



'Cause she's a mastermind... Ed Zurga/Associated Press

Taylor Swift-NFL conspiracy theories are the result of two sets of hardcore fans colliding

Published: February 9, 2024 4.17pm GMT

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.qpegqn6ek>

<https://theconversation.com/taylor-swift-nfl-conspiracy-theories-are-the-result-of-two-sets-of-hardcore-fans-colliding-223020>

At Super Bowl LVIII, Taylor Swift will appear on the field at Allegiant Stadium after her boyfriend Travis Kelce's team, the Kansas City Chiefs, wins the game. But she won't be performing. Swift's appearance will be a Pentagon-backed psy-op to turn the rigged game into a calculated political endorsement, to secure the 2024 presidential election for Joe Biden.

At least, this is what conspiracy theorists are predicting will happen.

Swift, Kelce and the NFL have all been targets of conspiratorial thinking before. Swift has been accused of queerbaiting (hinting at LGBTQ+ identity without coming out) and neo-Nazi allegiances after far right websites made memes out of her lyrics.

Kelce fell victim to vaccine-sceptic theories about "killer injections" when he endorsed the COVID vaccine. And some people have claimed that the NFL is scripted and rigged.

It is not unusual for conspiracy theories to emerge in response to political, media or entertainment events. And the convergence of two American institutions – Taylor Swift and the NFL – is a perfect storm.

Why people believe conspiracy theories

Belief in conspiracy theories is not necessarily tied to levels of intelligence or political affiliation. But research shows that these types of beliefs are more common in people who tend to use intuitive, rather than critical, thinking.

Linked to this is proportionality bias, a tendency to correlate major events with major consequences. It is associated with conspiracy theories as people search for simple answers to make sense of complicated situations.

The Swift-NFL conspiracy theories are fuelled by the fact that highly publicised people and events are involved. I am currently researching the relationship between Swift, the press and public opinion for a forthcoming volume on Swift edited by Paula Harper, Kate Galloway and Christa Bentley.

I am examining the journalistic practice of selecting contentious tweets as evidence of public opinion to support controversial narratives about Swift.

This builds on my previous research exploring social media reactions to Swift's LGBTQ+ allyship in "You Need to Calm Down". I have found that, while online posts about Swift are mostly neutral about the artist, this is often downplayed in the press in favour of over-reporting on controversy.

America's sweetheart, or a target for sexism?

The Super Bowl conspiracy theories also appear to be influenced by political and sexist attitudes. Swift has long been a symbol of "Americana", but one that is increasingly outwardly liberal, and told through the point of view of a young woman. As researchers Mary Fogarty and Gina Arnold note: "Taylor may be a monument to an old, white America, but she's also an avatar of a future that is female."

As the world has watched conservative politicians erode women's rights in the US, we cannot ignore the fact that Swift is a powerful, billionaire, woman whose fans are mostly women.

Swift has now entered another distinctly American space – the NFL – whose fans have historically tended to be conservative. In doing so, she complicates an "us v them" mentality defined by excessive nationalism, as seen in far-right conservative spaces.

Swift has demonstrable power within the music industry, not only through her fan support, but also in how she has fought for better streaming service royalties for artists and rerecorded her albums in a battle over rights to her music.

She also has political power, contributing to a record-breaking voter registration day with one Instagram post.

It is difficult not to see this new conspiracy theory as partly an attempt to downplay the success of a powerful woman, by implying that her increased popularity over the past two years is the result of a government conspiracy.

Clashing fandoms: Swifties v NFL fans

A vocal minority of NFL fans have complained that Swift is receiving too much airtime during games. But it is not just Swift who is disrupting the NFL, it is also her fans: the “Swifties”.

I have previously published research about the clashes that occur when young girls and women move into male-dominated fan spaces. New female fans are criticised for not being “true” fans or participating in the “correct” way.

A Look at the Cultural Influence of Taylor Swift



The Swift conspiracy theory seems also to have partly been influenced by Swifties’ practice of looking for “Easter eggs” (hidden messages) in Swift’s lyrics. As this process has infiltrated wider audiences and the press, the search for deeper meaning is now being extended into Swift’s relationship with Kelce and the NFL.

Pentagon spokesperson Sabrina Singh and NFL commissioner Roger Goodell have both made statements discrediting the conspiracy theories.

But if I were to trade one conspiracy for another, the situation could be setting the groundwork for a future theory. Should Donald Trump lose the 2024 election, it would be easy for those who believe these theories to blame Biden and Swift for voter manipulation, contributing to an undemocratic election.

Emotions run high around politics, fandom and football. This situation reveals some of the dangers of conspiratorial thinking: a loss of neutrality, a rise in ideological gaps and less reliance on critical thinking. In the words of Swift herself, you can't see facts through fury.