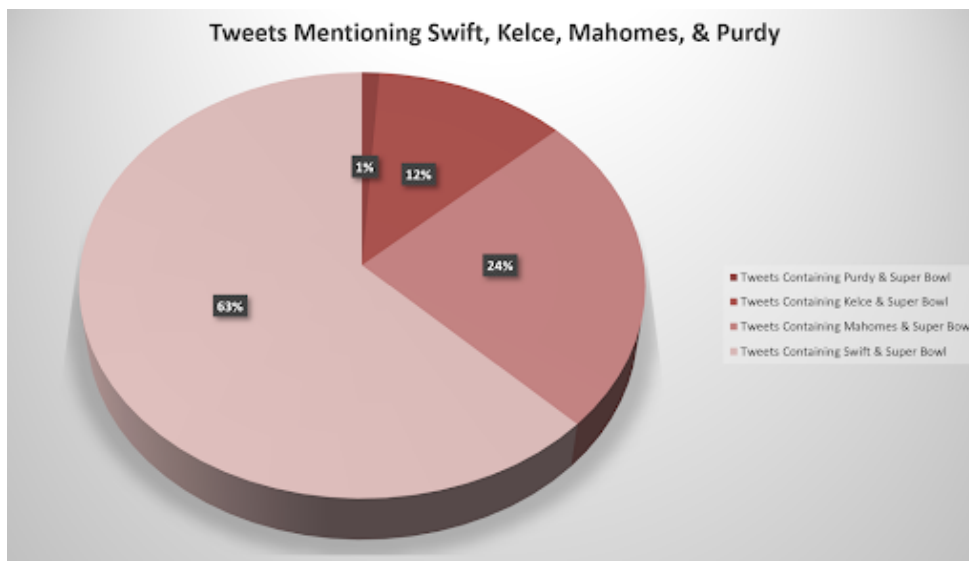
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Findings

While interest in all three players receded in the period after the games on Sunday, Swift's Super Bowl online impact dipped only 23.5 percent in the days following with interest in the key players cumulatively dropping 42.5 percent.

Frequencies of posts about Swift, Kelce, Mahomes, and Purdy on X (formerly known as Twitter) were also calculated.



In the period when the Chiefs and 49ers advanced to Super Bowl LVIII, Taylor Swift related #superbowl tweets totaled more than the COMBINED total tweets about the game's QB's and even her beau, Travis Kelce. Total #superbowl tweets generated in the period around and immediately after the AFC and NFC championship games resulted in 52,419 mentions for Purdy, 75,258 mentions for Mahomes, 91,325 mentions for Kelce, and an astounding 272,406 mentions of Taylor Swift in connection with the big game. For #superbowl tweets mentioning any of the four studied individuals, Swift mentions accounted for 63% of the total.

Emerging Swift Themes and Narratives Related to Super Bowl LVIII

To explore how social media users have discussed Taylor Swift in relation to Super Bowl LVIII, data was collected with a focus on recurrent themes, narratives, and topic-s linked posts discussing Swift. Researchers employed the artificial intelligence (AI)-driven social media analytics tool, Brandwatch, to collect data in the forms of social conversations. Brandwatch is a leading analytics tool to derive social intelligence regarding consumer insights, influencer marketing, competitor analysis, reputation monitoring, and benchmark studies.

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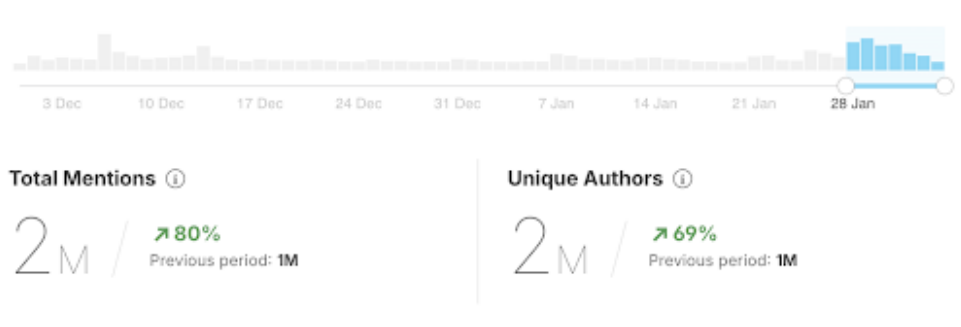


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Essentially, Brandwatch was utilized as a social listening tool to understand the sentiment, perceptions, trends, and reactions of social media users' conversations pertaining to Taylor Swift and the big game. Emerging data from Brandwatch suggests the following:

Volume



The social mentions of Taylor Swift and Super Bowl reached two million in the past seven (January 28 - February 3, 2024) days after Chiefs win on January 28 and sparked an 80% surge in social mentions compared to seven days ago. Particularly, the conversation thread of “Taylor as a national treasure” increased 100% and is still gaining strength on social mentions. The social discussions on Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce’s relationship surged 490% since Chief’s AFC Championship victory on January 28. Tons of Swiftie fans poured their well wishes for the couple and demanded more coverage of their love story. Swiftie fans have been speculating when Travis Kelce will pop the question, maybe after their Super Bowl win! Remarkably, nearly 31,000 social posts (approximately 224% increase) in the past seven days cheered on how Taylor Swift's involvement with the Super Bowl could potentially boost ratings and interest in the event.

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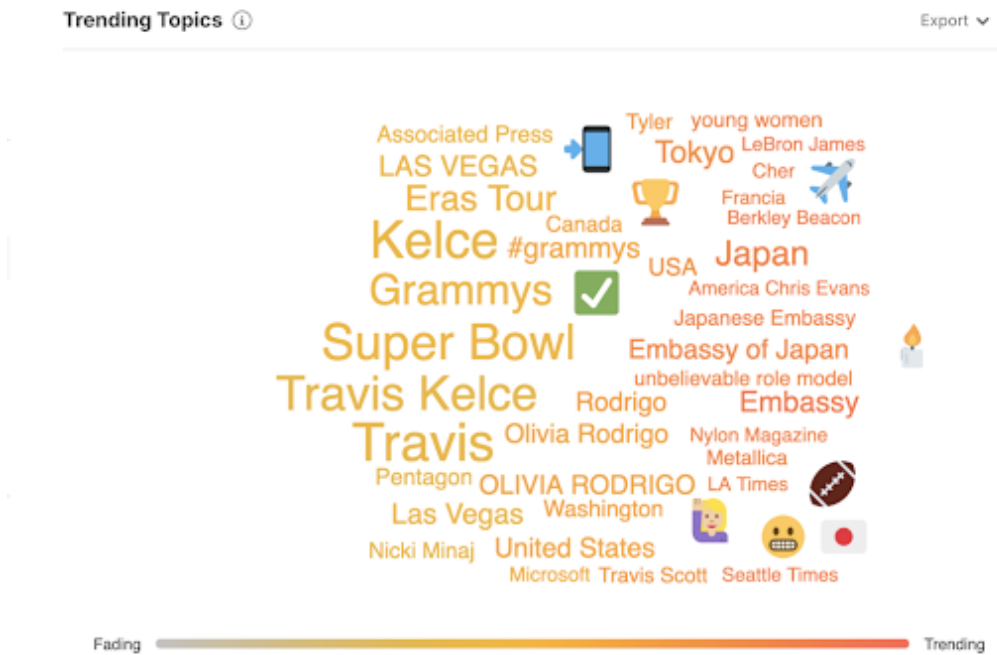


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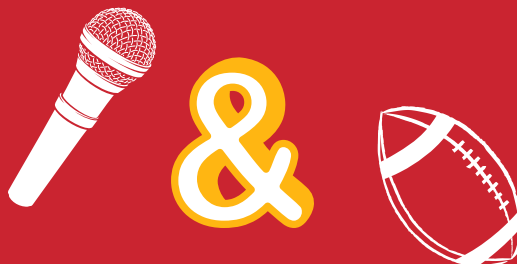
This land-slide interest in Taylor Swift’s role in the NFL made lots of social media users predict that this year’s big game will be the “highest watched Super Bowl in history.”

On the heat maps of topics related to Taylor Swift as an “unbelievable role model,” social discussions related to Taylor Swift’s logistics of making back to Super Bowl game from Japan had a clear and firm lead over topics related to Super Bowl (e.g., Kelce, bowl, NFL, etc.).



Politics

Results from social analytics revealed that the NFL is not the only entity trying to take advantage of Taylor Swift’s stardom. Political discussions also seemed keen to hijack this Swift force. For example, Liz Cheney’s tweet on January 31 (“Taylor Swift is a national treasure,”) sparked significant backlash among conservatives and loud approvals from fans.



Taylor Swift has been pulled into politics as she was mentioned frequently, especially in alliance with the Democratic party, in an attempt to appeal to young voters. Social media users on both political isles either mocked or championed Donald Trump's waging a "holy war" on Taylor Swift, especially if the mega star ends up publicly endorsing Biden. Social comments poking fun at MAGA's "performative politics" and calling Taylor Swift as "MAGA-Trigger Taylor" dominated.

Conspiracy theory.

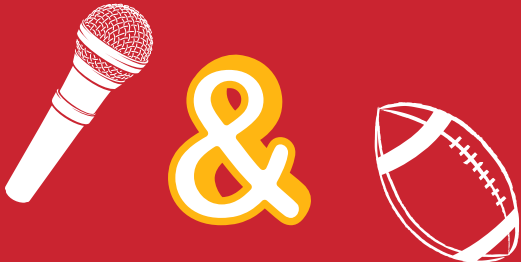
Of note, some conspiracy theories pertaining to this celebrity's coupling swelled on social posts. These conspiracy theories blended the upcoming 2024 Presidential election with the highly anticipated play-off game in the NFL. Particularly, the "idea that liberals conspired to get Taylor Swift to date Travis Kelce and then rigged the playoffs because this somehow abstractly helps Biden" appeared to be a leading conspiracy theory surrounding this celebrity couple. For example, some typical social posts related to this theme stated: "Fox News Is Scared as Hell of Taylor Swift Endorsing Joe Biden," "Taylor Swift is a billionaire democrat asset," "More than 35,000 people registered to vote after Taylor Swift posted about it. Repubs: She's a plant for the deep state and Joe Biden!" "The deep state put Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce in an arranged relationship and is going to rig the Super Bowl in order to maximize their cultural cache so they can endorse Joe Biden in 8 months," "Taylor Swift will announce her endorsement of Biden at the halftime show,"



“Sorry to inform you but, Taylor Swift is bought and paid for by the DNC MARK MY WORDS, Joe Biden will use her as a political tool Do you support Taylor Swift ?” “I've been told I'm trending globally for exposing Taylor Swift as a gold-digging jezebel,” “Taylor Swift will endorse Biden in exchange for Chiefs’ win of Super Bowl. Some far-right influencers claim that Taylor Swift is a "Pentagon asset" and part of a conspiracy to rig the Super Bowl and manipulate voters. A sizable number of social posts angrily alleged that the NFL was rigged: “Is The NFL Rigged? Was Tonight’s Game Rigged Setting Up A Super Bowl Win For The Kansas City Chiefs where Taylor Taylor Swift & Travis Kelce Will Tell The World To Vote Democrat? Watch this clip, notice anything? It’s all a Psyop, The World is a Stage,” “Taylor Swift will endorse Biden in exchange for Chiefs’ win of Super Bowl.” Some far-right influencers even claimed that Taylor Swift is a "Pentagon asset" and part of a conspiracy to rig the Super Bowl and manipulate voters.

Deep Fake

The controversial deepfake post about Taylor Swift provoked an outrage among Swifties who jumped to defend their idol and denounce this atrocious online bullying. The intensive social media reactions even led X to pause Taylor Swift’s searches. This incident sparked a strong, united voice on social media to tackle non-consensual, sexual deepfakes to fight back against deepfakes.



The Super Bowl is a cultural event of meaningful social significance. The coupling of one of the biggest pop singers in the world with the biggest game in American sports and her connection to one of the most significant players in the game is zeitgeist never seen before in the space of popular culture. This study suggests that this event has had stratospheric amounts of online discussion along with varied themes related to the event.



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Thank You!

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About the School of Communication and Media: Founded in 2012, the School of Communication and Media offers a range of dynamic programs in communication and media to a talented and diverse student population of over 1,800. Offering degrees in film and television, social media and public relations, advertising, journalism and digital media, sports communication, communication and media studies, animation and visual effects, and an MA in public and organizational relations, the School prepares the next generation of communication and media practitioners and leaders. The School houses award-winning student programs that include WMSC Radio, The Montclarion newspaper, Hawk Communications Agency, the Red Hawk Sports Network, Hawk+ OTT streaming platform, and News Lab, as well as the Center for Cooperative Media, which serves the public by working to grow and strengthen local journalism. Student projects and programs have recently received national recognition from PRSSA's Bateman Competition, an Edward R Murrow Award, several Marconi Award nominations, and a College Television Award from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

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